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Residual Effects: The Recurring Theme of Incest in Contemporary Chilean Women's Narrative

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The disturbing portrayal of incest that characterizes "Secretos," the middle episode of the most successful and acclaimed Chilean film to date, *El chacotero sentimental* (1999), stands in stark contrast between two other stories of casual adult-sex and enduring romantic love taken from radio broadcasts aired on the talk-show program of the same name.[1] In the aftermath of a violent fight with her sister Alicia, the black-and-white cinematic short reveals Carmen's call into the radio show upon recollection of the repressed memories of her mother's suicide and realization that her sister's children are her actual half-brothers.[2] Although shocking for some audiences—for *El chacotero sentimental* is the first Chilean film that explicitly illustrates illicit parent/child relations—the incest motif is significant to note for it has also become a commonly recurring thematic devise in the narratives of a new generation of female authors. As evidenced in Andrea Maturana's *El daño* (1997), Nona Fernández's *Mapocho* (2002), and Alejandra Costamagna's *Cansado ya del sol* (2002), three novels written at the turn of the millennium by young Chilean authors, the conflict between the enticing pull of amnesia and the drive to uncover the secrets hidden in and by memories that frame the act of incest serves to characterize the tension present for emerging female identities in 21st century Chile. In this

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essay, I explore the ways in which these Chilean authors incorporate the theme of incest in their narratives as a metaphor for the socio-political and economic system of 21st century Chile, where the enticement of the future promoted by a neoliberal economy collides, oftentimes violently, with the memories and responsibilities associated with former national discourses of the past.

Sara E. Cooper maintains in the introduction to *The Ties That Bind: Questioning Family Dynamics and Family Discourse in Hispanic Literature* that the family system, and subsequently the issuant imagery of this system, have been discussed, defined, lauded, and maligned throughout the course of Hispanic literature. This is to say that the representation of family as a domain of violence and cruelty (incest), and as the center-point for dysfunction is nothing new. In fact, Cooper argues that Hispanic literature has a rich history of calling into question the mythical homogeneity and cohesiveness of the family unit. However, unlike divorce or extramarital births that have ceased to be deviant occurrences and have been largely integrated into the evolving definition of family, incest continues to represent the most serious violation of social order.[3] For some sociologists, the prohibition of sexual relations between persons to whom marriage violates custom or law derives from the innate feeling of revulsion. A basic trait that distinguishes the human species from all other species of life, namely the animal world where sexual activity is indeterminate, the incest taboo is a representation of humankind's fundamental attempt at social order. Since the family unit is the most basic representation of social order—the place where we learn how to interact and where we define our roles in the public and private spheres—the portrayal of incest as a threat or challenge to maintaining order never loses its relevance in literature (Cooper 6).

In Latin American literature, the incest taboo first surfaces during the Romantic period as a metaphor for the cult of socially forbidden love and for the primacy of individual desire, such as in Cirilo Villaverde's novel *Cecilia Valdés* (Cuba 1882), Jorge Isaac's *María* (Colombia 1867), and *Cumandá*, by Juan Leon Mera (Ecuador 1879).[4] Towards the end of the Romantic period, the commentary over the social implication of incest fades and the political symbolism of the theme moves to the forefront. In Clorinda Matto de Turner's novel *Aves sin nido* (Peru 1889), for example, incest serves as a critical metaphor against the brutality of men on women, as well as denigrates the corruption of the church and state in newfound nations. In 20th century Chilean narrative, namely in works written by women who experienced the political turmoil of the 1970s as young adults, the theme of incest surfaces as a literary tool for writing about the transgressive violence experienced under Pinochet's rule. As seen in Isabel Allende's *La casa de los espíritus* (1982), and employed

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by Diamela Eltit and Ana María del Río respectively in *Por la patria* (1986) and *Oxido de Carmen* (1986), the incest motif serves as a powerful allegory for the betrayal of the father/nation and accentuates the criticism against the destructiveness of hegemonic, patriarchal power.[5] Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the theme of incest continues to function in literature, this time as a metaphor for the socio-political and economic system of 21st century Chile, especially among works written by young female authors. More than a vehicle that (re/de) constructs the socio-political symbolism of family/father, the incest motif fuels this generation's narratives very much like the placement of "Secretos" in the film *El chacotero sentimental*—as the violent center point where the enticement of amnesia promoted by a neo-liberal economy (Carmen's future as an aspiring architect) collides with the emerging memories from the past (the unraveling of the family/nation). In this way, the stories of incest in Maturana's, Fernández's and Costamagna's novels formally and symbolically characterize the socio-political, psychological, and economic dichotomies present at the turn of the millennium by showing the liberating effects of Chile's re-democratization process upon traditional institutions and the irrepressible forces (former allegiances and responsibilities linked to multiple nation building discourses) that work to reveal hidden secrets from the past.

According to Chilean critics Carlos Olivárez and Rodrigo Cánovas, a new generation of writers—who produce a body of works called "la nueva narrativa" or "la novela de orfandad"—emerges during Chile's re-democratization process. During Pinochet's regime, as these critics explain, Chileans identified (oftentimes through force) with a society controlled by an absolute state power and strict rules of conduct. Hence, with the turn of events that took place in late 1980s and early 1990s, the political and social structure of the nation broke open. Many citizens felt abandoned by Pinochet—the "father" of their country—who lost the national plebiscite and turned the country over to democracy. For others, mostly Chilean youth, the transition to democracy represented a time and opportunity to forge new identities—as there was little leadership and guidance from their elders due in part to exile, disappearances, and a (sub)conscious force at work to erase the past. Present in this new narrative, the themes of foreignness and alienation, constant movement and travel, and the search for identity due to feelings of abandonment that Cánovas labels "orphanhood" express "un sentimiento de absoluta precariedad por el cual se desconstruye el paisaje nacional" (Olivárez 21). Distinctly visible in these works too is the consequential attitude of ambivalence or *no estar ni ahí* conveyed by these orphans, which sociologist Tomás Moulian labels as an affect of the *blanqueo de Chile* that emerges during the neo-liberal movement of Chile's transitional governments that puts exaggerated emphasis on the future of a fully

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modernized and globalized nation.[6] Liberated from traditional constraints and institutions, the narrators and characters portrayed in the new narrative embark on centrifugal adventures into a deterritorialized world.

Although the three works analyzed in this study share in the thematic development of travel, abandonment and an overarching sense of alienation that inspires the narrators' identity quests, the drive to recover and/or disclose repressed memories of incest facilitated by their consistent return to the source of the fragmentation felt—the family—ultimately separates these novels from the new narrative group.[7] By returning to the site of violence, these novels highlight not that the family unit was dissolved by the act of incest, but rather was fragmented before the event occurred and it is precisely this fragmentation that leads to the unwitting commission of the deed. Although one could call this centripetal return home a traditional journey of the female subject, it can also be viewed as Claudia Martínez Echeverría does in "La memoria silenciada" as the source of the novels' strengths:

> [E]l rearmar la historia de la familia supone una serie de desafíos en la medida que involucra adentrarse en una memoria que ha sido tergiversada, mutilada y ocultada por el propio núcleo familiar. De este intento surge un nuevo tipo de sujeto femenino: interesado en sus orígenes a pesar de lo conflictivo que estos puedan ser y, por sobre todo—y alejándose con ello de los modelos patriarcales—totalmente activos y dispuestos a confrontar la voz de la autoridad. (67)

I argue that in addition to expressing deep anxiety about societal and familial fragmentation that lays testament to a new, bolder feminine subject, the actual return itself to memories of violence demonstrates the national contradiction, as observed by critic Nelly Richard among others, present at the turn of the millennium. Unlike the characters portrayed by Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez, for example, that go to extreme measures to erase the past through material consumption, the victims of incest presented by Maturana, Fernández and Costamagna narrate both sides of the national dichotomy—both *el discurso de olvido* and *la cultura de memoria*. In this way, the incest theme in *El daño*, *Mapocho* and *Cansado ya del sol* is more than a socio-political allegory, but also represents the tension between the enticing pull of amnesia and the insatiable quest and ultimate assumption of responsibility necessary to uncover the truth/s that characterize, and oftentimes stagnate, emerging identities in 21st century Chile.

Inspired by and dedicated to Andrea Maturana's (1969) friend Vinka Jackson, whose autobiographical story of incest was published in 2007 as *Agua*

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fresca en los espejos: abuso sexual infantil y resilencia, the search for identity and truth undertaken by Elisa, the first person narrator of the novel *El daño*, delivers a modern and compelling coming-of-age story.[8] Rebelling against her family's silence and maintenance of the amnesiac *status quo* of the redemocratiza-tion period, Elisa embarks on a journey to the north. Accompanied by her friend Gabriela, who undertakes her own series of adventures in efforts to mask the pain she feels by her lover Marcelo's snub, Elisa heads to the birthplace of her father to gather possible answers from her aunt—namely information concerning whether the man who raped her as a child was indeed her biological father. "Tragarme mi infancia y seguir adelante es distinto si todo lo que pasó lo hizo mi padre o alguien que no lo era. Al menos eso quiero creer" (99). The purpose for the trip, however, is soon lost due to Elisa's cowardliness and the consumption of (material) goods. Gabriela's competing narrative voice that recalls the sordid details of her illicit affair with a married man overshadows Elisa's intentions and seemingly derails her search for truth—one she all too easily abandons. Yet aided by a brief encounter with Franco (who stirs up in Elisa the desire to become whole) and Gabriela's fidelity as a friend, Elisa resigns herself to pursuing the trip's original purpose and travels to her aunt's door.

Leaving Franco's patio and the safety of their makeshift home behind, Elisa silently follows Gabriela into the aunt's bone-chilling house at the beginning of the novel's second section. Spurred on by Gabriela and the hope represented by Franco, Elisa scrapes up the courage to ask her aunt for the truth:

> –¿Usted sabe si existe una especie de secreto de familia?
> Se trata de ponerlo todo en palabras bonitas. Mejor. Que nadie se asuste. Que suene como algo que les pasó a otros, sin ninguna relevancia. Que sea algo imposible, casi de película: un "secreto de familia". . . El silencio de mi tía, sumado al silencio en la periferia de esta ciudad, me da escalofríos. Ahora tampoco puedo mirarla. Sólo esperar. (125-26)

Faced with her aunt's steadfast silence, Elisa falters once more. Yet Elisa's sense of responsibility, partly for her past but mostly for her future, prevails and prohibits her from being broken-down by the simplicity of forgetting it all, or pretending, as Gabriela suggests, that it actually never happened. Angered by the injustice of silence, Elisa begins to exert her rights to know the truth. When the clandestine reading of her aunt's letters only renders more questions, answered with only more silence when the aunt expels them from her house, Elisa and Gabriela return to the city having no other avenue to pursue. It is at this turning point as the second part of the novel ends aboard a bus back to the city that Elisa realizes she can no longer play the game that prevents her

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emergence onto the world. Regardless of whether the man that raped her is her father or not, keeping the secrets of her childhood requires more energy now than full disclosure.

In order to continue with the prospect of self-realization, in parallel fashion with the ongoing identity search of the nation, Elisa returns home to Santiago demanding answers that break with the established order previously maintained by the act of forgetting and the amnesia promoted by consumption she witnesses before her on the busy city streets. Although the memories that Elisa recalls rock the foundation of her world, namely the constructed identities of her family members that hide the abuses suffered at the hands of her now deceased father, they ultimately free the women in the family from the burden of shouldering lies. Elisa realizes that her mother's closer relationship with her sister, Carla, must be in response to the guilt she feels that keeps them distant. "Con Carla no tiene ese problema, porque mi papá nunca la tocó y, ante ella, mi vieja no cometió el enorme pecado del silencio, de la omisión" (187). In regards to Carla, the story that Elisa deserved what she got was understandably easier to believe than what really happened. "Si no, la alternativa es empezar a hacerse a la idea de que esta familia ha sido siempre una gran cagada" (188). Upon these revelations, Elisa grasps that it is ultimately her responsibility to voice the truth. In the climatic discussion with her mother that takes place regarding the significance of Franco and the numerous letters that have arrived since her return, Elisa can no longer "forget" the past:

> —A quién habrás salido tan puta—dice con tono grave, como el de un salmo.
> En un segundo, algo se quiebra. Me ha dicho muchas veces ese tipo de cosas, con el afán confuso de expiar su propia culpa y a la vez odiarme por ella. Pero esto va más allá de mis límites, que no son fáciles de sobrepasar. Tengo la certeza de que está buscándose lo que va a venir: la paciencia no está, últimamente, entre mis virtudes. Y me niego a terminar ahí la conversación, que ella sí pretende dejar ahí.
> —Es que tuve una buena escuela desde chica, y eso ayuda." (188-89)

Although her mother runs from the room to avoid hearing the truth, Elisa has embarked on a path of no return. Seeking solace in the support of a therapist, having lost Gabriela to a perverse game with her ex-lover's wife, Elisa finally articulates the hitherto forgotten and hidden truth about her childhood. "Y me violó" (210). The world does not right itself upon the revelation of her family's most hidden secret. Although a new order to Elisa's life surfaces by the novel's end, one that involves hope for a future with Franco and new gained respect

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from her mother and sister, Elisa recognizes that the vicious and enticing pull of "el olvido" continues to be present in the world (nation) in which she lives. When Gabriela dies in a car crash involving her ex-lover's wife, killing them both instantly, Elisa knows there is nothing she can do to keep Marcelo from lying to his children and attempting to erase the memories of Gabriela, the evidence of his own culpability, from their past.

Classified by some Chilean scholars alongside Maturana as part of the new narrative movement in Chile, Nona Fernández (1971) also exhibits the thematic denominator of orphanhood, in addition to the related themes of travel, alienation and abandonment, in her debut novel *Mapocho*. Rucia, the first-person narrator of the novel, introduces herself as a cadaver floating down the trash-laden Mapocho River that traverses the city of Santiago in search of her brother, Indio. Killed in a car crash in Europe alongside her mother and brother, where the three had fled after their father's betrayal, Rucia witnesses her body, a soul that has not yet acknowledged her own death, wander the city streets in search of her brother and some semblance of memory for their childhood home:

> Desde aquí puedo verme allá arriba, en uno de los puentes que atraviesan el río. Soy yo. Me diviso de pie el día que llegué a esta ciudad. Veo que todavía no me repongo bien del accidente... Traigo conmigo una maleta y las cenizas de mi madre en una ánfora pequeña. Sé lo que estoy pensando allá en ese puente. Pienso que las aguas del río son demasiado sucias como para tirar a mi madre en ella, no imagino que algún día yo misma naufragaré aquí. Maldigo al Indio... En mala hora te vine siguiendo, Indio, ni siquiera has sido capaz de venir a buscarme. Qué hago en esta ciudad en la que se supone nací, con mi madre a cuestas, sin un peso, y sin una puta seña tuya. (14)

Throughout the four sections of the novel that divide the text, the narration alternates between Rucia's first-person voice, her description of the other Rucia that roams the city streets in search of the brother with whom she has been sexually engaged, and various omniscient narrators that comment on the interconnection between the city of Santiago's historical and mythical characters, and the children's father's literary creations.

Representative of this city haunted by other lost and wandering souls similarly caught in the limbo in which Rucia finds herself, souls that have also been victim to or have committed unforgivable sins (such as incest), the complication of Rucia's search for her brother, the climax of the novel's plot, aptly occurs in the city's cemetery. Rucia, gone in search of her family's gravesite

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in hopes that she will find Indio there, discovers instead her supposed dead father—a man she had not seen since the night the military police came into their home and gave him the work orders he did not refuse (his betrayal to the cause). What remains unclear until the novel's end, however, is whether the father Rucia discovers in the cemetery is dead or alive. According to the story told to Rucia and Indio by their mother while living abroad, Fausto died in a neighborhood fire set by the military police many years ago. Through vertiginous flashbacks, Rucia's narration reveals that Indio suspected the veracity of this story of their father's death from the beginning. In a scene symbolic of the tensions present in Chile at the turn of the millennium, Indio confronts the silence caused by his mother's secrets and lies:

> —Para el auto, Indio. Acaba con esto de una vez, nos vas a matar a todos.
> —No, Rucia.
> —Mira como tienes a la mamá, no sigas torturándola.
> —Déjala que grite. Está alharaqueando porque sabe que llegó la hora de aclararnos todas las dudas.
> —¿Qué dudas, Indio?
> —Hay cosas que ella tiene que decirnos, Rucia. No puede quedarse callada toda la vida, tenemos derecho a saber. (204)

Betrayed by her husband when he accepted the military-police's job and chose to live in a beautiful, modern skyscraper erected over the neighborhood's charred remains, the mother seemingly invented Fausto's death in reaction to his unfaithfulness to the cause. Rucia's older brother knows, however, that the only way to escape from the limbo that characterizes the place of uncertainty they inhabit (both dead and alive) is by seeking the truth. When their mother is unable or unwilling to disclose the truth to her children, Indio's violently reacts to her continued treachery and crashes the car in which they ride.

The exposure of their mother's lie not only explains the cause of the fatal car accident that is referred to at the beginning of the novel, the revelation of their parent's betrayal of each other and their children, in parallel fashion with the interwoven excerpts of betrayal from Chile's history, but also explains the fragmented setting in which Indio and Rucia are able to violate the most fundamental of social laws. Rucia and Indio are siblings and lovers. Allusions to varying degrees of sexual intimacy shared with Indio mark Rucia's narration from the beginning, first taking place as children isolated by their mother's multiple and varying illnesses. Consummation of the incestuous

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deed, however, does not take place until Rucia recalls what happened after the car accident:

> El sexo del Indio ha vuelto a la vida, resucita de entre los muertos y se eleva contemplándola.
> —No quiero que la caguemos, Rucia.
> La Rucia levanta la vista y mira el rostro sudoroso del Indio. Los dos dedos ausentes de su mano izquierda observándola desde algún sitio.
> —¿No dices que estás muerto?
> El Indio no responde.
> —¿Qué importa que la caguemos, entonces? (208)

Regardless of whether the siblings carry out the sex act before or after their death, Rucia and Indio's incestuous relationship metaphorically illustrates the need for a connection—between two souls lost in a void before the crash, siblings orphaned onto each other, or afterwards as broken and destroyed bodies on a desperate quest for rebirth. However, symbolized by Indio's obsessive portraiture of Rucia's "bellybutton" that is never complete, the desire to be reborn as a chance to erase the past and its painful memories is an impossible quest.

Whereas the chance at rebirth as a metaphor for the individual and material freedom obtained in their father's absence serves many members of the new narrative group as an allegory for the *tabula rasa* promoted in re-democratized, neo-liberalized Chile, the same theme as related to incest in *Mapocho* goes beyond political and economic symbolism. Despite the palimpsests of competing voices that continue to alternate and at times intertwine throughout the remainder of the novel, what is irrefutably revealed by the novel's conclusion is that Rucia seeks out her brother not just for aid in the ceremonious disposal of their mother's ashes in the city's river but also because of her desire for him. Although the acts of incest between Rucia and Indio take place in and/or because of their parents' absence, Rucia's frequent narration of desire for her brother exposes awareness of her responsibility for past events and her current state. Rucia's narration thus reveals that the state of limbo in which she and many other souls left wandering Santiago's city streets is a type of purgatory—for in this diabolical world seemingly defined by lies and acts of betrayal, they are no innocent players.

As portrayed in Maturana's *El daño* and Fernández's *Mapocho*, the theme of incest in *Cansado ya del sol* by Alejandra Costamagna (1970) fulfills a symbolic function representative of the dysfunctional social order caused by the tension of *la memoria* and *el olvido* present in 21st century Chile. In *Cansado*

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ya del sol, Costamagna refines many of the same tropes present in her other works: mourning and memory, travel and isolation, disappearance and death, and the implications of secrets and remaining silent—yet introduces incest for the first time. Mayra, the young twenty-year old narrator re-tells her life's events in order to purge her sentiments of anger and cobble together an identity that she feels she has been unable to construct. The novel begins with Mayra's first person narration of what she imagines took place many years ago: the packing of bags, the abandonment of her by her mother, the details of her and her father's flight from Chile. In the second of twenty-five chapters that divide the novel, the narration jumps to Puerto Escondido where Mayra returns upon the death of her father, the man who she called Manuel—and with whom she had lived alone throughout her childhood and adolescence. The small Mexican beach town was the last place Mayra and her father lived, after many years of aimless travel and exile from which her father never explained and insisted upon forgetting by claiming that "[l]a memoria es basura" (22). Upon his death, however, Mayra realizes that the silencing dismissal of her father is now over and it is during this return trip to Mexico that Mayra begins the process of discovering, remembering and unraveling her life so far: "Los funerales son siempre eso: descubrimientos de asuntos borrados. Casi no importa quién murió, a quién velamos, sino en qué nos hemos convertido los demás. Yo me he convertido en una hija de puta (o lo soy desde mi origen)" (19).

Symbolic of the liberation that springs from orphanhood, Mayra delves into the past that had hitherto been prohibited during her father's life. Her narration revisits her arrival to the beach town many years ago, the tourist cabin in which she and her father had lived, and the night they celebrated their new life in Puerto Escondido:

> Con mi viejo pantalón de mezclilla partimos a Oaxaca. Llegamos al atardecer. Manuel y sus obsesiones: ni bien nos instalamos quiso salir a celebrar. Me pidió que tomara un trago con él. Accedí. . . Sentados en aquel bar de la plaza central, riéndonos de nada, de todo, brindamos por nuestra nueva vida, por nosotros. Al tercer trago commencé a ver borroso . . . Manuel se rió de mi borrachera.
> —No te rías—le pedí—. Me siento muy mal.
> —¿Quieres ir al hotel?—preguntó entre risas.
> Entonces me tomó en sus brazos como una novia y caminó tranquilamente hasta el hotel. (46)

Alluding to the inappropriateness of her relationship with her father, her desire for him that she recollects with increased frequency over the course of her nar-

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ration, Mayra justifies the confusion she feels for Manuel, in her childhood and as an emerging adult.

Mayra's remembrance of her experiences in Mexico in regards to the incestuous ties she has with her father run in parallel course with memories of the budding romance that takes place between herself and Laino, the neighborhood boy who has been, up until this day, her only friend. In the chapter entitled "La Dolorosa," Mayra narrates the jealousy Laino displays when they talk about her father and the subsequent accusations he makes. "—'Lo quiero bastante'—me imitó y se rió—. Tú no sólo lo quieres, tú estás medio enamorada de él" (84). Mayra immediately refutes Laino's assertion that she is in love with her father, but when Laino kisses her in comfort later on that evening after upsetting her with questions about her past, another type of confusion sets in:

> Tibiamente acercó sus labios a mis mejillas, me chupó las lágrimas que se habían disuelto en mi cara y posó su boca sobre la mía. Qué ganas tuve de que se posara completamente sobre mí. Qué ganas tuve de que aquel cuerpo fuera el de Manuel. (89)

Laino's claims concerning the feelings she has for her father, for the past they share that remains hidden by secrets, as well as his questions regarding her mother, awake Mayra's subconscious and ignite her curiosity. She tells Laino about her past, the past that she remembers, but her disclosure about the feelings she has for her father remain in check by her habit of keeping secrets and by her growing sense of inappropriateness. "No inventé lo que hablé esa noche. Omití, eso sí, lo que comenzaba a intuir. Fui selectiva" (96). Regardless of her omissions, however, Mayra recognizes the need to tell her story and put to an end the silence that has surrounded her since birth. At first, Mayra's awakening centers on uncovering the truth about her mother and the reason they left Chile, but it soon becomes obvious that she must also reveal the truth about her feelings for her father if she is to ever emerge unto the world and establish an identity independent of him.

In the following chapters, Mayra narrates the series of events that took her from Mexico back to Chile—her maternal grandmother Irene's visit and the confusion that ensued upon the discovery that her father's identity had been a complete fabrication. When Manuel casually announces Irene's upcoming visit, Mayra recalls fleeing her house in frustration and fear:

> Tantos años con ese forzado silencio y de un minuto a otro venir a decir que un familiar llegaba la otra semana. Venir a poner una fecha. Venir a instalar un nombre, un físico, una abuela, el cajón, las extrañas cartas. ¿Yo

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> era la criatura? ¿Quién era yo, quién era mi padre, quiénes éramos ahora? Más de una vez le había preguntado por qué estábamos solos y él había respondido con otra pregunta: ¿le temes a la soledad?... Las respuestas de Manuel eran siempre secas: no hay madre, no hay resto del mundo, hija. En este espacio estamos tú y yo, ¿comprendes? (100-01)

The impending and shocking visit of a relative hitherto unknown and the discovery that her father had kept her mother's identity and story from her for so long causes Mayra to run from her home and seek solace with Laino. Realizing that her grandmother's arrival will reveal truths and force an end to the silence, Mayra also subconsciously understands that the questionable relationship she has had with the man she calls Manuel must also come to an end.

Since Laino knows more about Manuel's past, Mayra exchanges intimacy for information in efforts to discover more about her father's lies. When she discovers that Manuel is really a poet named Clemente Borra who fled Chile after betraying the cause by revealing the name of his friend to the secret police, and that her mother went mad when she discovered that she was carrying a traitor's child, Mayra tries to convince Laino to kill him. When Laino refuses to poison Manuel's dinner, Mayra realizes that she is too weak to fight for the truth, not to mention fight the feelings she has for him. She leaves Mexico to return to Chile with her grandmother. Yet life in Chile is not much different than it was with Manuel: she feels isolated from people her own age, wanders the city streets alone, and finds her questions answered by continued lies or silence. Her disappointment is complete when her grandmother, the only other person with whom she has a connection, the only other Chilean she has known besides her father, is also unable to speak the truth. "Su problema no era mi allanamiento, sino el repetino estancamiento de sus palabras. Lo que ella no podía hacer era sacar las verdades por su boca" (184). It isn't until she receives a telegram from Laino telling her that Manuel is dead and she decides to travel to his funeral in Mexico that she starts to think she will begin to be the voice of her own future—a voice of truth despite and with all its bitterness: "Enflaquecida como me dejó Clemente, les hablo a estas gentes después de estos años. 'Alto ahí', les ordeno. 'No pierdan tierra. Todavía me quedan las verdades'... Soy la hija de puta" (210-11). With the symbolic and literal threat of incest over, the destruction of the social order of her world complete, Mayra draws upon her own courage and begins to speak the truth—the narrative product itself.

Despite the similarity of themes presented in these novels, such as international movement and national travel, the alienation felt in the urban landscape of Santiago and the presentation of young female characters who grapple with the state of independence and subsequent feelings of isolation acquired upon

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the death and/or abandonment of their mothers and fathers, the theme of incest provides these novels their strongest connection. The conflict presented by incest, whether between father and daughter or brother and sister, frames the world into which the narrators struggle to emerge as a metaphor for the dichotomy present in 21st century Chile between *la memoria* and *el olvido*. In each novel, remembering, processing and acknowledging incest accompanies the rite of passage to adulthood (in Rucia's case a passage out of purgatory) that ultimately comes to fruition with the recognition of her responsibility not necessarily for the incest act itself, but for her complicity in having kept the family's secret. Although bitter tones of hopelessness mark the narrators' realizations that the act of incest is not the source of the fragmentation felt but rather is the result of a destroyed social order, putting voice to one of the gravest taboos itself is an act or effort to reestablish harmony. In this way, the female protagonists of these three novels, as does Carmen from the film "*El chacotero sentimental*," represent and transcend the dichotomy present in 21st century Chile by not only revealing the secrets and memories of the past in the telling of their tale, but also by acknowledging their own responsibility for keeping the secrets of the past hidden, and at times admitting culpability for the desire inherent in the keeping of the secret itself.

NOTES

[1] According to Ascanio Cavallo and Verónica Cortínez, *El chacotero sentimental* by director Cristián Galaz broke national box-office records by selling 800,000 tickets the year of its release (1999). In 2002, the Chilean television premiere of the film surpassed all prior prime-time rating marks, even those earned by the film *Titanic*.

[2] What is most tragic about Carmen's story is not that she too is a victim of her overbearing father and his destructive behavior, but that she secretly witnessed the undoing of her family from her parents' armoire and did nothing to stop it. Possibly seen as a call for help before committing suicide herself or as a request for the audience's absolution, Carmen's story and its strategic placement in the film compel viewers to question the responsibility inherent in their own acts of voyeurism. As stated in Juan Poblete's article, "New National Cinemas in a Transnational Age," the spectator of *El chacotero sentimental* feels responsible alongside Carmen for her role in the story. "This complicity is not meant as simply allowing the objectifying purging catharsis that will liberate the viewer from social sins, or make possible through voyeurism and fetishism his/ her experience of the film, but also as their Brechtian opposite: an urgent invitation to develop an active critical spectatorship. This will necessarily involve both identifications and thus a shared responsibility in those collective sins,

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and a critical distancing turned into reflection, understanding and, perhaps, even a will to action" (230).

[3] Sara E. Cooper mentions in her introduction to *The Ties that Bind* Martine Segalen's study "The Industrial Revolution: From Proletariat to Bourgeoisie" in which she proposes that family should not be considered a passive social institution but rather a site of resistance capable of adapting to different situations (8-9).

[4] Noted by Doris Sommer in *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*, the stories behind the young men and women falling in love across class, regional or racial divides despite their shared genetic code also has to do with the projection of a desire for nation-building. In parallel fashion with the representation of nation building despite adversity, the incest motif surfaces in the plot development of the Latin American novel towards the end of the Romantic period between half-brothers and sisters, or nieces and uncles, rather than between a more egregious coupling of child and parent.

[5] In *La casa de los espíritus*, the sexual torture of Alba by her uncle while held prisoner serves to symbolize and condemn the violent crimes of the dictatorship against Chile's own citizens. In *Por la patria*, as well in *El cuarto mundo*, incest works to undo the narrative of the nation by destabilizing the rules governing the gender and sociopolitical systems under Pinochet's dictatorship that called for faith, hope, responsibility, cohesion, integrity, and loyalty for all Chileans (Tierney-Tello 81-82). In *Oxido de Carmen*, the sexual imagery between half-siblings aids the novel's overarching metaphor of repression and resistance, and fuels the criticism against the dictatorship's longstanding and aristocratically driven class and racial divisions.

[6] Chilean sociologist Tomás Moulian names in *Chile actual. Anatomía de un mito* the "blanqueo de Chile" as a movement of amnesia promoted by the neoliberal politics of the governments of Patricio Aylwin (1990-1994) and Eduardo Frei (1994-1999). "Un blanqueo que exigía olvidar los orígenes del Chile actual para mostrarle al mundo que el Chile de la Concertación había conseguido superar el pasado" (31).

[7] For more information regarding subsets of this narrative group, see Patricio Mann's article "Chile: por una narrativa de los espacios abiertos" in *Literatura chilena hoy: la difícil transición*.

[8] As stated by Julia Kushigian in *Reconstructing Childhood*, Spanish America has revived the *Bildungsroman* by transforming self-realization into the service of a universal social goal; by intertwining the individual identity search with that of the nation (13-15). Kushigian states that a "cultural patterning emerges that forms and identifies an individual, not separate from but representative of a nation. This self-examination and search for identity is especially productive and fluid in moments of national crisis, a historical period when, as Francine Masiello signals, a shifting discourse on gender and family may insinuate doubt into the binary structures that inform official history" (Kushigian 17-18)

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