

The Corporeality of Memory, Resistance and Survival in Alicia Kozameh's Fictionalized Testimony

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In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992), Dori Laub explains that Holocaust survivors “did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive” (78). As a former political prisoner and witness of extreme state repression during Argentina’s Dirty War (1976-1983), author and survivor Alicia Kozameh (b. 1953) has expressed similar views about her motivations for writing *Pasos bajo el agua* (1987), a poignant testimonial novel about her traumatic prison experience and the challenges that she faced in its aftermath. Telling her story and that of her cellmates became a matter of survival for Kozameh who, as a writer, chose to fictionalize her experiences and describes the process as a “drenaje doloroso” (Pfeiffer, “Escribir” 96).

While most testimonials given by victims of the Dirty War include detailed descriptions of physical abuse and torture, Kozameh’s novel, as well as her short stories published in *Ofrenda de propia piel* (2004), do not dwell upon such horrifying practices. Yet, her preoccupation with the lived body permeates her texts and is one of the most compelling aspects of her narrative.¹ Although many scholars have highlighted the fact that in prison, one’s physical body is usually also one’s sole valuable possession, hence its importance in prison literature, I believe that Kozameh’s vivid depictions of the materiality of the female body and its transformations go beyond this explanation and complicate the meanings that have been assigned to the imprisoned body.² Indeed, as Peter Brooks notes:

Narratives in which a body becomes a central preoccupation can be especially revelatory of the effort to bring the body into the linguistic realm because they repeatedly tell the story of a body’s entrance into meaning. That is, they dramatize ways in which the body becomes a key factor in a text: how, we might say, it embodies meaning. (8)

This is especially relevant when taking into account the fact that the female imprisoned bodies that Kozameh writes about were not only assigned a negative meaning, but were also deemed disposable by the repressive state whose aim was to violently impose its conservative agenda. Indeed, the military regime justified its tyranny, which included torture, arbitrary detention and disappearances, by resorting to a rhetoric filled with metaphors of the body. As Lessie Jo Frazier explains, the dictatorship saw the nation as a vulnerable organism contaminated by subversive forces depicted as diseased bodies. The military's mission was thus to act as an antibody and purge that disease from the national body (390).³

In this paper, I demonstrate that, while Argentina's past military government tried to erase "subversive" bodies from its national narrative, Kozameh places the materiality of the insubordinate body at the core of her texts to denounce past oppression, document physical acts of resistance, and testify to the challenges of surviving traumatic experiences. I argue that her portrayal of the lived body as the concurrent site of destruction and reconstruction enables her to reclaim meaning for herself and other victims of the regime. I also show that through her writing of the body, Kozameh constructs a collective feminist consciousness that allows for the brutally silenced Argentine female voice and body to be heard and seen as an agent of her own subjectivity. Her focus on the corporeal therefore offers a powerful counter-discourse to that of the military and is part of an effort to seek healing and restore justice.

As I mentioned earlier, *Pasos bajo el agua* (1987) is heavily based on Kozameh's prison experience: it includes, in a non-chronological and fragmented fashion, the circumstances of her arrest on September 24, 1975 by men from the Federal Police and the infamous Alianza Anti-Comunista Argentina; the abuse and degrading conditions she endured in jail, first in the basement of the Rosario police station and later at the Villa Devoto prison in Buenos Aires; her friendships with other female prisoners; her release on

December 24, 1978 and, finally, her lasting struggles to heal from such a traumatic experience and to live in exile in Los Angeles. In the book's short introduction, Kozameh insists on the truthful and collective aspects of her accounts: "Lo sustancial de cada uno es verdadero, sucedió, lo viví yo misma o lo vivieron otras compañeras y yo lo supe, aunque he reemplazado nombres o quizá detalles que para nada cambian, de hecho, la esencia de la cosa." Furthermore, she states that she wrote this book "para que los episodios de los que me ocupó sean conocidos" (7). The book also includes reproductions of the cover of one of the two notebooks she was given while in detention at Villa Devoto and of the sketches she drew in them.

Yet, the author makes it clear that she has fictionalized many of the situations described in her text: "les he dado forma literaria porque me gusta, disfruto trabajar aprendiendo la literatura," and refers to her work as a novel in various interviews (7). The English translation, published in 1996, clearly emphasizes the text's fictional nature since the subtitle "A Novel" was added to its title, *Steps Under Water*.⁴ The story's main protagonist, Sara, is thus a fictional character who is only partially based on the real Kozameh and whose point of view is one among many as the narration goes back and forth between first and third persons. The novel's literary attributes are also evident in its circular structure and in its polyphonic nature.

Many of the protagonists present in *Pasos bajo el agua* reappear in the ten short stories compiled in *Ofrenda de propia piel* (2004) and each of these stories is related in some capacity to the traumatic prison experiences recounted in the novel. All were written in Los Angeles between 1992 and 2004 and several of them were previously published in different literary journals. As José Luis Hisi notes, these short stories offer a variety of discursive styles: "la narrativa, en su forma ficcional y real, conlleva incrustada la poesía y el lenguaje teatral, dramático, con pizcas de otros lenguajes referidos, como el del cine y la literatura oral" (np). As in the novel, different literary genres are present, including conversations, notes, and diary.

In their analysis of Kozameh's writing, various scholars, including Rhonda Dahl Buchanan and Victoria Cox, have noted the prominent place that the Argentine author dedicates to the lived body and its sensory apparatus. David William Foster, for example observed that, in *Pasos bajo el agua*, Kozameh "is concerned to inventory the body as an organic phenomenon beyond the specific circumstances of interrogation" and that her novel "captures both the materiality of the body and its transformations" (53). It is precisely her vivid portrayal of the body and the ways she represents it to simultaneously express, resist and overcome pain that I found most compelling in her novel and short stories.

Elizabeth Scarry explains in her now canonical book *The Body in Pain* (1985), that physical pain is difficult to communicate because it is "object-less;" it is a state that "resists language" since it cannot be linked to a particular referent; "it is unsuitable for the kind of objectivization on which language depends" (17). Consequently, physical pain is rarely represented in literature. Yet, she adds that when pain does find a voice, "it begins to tell a story" (3). In *Pasos bajo el agua* and in *Ofrenda de propia piel*, Kozameh not only effectively conveys physical pain both thematically and stylistically, but as my analysis shows, it is through her focus on the corporeal that she simultaneously denounces and resists severe emotional and physical violence, and testifies to the challenges of reconstructing oneself after trauma. I also look at the act of writing the female body as an attempt to exorcise an embodied trauma generated by violence and discrimination in order to seek healing and liberation. Each of these topics is closely related to the others and they often occur simultaneously.

One of the most startling aspects of Kozameh's writings lies in the way she represents the body in a dismantled fashion throughout her novel and short stories. Indeed, she often focuses on specific body parts or organs that seem loosely connected to each other. This constant fragmented representation could be part of an overall creative effort by the author to reject traditional and realistic modes of writing. Kozameh's novel is fragmented on various levels: its

structure is not linear, it is composed of various types of discourses such as diary entries, letters or sketches, the point of view constantly shifts between first and third persons and between past and present tenses, and there are few linguistic connectors between the narrators' ideas. According to Beatriz Sarlo, who has observed this fragmented style of writing in various Argentine authors of the 1980s:

The violent fragmentation of the objective world had repercussions in the symbolic world. Having to come to terms with repression, death, failure, and lost illusions, fiction introduced bewilderment by using two basic strategies. On the one hand, it rejected mimesis as a unique form of representation, and, on the other, it proposed a discursive fragmentation of both subjectivity and social reality. (240)

I believe that these strategies are indeed present in Kozameh's writing and that they are part of a constant effort by the author to represent her reality while resisting it at the same time. On one hand, fragmentation in her texts can be interpreted in part as a literary device that challenges traditional (masculine) prison or testimonial narratives to communicate the devastating and confusing effects that severe state repression has on reality and on discourse in general. On the other hand, given Kozameh's traumatic personal experience, fragmentation, especially when representing the body, is one of the ways, in addition to fictionalizing the events, that the author uses to survive the emotional pain caused by writing that experience. It is also an attempt to realistically represent Sara's traumatized state and denounce how state-sponsored violence, captivity, and forced exile have shattered her physical and emotional being.

Expressing and Resisting Embodied Violence, Captivity, and Exile

Zillah Eisenstein explains that "the physicality of the body becomes a horribly powerful resource for those who wish to conquer, violate, humiliate and shame" and it has been well documented that the torture and disposal of supposedly subversive bodies was a dreadful strategy that the military used to get to and remain in power during the Dirty War (33). While Kozameh writes

about various of the drastic measures taken by the junta to persecute Sara and her cellmates, including the way Sara is kidnapped and beaten in *Pasos bajo el agua* and how a woman and a child are being tortured in “Vientos de rotación perpendicular,” for example, violence does not occupy center stage in her novel or short stories, and she does not provide lengthy descriptions of torture sessions or the physical injuries that result from it. It is not my intention to suggest here that Kozameh or her fictional characters did not experience torture. Not only has the author openly spoken about how she and other political prisoners were tortured psychologically, but several of Sara’s and her compañeras’ experiences depicted in the narrative relate to torture as described by the United Nations.⁵ However, unlike the oral testimonies compiled in the official report *Nunca Más* that “cling tenaciously to the body – the wounds, blows, and shocks administered to the flesh” to provide evidence of and condemn torture, Kozameh’s inventory of the body goes beyond proof of physical destruction and draws attention to the psychological effects of corporal violence (Taylor 161). When referring to the oral testimonies compiled in *Nunca Más*, Diana Taylor explains that:

the person describing the violence seems trapped in the body/mind split provoked by their torment in their effort to keep their personhood out of the picture. It is as if the survivors, separating themselves from the violence inflicted on them in and through the body, negated the totalizing and engulfing nature of pain by isolating it onto the body. (161)

In Kozameh’s texts however, this separation between mind and body does not usually occur. On the contrary, she seems to specifically write the body in order to express Sara’s (and her own) emotional and psychological pain. Her character’s emotions are also often expressed in highly visceral ways and seem to reverberate to specific parts of the body. This is the case for example in *Pasos bajo el agua*, when Sara addresses her confused state by describing how the words spoken by two of the policemen who arrested her bounce inside of her, as if her stomach and head were empty spaces: “Hablan de una prima que se va a Europa. Europa se me deshace. Me rebota en las

paredes del estómago, de la cabeza. No entiendo” (23). It could also be argued that at times she writes emotions in order to articulate the body. In both cases, she affirms the overwhelming character of suffering and the fact that her subjection and recovery are both physical and emotional. Furthermore, her display of the traumatic impacts of violence encompasses those related to her characters’ captivity and subsequent exile.

While she does not directly address the topic of torture by providing gruesome descriptions of wounded bodies, her fragmented representation of the body alludes to the dehumanizing and painful nature of torture that literally seeks to destroy the physical entity of the body and reduces one’s existence to the corporeal. In “Bosquejo de alturas” for example, Sara describes her cellmates resting on their beds as a pile of body parts: “Las cabezas, los brazos, los pies, tratan de olvidarse de las vísceras” (*Ofrenda* 24). By describing her compañeras in such a fragmented fashion, Sara demonstrates how the constant psychological torture by zealous prison guards, the stress of not knowing whether she will live or die, and the unsanitary conditions in which she is forced to live have an impact on her perception of the people around her. Indeed, while in many instances she refers to her cellmates by name and speaks of their individual characters and physical attributes, there are times, such as in the above-quoted passage, when she or the third person narrator sees others as mere body parts. In this way she internalizes the dehumanizing effects of torture and confinement.

Yet, while chopping the body into parts implies destroying it, paradoxically the way each part or organ appears to remain intact and tries to function independently or reconnect with others shows an intent not only to resist destruction but to actively reconstruct and preserve the integrity of the body. The following quote from “Bosquejo de alturas,” for instance, details part of the ongoing organic communication that occurs inside the prisoners’ bodies and which keeps them alive and interacting with each other: “Hay fulgores. Son el frotamiento de las moléculas que conforman los músculos y las paredes del estómago. Salen los ombligos, por las bocas, se encuentran en el aire,

producen luz. Llamen la atención de las cabezas, se levantan los párpados, se cruzan las miradas, se reconocen, se hablan” (*Ofrenda* 24). By virtue of this biological process, not only are the prisoners’ bodies alive, but their organs are working together, giving them the power to communicate with each other and to resist as one.

This collective resistance also appears in the way the narrative voice describes the prisoners almost as one mass: “Por lo menos treinta cabezas. Y todas sin desórdenes genéticos. Seiscientos dedos. Trescientos de manos y trescientos de pies,” (13) and in the way these bodies speak as one at the end of the story: “El cuerpo de todas, somos” (32). Here the boundaries of each individual body expand to include the entire cell and therefore transform the prisoners into one. By representing a collective body made up of fragmented parts, the author highlights the paradoxical and profound sense of community that these women achieved in order to resist and survive such terrible conditions.

Kozameh’s focus on the lived body and its internal functioning is also a testament to the controlling and transforming power that imprisonment has on one’s perception of reality. In the opening chapter of *Pasos bajo el agua* entitled “A modo de regreso,” Sara, who has just been released and finds herself back on the terrace of her parents’ home, chooses the corporeal to communicate how prison dramatically distorted her interpretation of certain sensations. She understandably feels overwhelmed by the noises of motorbikes and the rhythm of people’s feet walking on the street that she has not heard and felt, and by the sunlight that she has not seen, in over three years. Yet, upon hearing a cat meow, Sara is suddenly filled with irrepressible fear and panic. Images of dead cats that she saw during childhood overcome her and she instantly remembers the feeling of being horrified and physically sick. She explains for example that after passing one of those dead animals on the street: “llegué a casa y tenía la garganta hinchada como si allí estuviera instalado el cuerpo muerto, gordo y amarillo. Entre la lengua y el esófago. Me metí en el baño, directo a vomitar” (14). The fear and memories that the cat

meowing sets off in her are disconcerting and do not coincide with her father's memory of how much she liked these domesticated animals as a child.

Since the unexpected sound of the cat triggers Sara's involuntary memory, Kozameh asserts, like Proust, the centrality of the physical to the activity of recollection. As Julia Kristeva points out, the Proustian unconscious form of memory is "grafted in the actual body of the narrator" (82). Yet, while Proust is famously able to recollect a feeling of happiness associated with eating a madeleine,⁶ Sara retrieves a feeling of terror and death from what should have also triggered a pleasant memory. Her memories of the dead cats remits back to the circumstances in which those sights and feelings took place and notably the fact that, in the first instance, she links a dead cat to the present violence occurring in Argentina: "Ibamos a Alberdi, a la casa de su hermano, que estaba muy vivo y no se imaginaba que iba a morir veinte años después en la calle, como muchos gatos, pero de balas paramilitares" (13). Furthermore, amidst her remembrance of dead cats Sara also alludes to her own traumatic experience and questions her reality: "Qué diferencia habrá entre lo que siente un milico al ver un gato y lo que yo siento ahora con sus maullidos" (14). Sara's involuntary memory is therefore related to her traumatic experience in jail. In *Memory*, Anne Whitehead, who examines the contribution of recent trauma theory to the understanding of involuntary memories, explains that, according to neurobiologists van der Kolk and van der Art, "trauma is registered and encoded in the brain in a different way from ordinary memory" and that "the 'memory' of trauma is thus not subject to the usual narrative or verbal mechanisms of recall but is instead organized as bodily sensations, behavioural reenactments, nightmares, and flashbacks" (115). The above episode therefore highlights how Sara's memory of trauma is engraved not only in her brain, but in her entire body.

Her memory also combines past and present, as she associates the dead cats with the state-sponsored violence that claimed her uncle's life and ultimately her own freedom and perception of reality. Indeed, while hearing a cat forces her to recall horrific images and feelings, she is unable to remember

cats in the pleasant ways she used to see them before her ordeal: “Tengo que averiguar algo sobre gatos; volver a enterarme, aprender” (14). This also shows how the memory of trauma cannot be conceptualized as a constructive process in the way memory of regular events serves to create a continuous identity. As neuroscientist Nikolai Axmacher explains, traumatic events cannot become part of one’s personal identity because

their subjective meaning is not re-evaluated and integrated into a narrative continuity with other events, but remains restricted to the situation when these events were experienced. Repressed conflicts and traumatic events remain permanently present in a pathological sense – they cannot be forgotten or temporarily dismissed” (np).

This explains in part why the narration moves from past to present and how Sara relives in the present tense events that occurred in the past.

Eduarne M. Portela, who explores Kozameh’s symbolic uses of language and images in relation to the representation of traumatic memories of violence, explains that the cats “represent for Sara two extremes; they are creatures that appear to be immortal by escaping almost any danger, and it is precisely for this reason that, when they die, they embody the absolute horror and omnipotence of death” (120). As Sara leaves the terrace to join her friends and family, she has the impression that the stairs are “cubiertos de gatos amontonados, enfermos, colgando, aferrados a las bandas, blandos o endurecidos como goma seca.” They are, as she further explains, “una mueca reverencial que me hace la libertad” (*Pasos* 15). It is therefore through her unwanted physical reaction to the meowing cat on the terrace and the emotions that this brings out in her in this episode that Sara realizes the depth of her trauma and the contingency of her body to being subject to forces she cannot control. When considering the lasting impacts of violence on one’s post-traumatic reality, Michael Humphrey explains: “healing cannot mean the reconstitution of prior relationships since in most cases that world has been lost. Violence does transform individuals and social relationships. Victims cannot just pick up prior relationships, nor are they able to see the world in the

same way” (120). Sara’s awareness of this transformation within her, which starts with her physical reaction to the cat in the first chapter of *Pasos bajo el agua*, might point to the long road of recovery that awaits her, but it is also an important step toward the construction of her new self.

In contrast to most prison narratives, which start with the main character being detained or in detention, or with oral testimonies that usually concentrate on the traumatic event and not its long term aftermath, Kozameh starts her novel with Sara’s “way back” to freedom and thus conveys her intention to focus on rebuilding oneself. While Sara’s experience upon hearing a cat in this first chapter points to the traumatic and lasting impacts that captivity and violence have on her mind and body, it also allows the author to focus simultaneously on the constructive aspects of recovering one’s senses and physical freedom, or as Sara explains: “(...) lo que es recuperarlo todo de golpe; ocupar las oquedades con sonidos que nunca han sido olvidados” (12). Sara’s body forces her to understand that her experience has changed her and that she has the ability to build new maps and perceptions of her relationships to the world. Therefore, by describing the recovery of physical sensations and by portraying a dismembered body, it is as if Sara were literally piecing herself together.

This process is extremely difficult and Sara seems to equate being free with being in physical pain. In *Pasos bajo el agua*, she describes how everything and everybody outside of jail became “alien” and “hostile” to her and her former cellmates: “everything smelled as though it didn’t belong to us” (80). Being free, she explains, filled them with “unremitting pain”: “[But] we fell, stunned and hounded by nausea, in the middle of the resounding deafness of a people deadened by fists. And it gave us a good dose of sadness and anger, though I’m not sure how effective a dose it was” (81). Furthermore, freedom provokes emotions of guilt and confusion that affect Sara in highly visceral ways: “I have that windmill turning in the pit of my stomach. Everything that goes on around me makes the windmill move and it exasperates me, it churns my insides” (54). By choosing words that allude to physical violence such as

“hounded by nausea,” “deadened by fists,” and “it churns my insides,” Sara indicates that she experiences her newly gained freedom almost as an act of torture. In her analysis of the first and last chapter of *Pasos bajo el agua*, Portela points to the fact that being released from jail is a traumatic episode for Sara and that “the moment of liberation becomes an event that cannot be processed until it is remembered and written” (127). While I agree with Portela, I believe that, as the above quotes show, the trauma of being released is not a short-lived episode, but rather becomes a painful state of being that Sara fights emotionally and physically to accept as her new reality.

She becomes aware of a sort of distancing from reality that she does not fully understand and that pains her: “I am in the middle of all that movement, but emotionally I just don’t take part. It’s like sitting there watching a movie. And not just any movie, but a really insipid one...” (54). Being free in Argentina’s political and social context is therefore a condition that makes her physically sick and that her entire body resists. In a sense, Kozameh counters the regime’s rhetoric of the body that I referred to earlier. In her interpretation, it is the regime that contaminates the nation with a deadly virus that is spreading rapidly and affecting the physical and psychological health of its citizen through brainwashing, torture, or killing. Since, as Humphrey claims, “political power is the source of violence,” it is fair to say that for Sara, violence does not end with her release from prison. Indeed, the repressive regime that detained and abused her is still ruling the country. Furthermore, given Sara’s emotional and physical responses to her new reality, the political power at the source of violence cannot be interpreted solely as governmental power but should also encompass the acceptance of the repressive regime by a significant part of Argentine’s society.

In *Pasos bajo el agua*, Sara makes it clear that the freedom she was granted is a misnomer, as the state still exercises control over her entire being. In addition to her daily check-in at the command post of the II Army Corps, she is subjected to constant surveillance and harassment by the police.

Interestingly, Sara's representation of the milico's body appears as fragmented as hers or that of her cellmates:

[But] in Rosario, to survive after prison in a city with one million people, when just by walking the streets at the same time you fatally encounter the same faces, the same feet, and consequently the same pistols (and if you don't see them, it's because they lurk, always on the muscle, under a sweater or, of course a jacket) – now, that was difficult (80).

Given that Rosario is the second largest city in Argentina and that, as Sara states, it is quite populated, the above quote points to the fact that everybody looks alike and that no one can be trusted. Taylor, who details the type of clothing and grooming approved by the regime during the Dirty War, explains that the military often tried to look like average citizen and used disguises “to infiltrate the other's space” (107). For Sara and her cellmates, whose cell represented an extension of their plural oppressed female body, the presence of hidden oppressors among the society that they now have to navigate is especially stressful. While they spent countless hours as prisoners observing each other, the task of reading other people's bodies, especially that of men, once out of prison, becomes a difficult endeavor that often leads to feelings of confusion and paranoia.

Furthermore, by adding “pistols” to the list of body parts that describe her oppressors, Sara seems to paradoxically highlight how violence has become an inherent part of being an Argentine man, while at the same this hidden metallic “part” precludes them from being truly human. Since there were no men incarcerated with Sara and her compañeras, the confined space that they shared in jail was mostly a feminine one. The few men connected to these women's jail experience were policemen or members of the military who carried guns and abused women.⁷ By fragmenting the masculine body and by assigning it an inorganic limb, Sara dehumanizes her oppressor and denounces the extreme state of terror and repression that she continues to experience after being released from jail.

Thus, as Sara finds herself a stranger in her own city and to some degree to herself, she clings to the “plural body” that allowed her to survive and resist while in detention. It is again in the friendships and presence of the women who shared her traumatic experience that she is able to cope with and resist the emotional and physical feelings of estrangement that she faces in her new reality. Kozameh especially addresses the powerful bonds that unite these women beyond their years in detention in the chapter “Sara, Elsa, Marco, and the Dance of Great Sadness” that she added to *Pasos bajo el agua* in 1996, as well as in the short story “El encuentro. Pájaros” that she wrote in 1994. In the aforementioned chapter, the reader hears different points of view about Sara’s choice to end her short affair with Marco, the husband of her friend and former cellmate Elsa, in order to keep their friendship intact. In the part called “(ELSA AND MARCO’S VERSION, THAT SAME NIGHT)” Marco points to the indivisible connections that Sara, Elsa and Cristina have: “Together you have a sort of energy I don’t understand very well. And I don’t know where it comes from. And even though you all seem to be fighting, there’s nobody that can split the three of you up” (64). This chapter also highlights Elsa’s difficulty in connecting with the pain that Marco experienced and continues to feel due to her physical and emotional absence in their marriage. Yet, it is Sara’s explanation in “Encuentro. Pájaros” of why the military would not approve of the former cellmates’ reunion that she, Elsa and Cristina are organizing, that better sums up the feeling of community and resistance that exists between them: “Pero no nos quieren juntas, porque juntas, ya sabés, nos sentimos reconstruidas, cómo te puedo decir, retejidas, y podemos desafiarlos” (49). The lasting friendships and the feeling of belonging to a body greater than oneself are therefore not only positive successes that these women achieved against and in spite of the military’s intentions to destroy them physically and mentally, but they are also strengths that allow them to resist and cope with their new hostile environment well beyond physical detention.

It is in part through the conversations and correspondences that Sara has with her former cellmates over the years that she communicates how exile

affects her sense of identity and physical integrity. As Sara explains while briefly living in Mexico: “Now I’ve got this identity crisis; I stop knowing who I am. I lose my own way” (88). Yet, her struggle has more to do with her past traumatic experiences in Argentina than with her new life abroad. In the chapters of *Pasos bajo el agua* and in the short stories in which the protagonists, mostly Sara, find themselves in exile, the narrators’ main preoccupation is remembering or forgetting traumatic events that occurred in Argentina and not so much on adapting to a new culture or environment. As Kaminsky notes: “Whether forced or voluntary, exile is primary from, and not to, a place. It thus carries something of the place departed and of the historical circumstance of that place at the moment of departure, making the exiled person no longer present in the place departed, but not a part of the new place either” (30). Indeed, emotionally, Sara first seems to live her exile as an extension of the feelings of alienation and confusion that she experienced in Argentina upon being released from jail. Physically, she experiences it through her body as a consequence of the military repression. Therefore, while her forced exile prevents her from being killed or suffering further retaliation from the military, she also interprets it as strategy that enables the regime to control, or worse yet, erase her physical being from the national narrative. Furthermore, she finds herself physically separated from the women who shared her trauma and with whom she identifies.

Remembering the past and making sense of it while in exile becomes, in part, a way of resisting a repressive regime that still affects her corporeality. In the short story “Dos días en la relación de mi cuñada Inés con este mundo perentorio,” which is in part dedicated “a los protagonistas del exilio,” Sara takes her sister-in-law on a car ride through Los Angeles and urges her to fight the sadness she feels about her husband’s disappearance and the horror that she went through. Throughout the story and especially in the passage quoted below, we get a sense of Sara’s need to keep believing in herself and in her friends, in the fact that the military regime did not crush them emotionally and physically, that they resisted and still are resisting:

¿Qué somos, Inés, sino las marcas del miedo, del miedo del adversario a nuestra resistencia accidentada y potente? ¿Qué nos rige sino estos pies que nos transportaron el cuerpo casi embalsamado a través de corredores carcelarios y calles conminatorias, alarmantes, los mismos que se ejercitan ahora, día a día, en carteles luminosos de otras ciudades del mismo mundo, los que nos impulsan por lo que nos queda de la vida, los que nos absuelven del temor a lo que falta? (66)

Sara's need to affirm her resistance and to cling to the bond that she shared with her cellmates becomes part of reconstructing her post-traumatic identity as a survivor. As Humphrey explains, being a survivor refers to "a 'group' identity amongst those who share the unshareable." He further adds that, "Survivor identity is constructed as much by an in-group recognition of who really shares a particular traumatic/horrific experience as much as through the experience of becoming the sacrificial victim" (121). It is especially difficult for Sara to assume this identity. Not only is the military regime still there and controlling her upon her release, but it also forces her into exile away from others who went through the same experience. Furthermore, the Ley de Obediencia Debida, signed by democratically elected President Alfonsín in 1987, gave amnesty to all military personnel, including torturers and high-ranking officers who ordered the atrocities to happen in the first place. As Humphrey notes, "The survivors of torture and political imprisonment were not recognised, with the consequence that they had to 'pay the real price of reconciliation'." The suffering of the living victims, such as Sara, is therefore denied and becomes politically and socially problematic (121). Agger and Jensen also explain that survivors were "stigmatised by their criminal records" and therefore "kept unemployed – and in poverty" (qtd. in Humphrey 121). Kozameh's novel, which was published in 1987, one year after the Ley de Punto Final and the same year as the Ley de Obediencia Debida came into effect, therefore also defies and denounces the indifference to justice of the new democratic government.⁸

While the novel and short stories highlight Sara's struggle to reconstruct herself after leaving Argentina, ultimately, exile proves to be a productive space

for Kozameh, to resist oppression, share, and start healing from her experience. As Humphrey explains, one way to get rid of the effects of violence is to share it: “however, sharing involves more than the rhetoric that ‘revealing is healing’ implies. Sharing involves not the elimination of suffering so much as its recognition as an enduring reality” (122). Writing for Kozameh is a way to express her pain and to make sense of it but it does not eradicate it. It is through her focus on the lived body that she alleviates her suffering and denounces how state-sponsored violence, captivity, and forced exile have shattered and continue to undermine Sara’s life. And, as I continue to demonstrate in the next section, it is also through her central preoccupation with its materiality that she is able to reconstruct herself, as well as give a voice and agency to the brutally silenced female victims of the repressive regime.

Writing the Female Body to Seek Healing and Liberation

In his survey of Argentine-Jewish women writers, Foster notes that Kozameh’s novel is particularly feminist in terms of its representation of the body. I agree with his interpretation, and believe that, through her writing of the female body, she constructs a collective feminist consciousness that challenges the hegemonic repressive and patriarchal discourse of the state. In this section, I thus show how, by focusing on the prisoner’s corporeality, Kozameh is able to simultaneously denounce and reject some of the ways in which women’s bodies become a site of state control.

When Sara first arrives in the basement of the Rosario police station, she is temporarily jailed with common criminals who are accused of practicing or undergoing abortions, child trafficking, prostitution, or murder. Despite these serious accusations, their prospects of ever getting out of jail are brighter than those of the political prisoners. Adriana, a doctor accused of running an abortion clinic, clearly states their differences: “Sonaste. Ustedes sí que sonaron. Nosotras ponemos unos pesos, qué se yo. Capaz que si les ofrecemos un par de pibes a los empleados de la cana o del Juzgado, a esos estériles de mierda, en un mes estamos funcionando otra vez” (31). I would like

to highlight here that while Kozameh does not elaborate further on the gender-related topics of abortion and prostitution for which these women are jailed, the fact that she mentions them brings to light practices that have often been hidden in Argentine literature and society.⁹ It also allows her to denounce not only specific ways in which the state controls the female body, but also the extent of the state's corruption and hypocrisy in regard to these practices.

Eventually, the women who share Sara's cells, in Rosario and Buenos Aires, are political prisoners who are detained for their alleged participation in or connections with leftist groups that were supposedly plotting against the military regime. Although Kozameh does not address specifically her character's political affiliation or ideology, various indications in her texts points to the fact that Sara and her cellmates are in fact political activists. It is thus fair to say that a sense of community preexisted among the political prisoners who, in one form or another, disapprove of the repressive regime, are devoted to their cause and share a leftist ideology, often based on Marxism, that at its core promotes community over individuality.

This feeling of being ideologically connected to a whole larger than oneself, however, is magnified once in jail and transforms itself to encompass a powerful physiological connection. First, these prisoners share the experience of being female political activists in a conservative society that, despite such predominant political female figures as Evita and Isabelita, believes a woman's place is in the home, outside of public life. Mary Beth Tierney-Tello notes that this strict division between public and private was not only "at the heart of much authoritarian discourse," but is was also "a convenient fiction propagated by the authorities in order to better maintain absolute power over both spheres at once" (23). Furthermore, as Ximena Bunster-Burroto explains in "Surviving Beyond Fear: Women and Torture in Latin America," the regime's disdain for women acting outside of the private sphere was cruelly dramatized in the way it tortured women: "one of the essential ideas behind the sexual slavery of a woman in torture is to teach her that she must retreat to the house and fulfill the traditional role of wife and mother" (307). She further observes that, from the

junta's point of view, "Politically committed women who have dared to take control of their own lives by struggling against an oppressive regime *demand* sexual torture" (307). It became well known that the junta's actions against any kind of dissidence included methods of torture that specifically targeted women. Female political activists therefore also shared a tremendous sense of loyalty to their cause and their country. Secondly, and as previously explained, being confined together for years in a small space and having to endure emotional and physical violence help unify the political prisoners into one collective body and narrative voice. It is through the corporeal materiality of this collectivity that various acts of resistance are recorded.

The women resort to their corporeality in various ways in order to defy the negative effects of confinement and repression. By doing so, they also claim a new self-defined female identity that rejects the "subversive" label that has been imposed upon them. In "Bosquejo de alturas," one of the powerful ways in which they use their body as a resistance tool is by creating a living library. Tapping into their memory and imagination in order to recreate, for their cellmates, texts that they once read when they were free, they use the scarce rolling papers available to them for cigarettes and re-write these stories "con letra milimétrica."¹⁰ These papers are then carefully hidden inside of their body:

Y Liliana, especializada, ya, después de tantos, arma el vaginal. Impermeable, envuelto en capas de polietileno de alguna bolsa entrada en épocas en que todavía se les permitía depositarles alguna comida. Sellado con brasa de cigarillo. Y adentro. Con o sin menstruación. Hasta ahora han logrado evitar que en las requisas les metan los dedos. Todo lo que se ha estado guardando vía vagina, se ha venido salvando. Y la biblioteca es indispensable. Contiene sus pensamientos. Su caudal intelectual. Su aprendizaje. La enseñanza de una a otras. El intercambio. La justificación de resistir. La biblioteca confirma la existencia de todas. De cada una. (16)

By hiding these manuscripts in their most intimate part, sharing ideas and learning from each others, these women are empowering their own bodies to become a sanctuary for culture. As the above quote suggests, culture is defined both in terms of the enlightenment that one acquires through education intellectual activities and exposure to the arts, and in terms of the beliefs and social behavior that one shares with a particular group of people. These bodies are thus subverting the meaning of worthlessness and disposability that the state has imposed upon them as they hold within “the only possible form of liberation for human beings,” which is Kozameh’s own definition of what culture means (qtd in Dahl 49). In a sense their female bodies, which are innately built for the task and responsibility of reproducing life, reproduce in jail a different type of vital element needed for their own survival and that of humanity: words. Furthermore, for Kozameh, who has always considered writing as a refuge, and for Sara, who in the concluding chapter of the novel states “yo creo en la palabra. Con fervor” (101), it is as if the body and the word join to become one safe place.

By allowing words to penetrate them as opposed to penises, these women also expand and subvert the definition of the traditional functions of the vagina. Indeed, they reclaim a part of their anatomy that has too often been violated by men, especially during these dark years of repression. As the testimonies compiled in *Nunca Más* demonstrate, the atrocities inflicted upon the private parts of the women who were detained, tortured, and disappeared during the Dirty War were especially heinous.¹¹ Although Kozameh does not expand on the subject, she includes the following disturbing scene that the narrator in “Vientos de rotación perpendicular” briefly remembers witnessing upon arriving in the basement of the police station: “La mujer se parecía tanto a la dueña del mercadito italiano. Dos hombres sosteniéndole las piernas abiertas y metiéndole en la vagina algo como una rata. Viva. Ella mirando, lívida” (87). The vagina has also historically been associated with pain and shame in Western culture. In their essay on the “Socio-Cultural Representations of the Vagina,” Braun and Wilkinson explain that the vagina

has “commonly and persistently” been represented in negative terms as “absent, passive, vulnerable, dirty, smelly, shameful, and even dangerous” (25). However, as the hiding place for the library and by becoming one with words, the vagina becomes a positive space that empowers these women to resist oppression and, in a way, to carry within their own liberation. These prisoners’ bodies also became a viable space to defy the constant surveillance and the authority of the correctional institution.

Although the above example is specific to the prisoner’s vagina, I argue that Kozameh reclaims, in her novel and short stories, the agency of a real and marginalized Argentine female body, one that is rarely seen in Latin American literature. Of course, there is not one universal (female) body, yet, as Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak asserts “[there are] thinkings of the systemacity of the body, there are value codings of the body” (149). The bodies that Kozameh refers to are mostly those of the working-class and young Argentine female political activists detained by the government. Nevertheless, her representations encompass physiological experiences and address value codings that occur to most female bodies. As explained earlier, patriarchal society, especially when ruled by authoritative regimes, has imposed conservative values upon the appearance and function of all female bodies. The Argentine military junta, for example, promoted its Christian values, especially that of the nuclear family, through marianismo, which glorifies the Virgin Mary as the ideal of womanhood, motherhood and purity, and revered an essentialist figure of woman as reproducer and nurturer. This imaginary model excludes therefore the representation of any physiological process of the lived female body. In her texts, however, Kozameh does not shy away from writing the deglamorized body as she includes a variety of body parts and organs, as well as body fluids that have long been associated with the abject, such as menstrual blood, perspiration, and urine.

Writing the unidealized female body as opposed to the sanitized image of a female body that does not bleed, urinate, or perspire is necessary in order to convey and denounce the horrific reality that these women

experienced. Writing the lived body allows her to show how the often hidden or forgotten natural physical processes can take center stage when the body is the only thing that one has left. Furthermore, being confined to a small space with thirty other bodies that go through similar physical phenomena also normalizes these experiences. However, given the fact that the military regime viewed “subversives” as the ultimate abjection and sought to physically erase them through torture and disappearances, writing physiological processes that insist on the functioning of the body is also a way to make that body “reappear,” to prove its existence and paradoxically to rehumanize these women. This is especially the case in the concluding paragraph of “Bosquejos de altura,” in which the cellmates’ collective body becomes the narrative voice and asserts its presence and defiance:

El cuerpo de todas somos. El gran cuerpo completo. Todo el cuerpo. Su sangre, somos, y los huesos. La piel y la respiración. Y la vagina del mundo, somos. La gran vagina. Somos la orina producida por toda la especie humana. La orina de la vida. Y somos el origen de la orina: el alimento. (...) Somos esa gran máquina de soldar. Esa gran chispa. Y somos la armadura. El ristre cómodo. La lanza. La ropa que nos cubre. Siempre puesta. (*Ofrenda* 32-33)

In this short story, Kozameh presents what Zulema Moret calls “una geografía del cuerpo femenino” (82). Through the mapping of this geography, which includes the representation of traditionally hidden and abjected physical features of the female corporeality, Kozameh rejects the ideal representation that the state constructed through its manipulation of so called Christian values. Her mapping of the female body is one that also rejects the patriarchal gaze at woman as a sexual object. For instance, Kozameh does not engage with the representation of possible pleasurable intimate or sexual activities occurring between the prisoners, but focuses on the powerful and lasting friendships that these women foster and that arise from their detention. Through her representation of the female corporeality, Kozameh therefore gives these women a voice and a body that allow them to articulate the imposed violence and their identity in their own terms.

Performing also becomes an important way for them to resist and endure the reality of their life while in prison. First, by disguising themselves as different characters and by reenacting popular movie scenes, the inmates choose to temporarily assume other identities in order to mentally escape from their reality. In “Bosquejo de alturas,” the prisoner acting as the powerful Cleopatra is so immersed in her role that she even defies the armed male guards ordering her to hand in the sheet she used as a dress: “Si la quieren sáquenla ustedes” (20). Secondly, the women perform certain roles that might not reflect who they were prior to being detained. For instance, in the chapter “Como en la Guerra. En la guerra” from *Pasos bajo el agua*, we learn, through a conversation between Liliana and Gloria, that the cellmates are taking turns staying up at night in order to feed the babies and to prevent the guards from taking them away from their mothers. Through their dialogue, not only do we get a sense of how much the prisoners worry about and care for the babies, but we also learn about the difficulties of being a mother in jail and the unsanitary conditions in which these infants are kept. For instance, one of them deplors the fact that she will soon be separated from her son, since he is about to be three month old, the age limit for babies to stay in jail with their mothers. When asked who will care for the infant, she replies: “mi vieja: sesenta y ocho años, enferma, sola” (58). Later, we share Liliana’s disgust when she realizes that a dead rat had drowned in the mate that she just gave to the babies (65).

Some women might not be mothers and others are mothers but do not have their children with them, yet, in jail, they all act as mothers to these babies. In a way, the prisoners redefine motherhood as a concept that goes beyond biology, without necessarily essentializing it. By portraying the prisoners as one body in “Bosquejos de alturas” and by highlighting the lasting bond that unites these women in all of her texts, Kozameh also shows that their conception of what constitutes a family goes beyond the conjugal and consanguine unit promoted by the regime. As the prisoners become of the same flesh and blood, their mutual caring for each other’s lives also seem to equate or even surpass what is often considered one of the principal functions



of the nuclear family, that is, provision for its members. Furthermore, while detention forces them, at first, to define their “collective family structure” as one that excludes a father figure, Sara’s failed relationships with Marco and Hugo and the secondary role that men play in her life, show that she embraces the prisoners as her family even after being released.

By writing the corporeality of the female political prisoners, Kozameh restores these women’s body into a national and historical narrative that tirelessly tries to erase it. In her texts, the prisoners develop collective strategies of resistance through which they reclaim their own female bodies and redefine the values of nurturing, motherhood, and family that the repressive regime precisely accuse them of disregarding. Kozameh illustrates how gender discrimination and violence in prison mirrors practices and values imposed on free Argentine women as well. She therefore rejects the patriarchal view of women as mere objects and allows for the silenced Argentine female voice and body to become an agent of her own subjectivity. Kozameh also constructs, through her representation of the cellmates’ bodies, a collective feminist consciousness that challenges the hegemonic repressive and patriarchal discourse of the state and becomes a critical aspect of these women’s quest for survival, healing, and liberation.

In conclusion, Kozameh’s writing simultaneously reconstructs a body that has been traumatized by violence, detention and forced exile, and represents a corporeality that has rarely been expressed in Argentine literature. Her texts explore women’s agency by representing counter-hegemonic bodies, relations, and values that challenge patriarchal discourse primarily under dictatorship, but also under democracy. The centrality of the living body in her writing allows her to manifest her fervent commitment, first as a survivor, to preserve the memory and honor the life of victims of torture and imprisonment; and secondly as a woman, to provide a fuller understanding of female corporeality in Latin America.

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Notes

1 Kozameh's preoccupation with female corporeality is also at the center of her partially autobiographic novel *Patas de avestruz* (2003), which narrates the relationship between two sisters. In this novel, "el cuerpo (y en primer lugar, el cuerpo femenino) hace las veces de elemento temático, sino que cumple también una función importantísima como medio de escritura" (Pfeiffer, "Cuerpo" 99). Another topic of fascination would thus be to compare aspects of corporeality in *Patas de avestruz* with those in *Pasos bajo el agua* and *Ofrenda de propia piel*.

2 Prison literature consists of narratives that describe the prison experience and are written by authors who are or were incarcerated. I agree with Portela who states that: "the relation between violence and gender oppression is a primary concern in women's carceral texts. (...) Writing becomes not only an act of resistance against political repression, but also a powerful affirmation of the female self that has been physically and psychologically abused" (7). For studies that focus on prison narratives as a literary phenomenon in Latin America, see Saumell-Muñoz's "El otro testimonio: Literatura carcelaria en América Latina," Dorfman's "Código político y código literario: El género testimonio en Chile hoy," Harlow's "Barred: Woman, Writing, and Political Detention," or Portela's "Writing Prison: Women Political Prisoners and the Power of Telling."

3 This rhetoric of illness has been used by various military governments and politicians over the years in order to justify their repressive actions and ideologies. This tradition dates back to Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811-1888), who, in his seminal work *Facundo* (1845), uses medical terminology and refers to General Rosas and Argentina's lack of progress as a cancer that must be eradicated.

4 Beside a new subtitle, the 1996 English translation is different from its original Spanish version, published in Argentina by Contrapunto, in two ways. First, it does not contain any of the reproductions from Kozameh's original notebooks. Secondly, it includes two additional chapters that deal with Sara's life after her liberation and her difficulties adapting to her new reality. These two chapters were ultimately included in the second Spanish edition published in Argentina in 2002. To this date, I have been unable to obtain a copy of this second Spanish edition and therefore will use the 1996 English version when quoting from those two additional chapters in my subsequent analysis.

5 The article 1.1 of the United Nation's Declaration Against Torture states: "Any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person, information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an

official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions” (np).

6 In *Du côté de chez Swann* by Marcel Proust published in France in 1913.

7 The prison guards that appear in the novel and short stories are female and, while they clearly mistreated the inmates, men were present in most cases of physical violence. It should also be noted that Sara and other cellmates often refer to the female guards as cows and rats and, therefore, also dehumanize them.

8 The Ley de Punto Final was passed by the Argentine Congress on Christmas Eve 1986. This law established a sixty-day deadline to present denunciations and start new trials.

9 According to Human Rights Watch: “When the current penal code entered into force in the late 1880s, abortion was included as a crime with no exceptions. In 1922, while abortion was still illegal in all circumstances, the penal code provisions on abortion were amended to allow for three exceptions: punishment was lifted where the pregnant woman's life or health was in danger, where the pregnancy was the result of the rape, or where the pregnant woman was mentally disabled. During the 1976-1983 dictatorship, the penal code was changed to include further restrictions on abortion, requiring "grave" danger to a woman's life or health, and, in the case of rape, the commencement of criminal proceedings” (<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2005/06/14/decisions-denied-0>).

10 Griselda, for example, attempts to reconstruct episodes and metaphors from *Grande Sertao: Veredas* (1956) by João Guimarães Rosa and twenty rolling papers are dedicated to Engels' *Anti-Düring* (1878).

11 Men too were victims of vicious sexual crimes. For women however these crimes implied disastrous gender specific results since rape often produced unwanted pregnancies and mutilation of sexual organs caused permanent infertility and other lasting physical symptoms, such as incontinence.

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