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## ¿Está mal olvidar? Psychological suffering in Jorge Accame's *Cuatro poetas* tetralogy

### Abstract:

Argentinian writer Jorge Accame's tetralogy of narratives published between 2000 and 2010 are spin-offs from his 1999 fictional anthology of poetry *Cuatro poetas* in which he concocted the work of four writers. What appears superficially to be a playful and imaginative literary project in fact contains an exploration of some very painful topics rooted in the recent history of Argentina. These include the dictatorship as well as present-day social problems. This article considers the *Cuatro poetas* series as an exploration of the generation of writers that grew up during the dictatorship. Rather than using trauma theory's notion of 'unspeakable' as the guiding concept, this article examines attempts to express inner pain by these imagined writers, whose very profession calls for the articulation of experience using words.

5-6 Keywords: **Jorge Accame, trauma, Argentinian literature, dictatorship**

Iona Macintyre  
Hispanic Studies  
University of Edinburgh  
50 George Square  
Edinburgh  
EH8 9LH

Tel: 0131 650 3641  
Email: [iona.macintyre@ed.ac.uk](mailto:iona.macintyre@ed.ac.uk)

## ¿Está mal olvidar? Psychological suffering in Jorge Accame's *Cuatro poetas* tetralogy

[The] emphasis on the literary paradigm of trauma is [...] symptomatic of a generalised attempt to narrativise, and so work through, collective traumas often correlated with moments of historical crisis, as well as the less overt, though equally damaging individual and structural traumas associated with patriarchal ideology, unmitigated capitalism, and globalisation [...]<sup>1</sup>

Leí tu poema en el diario del domingo pasado, dice Juan. Me gustó, es doloroso. Le agradezco, pero en realidad no quise escribir un poema doloroso. Ignoro qué quise escribir, pero estoy seguro de que no era algo sólo doloroso.<sup>2</sup>

[...] ya no volví a ser la misma. A partir de allí el mundo se desbarrancó, sé que estuve como loca mucho años. Hasta que escribí mi primer poema y empezaron a mejorar las cosas. Era un mundo demasiado difícil, nadie podía soportarlo sin inventar un orden. Me recuperé ejercitando el soneto y la lira.<sup>3</sup>

This article builds on discussions on personal and collective trauma in Argentinian contemporary literature using a new set of works of fiction: Jorge Accame's tetralogy of narratives (2000-2010) which has four corresponding poet-narrator-protagonists. This series of self-conscious texts evolved out of an initial collection of poetry, *Cuatro poetas* (1999), in which Accame created the poets, dreamt up their biographies, and provided a selection of their respective oeuvre, an endeavour that won him the prize for poetry in the Premio Municipalidad de San Salvador de Jujuy in 1998.<sup>4</sup> During the following decade the invented poets (Marcelo Atanassi, Juan Cízico, Evaristo Soler, and Gabriela Sánchez), all the product of the imagination of Accame, became the narrators of four works of prose fiction. This project in fictionalisation in which we see fabricated writers, their works, and their lives as writers, provides plenty of scope for future research in metafiction, that proud tradition in Hispanic literature.<sup>5</sup> However, another aspect of the tetralogy which stands out is its exploration of trauma and the psychic pain of each of the poets. All of the four protagonists carry dark and distressing memories from childhood and youth, the dictatorship of 1976-1983 and its aftermath, and subsequent social and economic catastrophes. The psychological suffering referred to in the title of this article encompasses states of gut wrenching grief, deep regret, fear and rage, all stemming from very severe experiences where

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<sup>1</sup> Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau, 'Introduction: Traumatic Realism and Romance in Contemporary British Narrative' in *Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Literature* ed. by Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1-14 (1).

<sup>2</sup> Jorge Accame, *Concierto de jazz* (Buenos Aires: Norma, 2000) 39-40.

<sup>3</sup> Jorge Accame, *Gentiles criaturas* (Buenos Aires: Norma, 2010) 17.

<sup>4</sup> This is Accame's third collection of poetry after *Punk y circo* (1989) and *Golja* (1995). See Elena Bossi, 'La palabra que falta. Jorge Accame', in her work on Jujuy writers *Leer poesía, leer la muerte: un ensayo sobre el lenguaje poético* (Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 2001), 141-173.

<sup>5</sup> Ana Verónica Juliano has begun to explore this rich investigative line considering the prominent position of poetry in the first two texts in Accame's series in 'De poesías y poetas: reflexiones en dos novelas de Jorge Accame', *Argentina en su literatura*, Vol. X, 2009, 109-120.

the individuals, or their loved ones, came, or nearly came, to harm and, in some cases, to death.

The narration of historical trauma is of course an important topic in Latin American literary studies. In Argentina, early foundational examples born out of nineteenth century dictatorship and political violence include Esteban Echeverría's short narrative *El matadero* (c. 1838) and José Mármol's novel *Amalia* (1844).<sup>6</sup> In contemporary Argentinian fiction writing, the murder and torture of the dictatorship of 1976-83 constitute a collective historical trauma that demands representation, its horror amplified by being part of the wider expanse of military dictatorships and crimes against humanity in the Southern Cone and other Latin American countries. Noteworthy works on this subject matter published during the 1980s include Luisa Valenzuela's *Cola de lagartija* (1983), considered to be Argentina's dictator novel, and Alicia Kozameh's *Pasos bajo el agua* (1987) which was based around her own experience as a political prisoner between 1975 and 1978. In *El estado de memoria* (1990) Tununa Mercado explored her life as a political exile. In the area of narrative, the following decade saw texts such as Valenzuela's *Novela negra con argentinos* (1990), the late Ricardo Piglia's *La ciudad ausente* (1992), Liliana Heker's *El fin de la historia* (1996), and Sergio Chejfec's *Los planetas* (1999). State terror remains vital subject matter for many prominent Argentinian writers of fiction in the twenty first century exemplified in Martín Kohan's *Dos veces junio* (2008), Juan José Saer's (1937-2005) final novel *La grande* (2005), and Leopoldo Brizuela's *Una misma noche* (2012). Of these later works, Valenzuela (in *Novela negra*), Heker, Chejfec, Saer and Brizuela, create protagonists who are writers, as does Accame, and the infusion, to varying degrees, of biographical experience is clear.

In Accame's work the protagonists are all writers belonging to the same generation as him, born in the 1940s and 1950s, who were young adults during the dictatorship. All four texts explore the behaviour of people coping with loss. However, it must be pointed out at this juncture that the national trauma of the dictatorship and political repression could not be said to be the central subject matter of Accame's series of texts. As we shall see, two of the protagonists we meet are affected horribly and personally by state terror but the works also reflect different kinds of catastrophes. The novels are set after the return to democracy, in a narrative present of either the 1990s or 2000s, during economic chaos. The texts also deal with personal and childhood trauma and crime including the deaths, some by murder, of family members, acts of violence, and specifically femicide in the case of *Forastero*. It is precisely this diverse subject matter which is the focus of this article. My interest is to examine different traumas rather than maintain a sole focus on the repression and violence of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>7</sup>

To begin, let us turn to the fabricated anthology *Cuatro poetas* which gives rise to Accame's intratextual project. It is in this modest simply-named collection, with only a small selection of works, where the reader is introduced to the Argentinian writers

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<sup>6</sup> Argentina's most canonical nineteenth century work, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo* of 1845, although not a work of fiction, also shares this genesis of violence.

<sup>7</sup> In this way I engage with Nerrea Arruti's proposition that artists and critics should feel free to explore 'different traumas' and not limit themselves to certain privileged topics. See her position piece 'Writing Trauma: Re-Placing Contemporary Argentine Literature and Visual Culture', *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, Volume LXXXIV, Numbers 4-5, 2007, 517-528.

who will each take centre stage in a subsequent narrative. Their original works are presented alongside poems they have translated. But the concept of translation is not used solely in its conventional sense. In the brief prologue *Accame*, as supposed editor of the book, cites Marcelo Atanassi, the first poet included and the first narrator we will meet in *Concierto de jazz* (2000): 'Todos somos bilingües en algún sentido, porque aprendemos un lenguaje de palabras para traducir otro que no conocemos bien y que nos inquieta desde que nacemos: el oscuro idioma del espíritu'.<sup>8</sup> It is this notion of translating our disquieting inner world and inner pain, rather than a foreign written language, that informs the tetralogy. The sobering subject matter of Atanassi's poems quickly moves us into the darkness and mental suffering to which he refers and the topic of trauma: for example, a homophobic hate crime, the humiliation of a caged animal, and a teacher observing a pupil undergoing treatment for cancer. The next works are by Juan Cízico. Inspired by his own (and his creator Accame's) classicist interests, his style is abstract, formal and metaphysical, built on themes of pain, madness, and death. Gabriela Sánchez is the third poet presented. Her first poem entitled 'A Francisco Quevedo' explores the suffering that engenders poetry, and those that follow show a preoccupation with death and escape. The final poet included is Evaristo Soler whose prosodic works are nightmarish, depicting devils and frightening creatures, child snatchers and intruders. Thus the poets' inner pain provides the emotional context for the subsequent works of prose fiction.

The novella *Concierto de jazz* begins the tetralogy.<sup>9</sup> In it Marcelo Atanassi, the narrator, has fled his home in a nameless city in the interior of Argentina and assumed a new life in a nameless city in the United States. Out attending a jazz concert one night, he wistfully recalls the romantic relationship he has left behind with Marina, a Chilean former beauty queen, and, as companion to crime boss Fernando Segovia, modern-day gangster's moll. Marcelo and Marina met in a casino while Marcelo was deep in his addiction to gambling. In his eyes they are kindred spirits in their pain. Marcelo and Marina's story is at times pulpy, at times poignant. This, Marcelo's most significant relationship, although never consummated, ended in a criminal act. Segovia began to physically abuse Marina and eventually – not, tellingly, immediately, brutalised as they are – Marcelo and her fight back in defence. Having also taken the opportunity to rob Segovia, the pair seek the assistance of Marcelo's friend, the poet Cízico (also, as mentioned, a contributor to the anthology *Cuatro poetas*, the origin of the series of narratives) and, going their separate ways, flee the country with 200,000 US dollars stolen from Segovia. As I shall explain, in the next text in the series, *Segovia o de la poesía* (2001) Cízico takes up their story, to baffling effect.

In *Concierto de jazz* Marcelo relishes the creative energy in jazz, enjoying its vitality and fluidity, in a commentary with the occasional racist digression about the black players (in the tetralogy everyone is flawed, there are no ideal images). The energy in the music is so different to the way he experiences life. His reactions to the concert he is listening to interrupt his narrative and also guide his tale. For example,

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<sup>8</sup> Prólogo, *Cuatro poetas*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> The nod to saxophonist Charlie Parker in *Concierto de jazz* evokes Julio Cortázar's narrative 'El perseguidor' (1959) where Cortázar paid homage to the musician and depicted the task of the writer when documenting anguish and addiction. Julio Cortázar, 'El perseguidor' in *Las armas secretas* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1960), 99-183.

a crescendo in the performance triggers the memory of a jealous outburst on the part of Marina, a scene that shows the psychic pain she habitually hid from Marcelo (56). This idea of outpouring in the text is highlighted by the quotation from musician Robert Fripp which serves as an epigraph: 'Resulta interesante señalar que la palabra jazz es una abreviación de jazzum, que significa eyaculación' (9). Here though it is a flowing forth of Marcelo's memories of Marina and losing her, an expression of his inner world, in lieu of sexual relations.

But jazz music has other parallels and associations for Marcelo; he also equates its intensity and the intensity of its enthusiasts in the US to looting in Argentina. He is struck by the differences between the 'aquí' of the US and the 'allá' of Argentina, the 'gringos' in contrast to 'nuestra gente':

Esta es una ciudad bastante pequeña en el medio de los Estados Unidos, pocos habitantes, pero si vieras el teatro en el que estoy, te sorprenderías. Parece un estadio de fútbol de grande y los gringos se han volcado a su interior hasta llenarlo. Así entraba nuestra gente en los supermercados para saquearlos. ¿Es que la banda de jazz de Charlie Parton es muy reconocida en todo el país y nuestra gente tenía mucha hambre? Te acordás cuando estábamos en la fiambrería de la calle Bolívar y alguien tiró una piedra contra el ventanal? El vidrio se derrumbó, hizo ruido de hielo cayendo por un arroyo, y una horda entró saltando a través del marco, como si hubiera estado siglos prisionera adentro de un espejo y por fin hallara la manera de recuperar su libertad.

Aquí todos están contentos disfrutando de la música, sentados, sonriendo, aplaudiendo a veces. (19)

Marcelo contrasts the violent desperation of the Argentinian looters with the gusto with which the North American audience pack out the auditorium to hear the concert. Other realities of Argentina in the 1990s are present during Marcelo and Marina's time together. Scenes of economic meltdown, the suffering of marginalised groups, and the direct action taken by protestors intrude on Marcelo's romantic yet chaste trysts with Marina. On one occasion an autumn stroll is sullied by the smell of tyres burnt by protestors (30), and they see burnt out cars and barricades at a road block during a walk in the country, glimpses of the *piquetero* movement demonstrating against privatisation and mass redundancies during the market-oriented administration of the 1990s. Nevertheless these romantic encounters are soothing and amount to respite from Marcelo and Marina's daily inner suffering.

Another episode sheds light on Marcelo's state of mind. He and Cízico attend a demonstration where armed police fire tear gas. The pair try and help an injured fireman and are turned on by the crowd: 'La gente nos quería matar. Vendidos de mierda, nos gritaban' (69). Sharing the morbid curiosity, as we shall see, of Evaristo and Gabriela, his fellow protagonists in the Accame series, he later returns to the scene of the incident:

[...] volví y descubrí unas manchas de sangre junto a la base de la estatua. La casa de gobierno y la plaza parecían un campo en el fin del mundo. La virgen de la ermita del frente estaba negra de ceniza. Partes irreconocibles de cosas destrozadas yacían por todos lados'. (70)

These grim sights of violence, destruction and debris plunge Marcelo into a despair which triggers the pull of the casino and his addiction to gambling. Marcelo's feelings of self-loathing are very prominent in this section and they are expressed in bodily images of expulsion: 'Me sentí monstruoso, inmundo, un vómito de la oscuridad' (68).

But why should Marcelo feel so contemptible? His pain and misplaced guilt stems from his personal experiences, which he recounts gradually and minimally, of the dictatorship and then Raúl Alfonsín's presidency (1983-89) during which laws granting amnesty and impunity for killers and torturers were brought in. Slowly we learn about Marcelo's past and what he calls 'mis muertos'. His father, an anthropologist, was a political prisoner and killed for denouncing the military junta. Marcelo along with his younger brother and mother were witnesses to his kidnap from their home. As a consequence Marcelo's mother suffered a breakdown and his brother committed suicide:

[...] supimos que lo habían matado, pero lo peor vino cuando nos enteramos de cómo torturaban a los prisioneros. En esos días mi hermano Federico tenía dieciséis y yo, diecisiete. Solía despertarme a medianoche para tomar agua y encontraba a Federico tendido boca arriba, como un faraón, con los ojos abiertos. En cuanto me sentía andar, soltaba un torrente de palabras dolorosas, como el jazz, que ahora se ha puesto casi negro y anda por mi sangre. Qué le habrán hecho, preguntaba mi hermano, y yo volvía a la cama y me tapaba la cabeza con la almohada. Federico se tomó medio quilo de veneno para ratas a los dieciocho años. (21)

After the 1983 elections and the return to democracy Marcelo receives threats from his father's murderers and goes to work as a teacher with the Toba, an indigenous group in the remote north of Argentina, removing himself from his past life. He has an affinity with the Toba which Accame does not name. State killing, as with all indigenous groups in Argentina, is a part of the group's history, particularly in the late nineteenth century and the Massacre of Napalpí in 1924 on the orders of the state governor of Chaco.<sup>10</sup> In the first of a series of compelling animal metaphors relating to predators and prey in the tetralogy, Marcelo uses the customs of the Toba to help him articulate to Marina how his past has formed his identity: 'Pero sin mis muertos yo no sería como me conociste. Estoy parado sobre ellos y los cargo en mis hombros, como los tobas llevan las corzuelas que han cazado' (62). Marcelo's description here provides a strong illustration of what Annette H. Levine, following in the Freudian tradition, calls 'an interminable grieving process', meaning the loved one is never completely gone, a situation caused by the interruption or denial of mourning processes.<sup>11</sup>

As stated, Marcelo is a compulsive gambler. He received financial compensation from the government because he was a minor when his father was killed but he lost it all at the roulette table precipitating another huge loss; as a consequence his

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<sup>10</sup> See Gastón R. Gordillo, 'Places of Violence' in *Landscape of Devils: Tensions of Place and Memory in the Argentinean Chaco* (Durham N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2004) 53-69.

<sup>11</sup> Annette H. Levine, *Cry for Me, Argentina: The Performance of Trauma in the Short Narratives of Aída Bortnik, Griselda Gambaro, and Tununa Mercado* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008) 18.

marriage failed and his wife left him taking with her their young son. When he finally receives word from his estranged wife about their whereabouts and a photo of his son Marcelo disappears to the casino for two days. We learn about his feelings of panic and how gambling offers him some escape and release from his grief: 'el juego me transformaba en un hombre sin historia' (27) and 'Deseaba jugar y perder hasta aniquilarme' (30). His dangerous secret relationship with Marina, as companion to a gangster, can also be read as symptomatic of Marcelo's self-destructiveness. But there are reasons for their affinity, primarily that Chilean Marina also has her 'muertos'. Her parents were disappeared during the Pinochet dictatorship and she was raped the night they were taken (64). Marcelo recognises their shared experiences and fellow feeling although Marina does not tell him much: 'Estábamos los dos al encontrarnos ya demasiado heridos' (20).

Cízico's narrative, *Segovia o de la poesía* (2001), the most outwardly self-conscious text in the tetralogy, is a spin-off from *Concierto de jazz*.<sup>12</sup> Here we meet the character Segovia again and learn what happened after Marcelo and Marina skipped town with his stolen money. The narrative consists of a conversation over a cup of coffee between Marcelo's friend Cízico who, as we know from *Concierto de jazz*, played a small role in Marcelo and Marina's escape, and their mutual friend, who we learn to be the writer Jorge Accame, briefly mentioned in Marcelo's tale as the editor of a poetry anthology. Here Cízico recounts to Jorge what happened when Segovia, trying to track down Marcelo and Marina, paid him a visit trying to find them accompanied by three of his heavies and armed with a revolver. The text switches back and forth between the two dialogues, offering many opportunities for writerly discussions, intertextuality and improbable plot lines.<sup>13</sup>

In Cízico's tale Segovia is not portrayed solely as the ogre in Marcelo's story. Indeed Cízico casts aspersions on Marina's character when we learn of her treachery in pocketing the lion's share of Segovia's money, unbeknownst to Marcelo. The two men end up talking, watering the house plants Marina left behind, and drinking wine together companionably during what is, in essence, a home invasion. During this unlikely encounter Segovia happens to see Marcelo's manuscript and, admiring it immensely and presuming it to be the work of Cízico, generously offers to stump up the money for its publication. He is moved by Marcelo's poem about a schoolboy with cancer and other morbid topics. Segovia becomes more sympathetic as a man as he recounts his tough childhood, the death of his mother and his abandonment by his father, himself the sole survivor of a plane crash in what sounds like a tall story. At the end of *Segovia o de la poesía* the reader learns that Segovia has died of cancer, seemingly infected by Marcelo's poem, which both humanises him further and also, paradoxically, points him up as a work of fiction through the implausibility of his cause of death.

Segovia knew about Marina's traumatic past, telling Cízico for example that she felt terrible guilt that she had been misbehaving just before the military police came to her family's home. Segovia recounts a dream she once had to Cízico:

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<sup>12</sup> The work was adapted into a theatre play and performed at the Teatro Sarmiento in Buenos Aires in 2007. The adaptation is published in Jorge Accame, *Chinguil compari, Venecia, Segovia o de la poesía, Hermanos* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 2007), 97-129.

<sup>13</sup> There are references, both clear and oblique, to, for example, Umberto Eco, Thomas de Quincey (often popping up in the work of Borges), and Esteban Echeverría.

-Marina una vez me contó un sueño: dice que ella iba andando en bicicleta y llegaba a un barranco. Entonces dejaba su cuerpo sobre la bicicleta y ella seguía a pie. El cuerpo se iba cuesta abajo. Mientras caminaba, ella veía cómo la bicicleta tomaba cada vez más velocidad y se perdía a lo lejos.

-¿Y eso qué quiere decir?

-No sé Cízico. Si no lo sabe usted, que es poeta. Lo que se puede asegurar es que a veces, cuando estaba con ella, me daba la sensación de que su cuerpo era un animal que tenía. Algo con una vida aparte [...]. (82)

Here we see Marina describing a radical disassociation between her mind and her body, unsurprising perhaps as she is a survivor of sexual trauma and a person employed as a sex worker. This dream of annihilation harks back to *Concierto de jazz* where Marcelo remembers a fleeting moment when the couple shared a desire to die freewheeling through the countryside in Marina's car (74). But also noteworthy is the question Cízico puts to Segovia – '¿Y eso qué quiere decir?' – which emphasises the need to understand (and embraces the classic Freudian belief in dream interpretation). Segovia places that responsibility squarely with writers. However, in another sense, it is Segovia that is the author in that he has the 'real' power to decide what 'really' happens, something that remains mere fantasy and fiction to Cízico the writer. Of course both characters, as such, are imagined and thus there are many levels of suggestion here.

The episode involving the politician Agüero merits particular attention in this discussion of psychological suffering in literature because it takes the tetralogy further into the realm of cultural trauma rather than individual trauma. At one point, Cízico tells Accame, Segovia and his heavies take him along with them to go clear up some business. On arriving, Cízico sees that Segovia has a man held captive. Cízico recognises him as a local politician who was a torturer during the dictatorship now held by Segovia's men and interrogated in a reversal of fortunes. Cízico is filled with an urge to kill him and punish an agent of the dictatorship. Cízico prefaces his account of his sudden murderous rage with a description of the location of the scene, instantly recognisable as the famous *croquis* paragraph from Echeverría's *Matadero*<sup>14</sup> – the classic narrative of human brutality which contains a final scene of torture and murder – to which Accame drolly responds: 'La descripción del sitio me resulta familiar'. Cízico continues telling his story to Accame, outlining his fury and hope that the politician to be killed:

-Yo pensaba en todos los hombres que ese tipo había torturado, las mujeres embarazadas, los chicos, y empezó a hervirme la sangre. Las imágenes de cuerpos lastimados y el abismo de bocas abiertas aullando de dolor, el vino y las emociones de la noche me confundieron, me provocaron en la memoria una mancha de colores terribles y, con desesperación, lo llamé a Segovia aparte.

-¿En ese momento?

-Me puse loco. Estaba fuera de mí.

-Mátelo, Segovia.

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<sup>14</sup> Esteban Echeverría, *El matadero* ed. by Leonor Fleming (Madrid: Cátedra, 2006), 89-114 (98-99).

- ¿Al ministro? No me parece. Todavía podría serme útil. Voy a asustarlo un poco.
- Mátelo, lo va a traicionar de nuevo.
- ¿Qué especial interés tiene en que lo mate?
- Es un hombre del proceso. Torturaba gente, aproveche para hacer justicia.
- Esa sería una decisión romántica.
- Usted es un romántico, Fernando, o al menos, desea serlo.
- ¿Le parece? Ya veremos. Espéreme afuera.
- Si no, deme el revólver a mí. Yo le metería una bala en la cabeza con gusto.
- Usted no entiende, Cízico. Si el ministro muere o no, es mi decisión. Si usted lo mata, es mi decisión. Si usted muere, es mi decisión también. (70)

Ultimately, according to Cízico, as a result of his outburst the man is shot and his death is made to look like a suicide. This collision between a narrative of torture from the most foundational piece of fiction writing in the Argentinian canon and Accame's work reflects the centrality of torture's place in the national psyche.<sup>15</sup> The scene involving the torturer is an expression of wish; Cízico's anger at the intolerable situation where torturers walk free and his deep desire for accountability and punishment, to 'hacer justicia'.<sup>16</sup>

But a surprise awaits the reader: at the end of the text we learn that Cízico's tale has not been an accurate reconstruction of the events, albeit with witty asides about literature, but rather just a tale he has spun for his own amusement and to entertain his friend. In other words Accame, the implied author, has been told an invented story by a character he has created. Cízico and Jorge Accame close the narrative drinking a toast:

- Por lo perverso.
- Por lo que no termina.
- Por lo que no se explica.
- Juan, inventaste todo, ¿no es cierto?
- Salud.

Thus any remaining traditional mimesis and artifice explode and we learn the narrative was not born of Cízico's 'lived' experience. The fabrication cannot but distance the reader from the narrative told. The narrative of *Concierto de jazz* is, as a consequence, also disrupted. Where then does Marcelo's story begin and end? Does it still hold 'true' at all? To a lesser degree, the subsequent texts which do not allude to Marcelo, Marina, Cízico or Segovia at all are also destabilised. How much in each are we to take as 'real' in the narrative world created by Accame? Another

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<sup>15</sup> The same narrative was reworked in the twentieth century by no less than Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares in their short story *La fiesta del monstruo* (1947). This text, authored jointly under the pseudonym Honorio Bustos Domecq, attacks Peronist populism through the representation of the violent murder of a Jewish man, *Nuevos cuentos de Bustos Domecq* (Madrid: Siruela, 1986), 101-22.

<sup>16</sup> This scene is the kind of chance encounter imagined in Chilean playwright Ariel Dorfman's *La muerte y la doncella* of 1990 and Griselda Gambaro's 1991 play *Atando cabos*. The difference here however is that fantasy is fulfilled and the torturer is killed. Levine's research has raised the question 'How can survivors of Argentina's Dirty War accept that their torturers, criminals guilty of torturing and massacring tens of thousands of people, have been pardoned and continue to walk the streets? (78). In Accame's narrative, however, Cízico however does not have to assent to a reality where justice is not served.

effect is created: this disconcerting but very deliberate inventedness hides Cízico's true identity, begging the question: what trauma hides behind his silence?

*Forastero* (2008), the penultimate book in the series, for which Accame won the La Nación-Sudamericana literary prize, continues to merge the factual and the invented, albeit it in a much more violent fashion. As discussed elsewhere, while weaving in elements of the gothic, the central topic of femicide and violent crimes against women in the novel is inspired by real events.<sup>17</sup> Evaristo Soler, the narrator, collector of other people's stories (always involving traumatic events including fires, assaults, sickness, and death) and, something of a voyeur, sets about trying to piece together the unsolved murder of a woman.<sup>18</sup> The details of the killing are terrible to contemplate: Jimena Sánchez was branded by a hot iron, beaten to death, and her body dumped.<sup>19</sup> Soler's own ethical contradictions are also hard to stomach; on occasion he identifies with the aggressors in the text and himself engages in transgressive behaviour, for example, re-enacting abusive behaviour with *Dedicación*, and he also remains curiously emotionally detached.

Although fixated on the horror around him, the tragedy in Soler's own life remains secret until late on in the text when we learn that his wife and son were killed in a house fire. Like Marcelo in *Concierto de jazz*, Evaristo suffers from a kind of survivor's guilt. His anguish only shows occasionally but there are hints in his compulsive behaviour and his urge to court danger and make himself a target for aggression, for example when he joins in the bar brawl (56). Having to talk about his own trauma plunges him into certain destructive behaviours, similarly to Marcelo in *Concierto de jazz*. After Soler tells Marco Andrade about the tragedy he suffered he suddenly changes to an abrupt tone destitute of compassion: '—¿Me prestás el auto uno de estos días? — pregunto de repente—. Tengo ganas de ir de putas' (115). He experiences a very strong reaction on hearing his own story narrated by Carlos Sotomayor when Nájjar learns the details of what happened through unexplained, and perhaps supernatural, means:

Estoy inmóvil, paralizado por la tormenta que por fin se desató. Soy una casa vacía con las ventanas y las puertas abiertas que baten contra las paredes. Soy la tormenta también (215).

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<sup>17</sup> See Iona Macintyre, 'Images of Wilderness in Jorge Accame's *Forastero*', *Romance Studies*, vol. 29, Num. 3, July 2011, 177-185. Accame's interest in the Dracula figure is something he shares with Griselda Gambaro, who has created an Argentinian twist on the vampire tale more than once, most recently in 1998 in her short story 'Nosferatu' where we see a tired, irrelevant and outdated vampire who, being only 'casi immortal' (p. 7), is easily vanquished by the police, Griselda Gambaro, 'Nosferatu' in *Lo mejor que se tiene* (Santa Fe de Bogotá: Norma, 1998), pp. 7-13. See also María Gabriela Mizraje, 'Morder la tradición: El Nosferatu de Griselda Gambaro', *Latin American Theatre Review*, Vol. 35, No. 2, Spring 2002, 79-84 for an analysis of Gambaro's 1970 play of the same title in light of bloodthirsty traditions in the national literature.

<sup>18</sup> Significant parallels emerge with journalist Junior's investigation in *La ciudad ausente* by Ricardo Piglia (1992). Both narrative structures express the challenge of what to do with dangerous information, enclose fragmented stories of trauma, employ Freudian metaphors of digging and burial, show the female body as a specific target for cruelty and, in terms of style, create what Wirshing calls a polyphonic 'crying sound' (43). See Wirshing's chapter 'Ricardo Piglia's The Absent City: Oppressed Memories Unearthed', 37-59.

<sup>19</sup> For research on gender violence in Latin America see Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano (eds), *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Américas* (Durham N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

This forced confrontation with his past makes up his mind that he should leave the city and abandon his attempts to bring the murderers to justice. The words in the quotation represent a contradictory inner state: Soler is simultaneously immobile and in motion, and both cause (*la tormenta*) and effect (*la casa*).

The incidents of abuse in *Forastero* are many. The monstrous sugar plantation boss Ismael Palma looms large. A mythic figure, it remains unclear whether he is alive or dead. Cecilia is the daughter of agricultural workers. Her parents were killed by Palma when she was ten years old and he takes her so he can abuse her. The previous owner of the land, Luis Sinaglia, also a writer, kills Palma's overseer, attacks Palma and rescues Cecilia. In the city, teacher Nájjar sexually abuses his pupils, including Cecilia, but is protected by his lawyer, also from the Palma clan and suspected to be his father. The scarred man Dardo Gauntay in particular shares some horrific stories about Palma's abuse with Soler (110), making the children torture animals (122), and the branding of humans (136) which Soler laps up such is his thirst for horror (169). Everyone is traumatised. As the mysterious priest says to Soler after he discovers the mass graves: 'Yo he visto cosas terribles durante años' (184).<sup>20</sup> But it is the bodies of girls and women that bear the brunt of the inhumanity. When Soler finds the graves, Nájjar rationalises the body count saying that there are more than enough women going round and killing a few is of no consequence, to him it is part of a brutal natural order, and he draws a parallel to wildebeests stampeding on the African plains (186-7).

From this grim judgement on women we turn to *Gentiles criaturas* (2010), the final text in Accame's series. The novel is narrated by Gabriela who, it turns out, is Soler's childhood friend and former lover. To all outward appearances she has temporarily left her husband and children and gone to the Buenos Aires coast to rent a house by the sea out of season and use the much desired solitude to write. However, on the first page she discloses to the reader that her real intention is to confront her past and indeed she does, returning to the scene of two traumatic events in her life, one of which took place in childhood and one as a young woman, memories of which resurface on a regular basis. Gradually we learn about Gabriela's experience witnessing a killing on the motorway as a little girl when she stowed away in the back of her father's lorry. The second trauma was an attempted sexual attack while she was on the run from the authorities during her time as a *montonera*. The fear she experienced as an adult was intensified because, already in danger, being wanted by the authorities forced her to travel the same road, literally, and also metaphorically in the sense of being unprotected and vulnerable. The thought of the road to Baradero provokes terror and powerlessness in her: 'No, a Baradero, no', (171) and then, even worse, she has to fight off an attempted assault on her own.

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<sup>20</sup> Irene Wirshing identifies burial as a major theme in post-dictatorship Argentinian literature, both in the metaphorical sense of burying history and obscuring memory, and also in the denial of burial to those that mourn the disappeared, for example in Griselda Gambaro's play *Antígona Furiosa* (1986). Irene Wirshing, *National Trauma in Postdictatorship Latin American Literature: Chile and Argentina* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009) 53, 101. An example by an author of Accame's generation is the discovery of a mass grave during the dictatorship in Guillermo Martínez's 1989 narrative *Infierno grande* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2006). See Cynthia Lee Palmer, 'Rewriting the Honour Plot: *Infierno grande* by Guillermo Martínez', *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*, Vol. 12, 2016, 5-8.

The aftereffects remain with her and as an adult she has suicidal thoughts (55, 85, 153), often reliving the events. These feelings of insecurity propel her into an unhappy marriage.

In the narrative Gabriela's childhood memories surface frequently, attesting to the experience of trauma and feeling small and helpless. Her fixation on curtains expresses her need as a child to explore the world from a place of safety:

Las mañanas de los sábados, me levantaba antes que nadie, me acercaba al ventanal y las corría [las cortinas]. La luz me golpeaba los ojos como un chorro de agua y me obligaba a cerrarlos, hasta que poco a poco me acostumbraba e iba abriéndolos (10).

But as a witness to violence at a tender age Gabriela is not able to slowly adjust to the perils of the world outside from the safe base of her family home. Her initial fright and shock are added to as she is asked to keep the incident from her mother in order to protect her father, a request that in turn means her home is no longer a secure foothold. Her parents send her to a therapist because of her subsequent odd behaviour, particularly her attachment to an imaginary friend named Ifigenia, a telling reference to Agamemnon's daughter who he attempted to sacrifice.<sup>21</sup> An ugly scene follows in which Gabriela tells her therapist about the incident and then receives a beating from her mother for telling lies (52). The isolation that she feels remains with her during her adolescence. When her older brother tells her 'Todo el mundo es peronista' she feels a strong wish to belong to a bigger group and it is this sentiment that awakens in her an interest in politics (135). Her path to political militancy includes witnessing a young couple attacked and taken away by men in an armoured vehicle (163). Later she knows she was one of the lucky ones in escaping death in the campaign of political killing.

Gabriela is often reminded of the vulnerability of small creatures, for example when she sees a dead new-born foal. However in the narrative present she is able to save a seal pup from an attack by a stray dog (176), a reminder of her own strength. The image of the shark carcass displayed by the local fisherman is a clear symbol of lurking predators but also a reminder that predators can be caught. In an arresting and chilling passage Gabriela comes to meet her aggressor face to face once again when he calls at her house bringing her a recipe for shark meat. Now elderly, his scars from where she burnt his face protecting herself are still visible. This confrontation with her past is dark but also strangely healing. Her imaginary friend Ifigenia (who first faded from view when Gabriela became a writer) returns to say a final goodbye, further evidence that Gabriela is able to cope on her own, and providing narrative closure to the novel. Thus the final scenes of the narratives do not bring the tetralogy to a wholly bleak ending. Reminded that she can take care of herself, Gabriela liberates herself from her unhappy marriage and, entering a period of creativity, decides to stay in the community. Thus the protagonist of *Gentiles Criaturas* offers the reader a small hope of catharsis.

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<sup>21</sup> Emily Kearns, *Ancient Greek Religion: A Sourcebook* (Malden MA and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 69.

All of the writers created by Accame confront trauma in their stories, though not necessarily their own. Taken together, Accame's series of narratives can be read as a reflection on the collective social reality of Argentina at the beginning of the twenty-first century: the legacy of political violence including mass murder during the dictatorship, the economic exploitation and social unrest of the turn of the century, violence against women including sexual crimes, organised crime, and the exemption from justice and punishment enjoyed by certain elite groups. The traumatic memories of the writers depicted cover diverse experiences: childhood fears, sundry acts of violence, and the pain of living through losses and separations. The psychic impact is shown in their feelings of grief, guilt, anger, anxiety, and shame, as well as their destructive habits, troubled relationships, and suicidal wishes.

But Accame's outlook is not completely bleak; within his fictional world further progress can be made. In terms of relieving their emotional pain, Marcelo and Gabriela recount their traumatic experiences and integrate their pasts into their life stories. Soler, however, cannot face his trauma and uses the suffering of others as an avoidance strategy. Following Freud's concept of *trauerarbeit* ('work of mourning'), theorists working in the area of Latin American postdictatorship literature have pointed to examples of the externalisation of grief.<sup>22</sup> What Accame does in *Forastero* is express the real challenge of making collective grief public, dealing with the sheer quantity of bodies, and retrieving the stories of trauma of so many individuals. Cízico's narrative, quirky and intriguing though it is, constitutes a major gap in the series, a silence when it comes to his own story, evidence, we may conclude, of his own psychic pain. His contribution does however rage against unpunished perpetrators of violence, a commonality to some extent in all the stories, but certainly most forcibly expressed in *Segovia o de la poesía*.

The scope of the *Cuatro poetas* tetralogy is personal, individual and accumulative, never panoramic or sweeping, and as such it is difficult to draw elaborate conclusions. We can say however that victimhood and responses to tragedy and loss are not sentimentalised by Accame. An interesting stylistic achievement is that the factual basis for this fictional representation of Argentina is never far from view, and vice versa, with self-referential aspects and elements of the unbelievable popping up as reminders throughout. These, Accame's flagrant fictional strategies, have two overall effects. Firstly they help us to approach and attempt to conceive some of the internal states of extreme psychic pain that accompany atrocity and tragedy, and secondly, they provoke our admiration for writers that chose to confront such difficult subject matter.

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<sup>22</sup> For example, Idelber Avelar takes the creation of texts in Mercado's portrayal of exile *En estado de memoria* (1990) as a case in point. Idelber Avelar, *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 210-229.

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