

# Trauma and the Family Emotional System in Jenn Díaz's *Es un decir* and Marisa Silva Schultze's *Apenas diez*

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**Abstract:** Jenn Díaz's *Es un decir* (Spain, 2014) and Marisa Silva Schultze's *Apenas diez* (Uruguay, 2006) explore family dynamics in the wake of violence and repression under dictatorship. Using trauma theory and Bowen Family Systems Theory, this article examines how trauma stresses each family into dysfunction, arguing that breakdown occurs because of underlying trauma that remains unexamined. Although patterns of dysfunction are passed on to the next generation, addressing trauma and its effects begin a process of healing within the families of each novel.

**Keywords:** trauma – Bowen Family Systems Theory – dictatorship – Jenn Díaz – Marisa Silva Schultze

In the Hispanophone world, the experience of trauma brought on by political violence and dictatorial rule is not isolated to a country or region. While sociocultural and historical contexts vary, the personal experience of dictatorship and its aftermath connects those who have lived through it. A transatlantic comparison of the literature that delves into this painful past can be fruitful in its consideration of dictatorship and repression as a lived experience, among individuals and families, and shared across national borders. Jenn Díaz's *Es un decir* (2014)<sup>1</sup> and Marisa Silva Schultze's *Apenas diez* (2006)<sup>2</sup>, set in postwar Spain and post-

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<sup>1</sup> Jenn Díaz (1988, Barcelona) is a Spanish novelist, journalist and blogger. In addition to *Es un decir*, she has published *Belfondo* (2010), *El duelo y la fiesta* (2012), *Mujer sin hijo* (2013), and *Mare i filla* (2015), written in Catalan. Her latest collection of 16 short stories, *Vida familiar*, is also written in Catalan and won the Premi Mercè Rodoreda in 2016. Inspired in the works of Carmen Martín Gaité, Ana María Matute, Natalia Ginzburg, and Mercè Rodoreda, Díaz's literary pieces delve into family and town dynamics, and in particular mother and child relationships. Themes of daily life, isolation, abandonment, secrets, and death recur in her novels and short stories.

<sup>2</sup> Born in Montevideo in 1956, Marisa Silva Schultze lived several years with her parents in Sweden, in exile during the Uruguayan dictatorship. She is a Uruguayan novelist, poet, and history teacher. Her novels include *La limpieza es una mentira provisoria* (1997), *Qué hacer con lo no dicho* (1999), *Apenas diez* (2006), and *Siempre será después* (2013). Her novels portray ordinary Uruguayans, focusing on the family

dictatorship Uruguay, respectively, explore family dynamics in the wake of traumatic events. Using Bowen Family Systems Theory and trauma theory, this article explores how trauma resulting from violence, repression, and exile affect the functioning of the family unit as seen in each novel. Analysis of family emotional and behavioral patterns reveals long-lasting dysfunction that is transmitted to the next generation. For several reasons, family members do not address underlying trauma, and support within the family system is lacking. Small, incremental changes to family dynamics, however, help to address trauma and make healing possible.

### *Es un decir and Apenas diez*

The trauma of violence, dictatorship, and repression has deeply affected the characters in Díaz's *Es un decir* and Silva Schultze's *Apenas diez*, and the family emotional system reacts. In *Es un decir*, young Mariela and her grandmother share the tragedies that have befallen their family in the wake of the murder of Mariela's father, a man who fought with the Republican army in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). In the first and third sections of the novel, fifteen-year-old Mariela reflects on the previous four years since her father died. In the second section, Mariela's grandmother speaks in stream of consciousness to her estranged husband's dying mistress. As we see through their story, the time of civil war, and the postwar years under the totalitarian regime of Francisco Franco, were times of individual and collective traumas brought about by violence, repression, and fear.<sup>3</sup> As portrayed in *Apenas diez*, the brutal tactics employed under the Uruguayan dictatorship (1973-1985) also caused suffering for many Uruguayans.<sup>4</sup> With each chapter of Schultze's novel, the reader enters into the thoughts and memories of a Uruguayan family: Irene, her husband Gonzalo, brother Ariel, sister Adriana and brother-in-law Roberto, mother Lil, and daughter Andrea. The novel begins in 1991, as they reunite after years of separation. Through the voices of each character, the reader sees that this family experienced great pain during the years of dictatorship, and its aftereffects continue once democracy returns.

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dynamic within an intimate space, in the wake of family and political violence. In 2009, she published *Aquellos comunistas: 1955-1973*, in which she offers a personal and well-researched study of the Communist party and its members in Uruguay (similar to several of the characters in *Apenas diez*), from the crisis of 1955 to the beginning of dictatorship in 1973. As in her novels, Schultze shares the inner dynamic and characteristics of a group of people, here the Communist party, seen through their celebrations, rituals, and evolution.

<sup>3</sup> On the violence and repression of the Spanish Civil War and the years of the Franco dictatorship, see Anderson and del Arco Blanco 137-72, Casanova and Gil Andrés 183-248, Mir Curcú, Preston 471-517, and Richards 26-66.

<sup>4</sup> Studies on the violence and repression of the years of dictatorship in Uruguay include Lessa 31-47, Roniger and Sznajder 7-50, Ros 157-61, and Varela Petito 91-105.

## **Bowen Family Systems Theory**

As this article will show, trauma affects not only the individual, but also the families of those who have suffered. Developed by psychiatrist Murray Bowen, Bowen Family Systems Theory considers the family as a system in which its members interact emotionally and intellectually, with a constant flow of action and reaction. In particular, the theory looks at how the nuclear family emotional system functions in times of stress and anxiety. Predominance of emotional reactivity within the system, as opposed to responses based on cognition and reflection, is an indicator of dysfunction. When stress occurs, family members attempt to alleviate it by functioning in groups of three, or triangles: “the triangle, a three-person emotional configuration, is the molecule or the basic building block of any emotional system... A two-person system may be stable as long as it is calm, but when anxiety increases, it immediately involves the most vulnerable other person to become a triangle” (Bowen 372). Several triangles may exist at the same time within a nuclear family, and often include extended family.

These relationships, however, do not resolve the original stress, but rather they temporarily shift anxiety to another individual. Identification and examination of these triangles reveals the level of emotional fusion/binding and reactivity among family members – if the level of emotional fusion in the system is high, this means that there is dependency within the family unit, as family members feel responsible for each other’s feelings, but also blame one another for their own negative emotions. Within Bowen Family Systems Theory, this level of fusion is related to the differentiation of self, or the level of autonomous, intellectual decision-making relative to the level of emotional reactivity. Trauma may manifest itself in a lower differentiation of self, with which individuals or families react to stress emotionally and with anxiety, entering into a pattern of stress, reaction and dysfunction that evades resolution.<sup>5</sup>

## **Trauma Theory**

Recent research on trauma and its effects has been varied in its scope and orientation, considering biological, psychological, sociological, historical, and literary perspectives to understand what trauma is and how it manifests in the trauma sufferer. Trauma generally results from a stressor – a significant, violent event, the threat of extreme harm, or cumulative violence or threat of harm that makes a mark on the sufferer or witness (American Psychiatric Association 271). While this wound may manifest itself in different ways, common responses include intrusive and recurrent remembering or reliving of the event(s) (flashbacks, dreams, compulsive behavior, anxiety, guilt), emotional numbing, and emotional agitation/sensitivity (American Psychiatric Association 271-72). These and additional explanations of trauma and its

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<sup>5</sup> For excellent explanations of Bowen Family Systems Theory, see Bowen, Brown, and Haefner.

effects, drawn from the current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* published by the American Psychiatric Association, inform this article's understanding of trauma.<sup>6</sup>

The effects of trauma on perception, memory and behavior have been the subject of debate in recent years. Looking to Freud and Janet's studies on trauma, Cathy Caruth suggests that the original source of trauma does not register in the individual's conscious, as the psyche works to protect itself from extreme distress and the experience of trauma is belated, "when it exposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 4). Bessel A. van der Kolk finds this same disconnect between mind and body, suggesting that trauma may manifest in the body while conscious memory fails to register fully the original event (74-88). Marilyn Charles and Dominick LaCapra suggest similarly that as the traumatic event occurs within a context outside of the individual's concept of reality, it constitutes a rupture of representation and memory that hinders communication of trauma's impact (Charles 25-28, LaCapra 41-42). Jenny Edkins, E. Ann Kaplan, and Richard McNally concur that trauma sufferers often find it difficult to convey their feelings about trauma, acknowledging that trauma can affect memory. They reject, however, the idea that trauma remains unregistered in the psyche, instead positing that its seeming unrepresentability may be due to the rupture that trauma provokes, as language becomes insufficient and listeners are unprepared to comprehend what has occurred (Edkins 7-8, Kaplan 42, McNally). To this point, Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman emphasize the importance of the attentive listener's acknowledgement of trauma as a possible path to healing (*Testimony* 57-74).

These authors agree that trauma is a significant break from what came before the traumatic experience, and pain may later manifest itself in the mind and body. As Karen L. Lombardi and Avigail Gordon write: "Trauma is, at its core, a rupture. It is a moment that tears into normative living, altering the very bounds of identity" (172). This article bases its analysis in this view of trauma as a serious rupture in the face of a grave threat, that can have lasting effects that may affect body, psyche, and memory in

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<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet's early work on trauma and its manifestations is an important element informing contemporary trauma theory. Although aspects of their findings have been modified or refuted, namely the sexual origination of trauma and female hysteria, establishing a link between a past bodily threat and present psychosis or anxiety was a fundamental step in understanding trauma and its effects. Since then, myriad biological, psychological, and sociological studies have shaped medical definitions of trauma and its symptoms, as seen in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. These definitions have in turn influenced analyses of trauma in literature and history, seen for example in the work of Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Dori Laub, and Shoshana Felman. Because of this, there is wide agreement on the idea of what trauma is and how it may manifest itself within the individual. Divergences exist, however, regarding what happens to the psyche and memory when trauma occurs, why and how the body and mind experience trauma after the traumatic event, and how best to address trauma and promote healing.

different ways. As we will see, in *Es un decir* and *Apenas diez*, this rupture plays out within the family dynamic, as the broken self looks for healing but finds instead breakdown.

## I. Violent Death and the Nuclear Family Emotional System

Patterns of dysfunction emerge within the family systems of *Apenas diez* and *Es un decir* in the aftermath of traumatic events. The strongest dyads of each system experience anxiety that spills over to a third family member, forming a triangle. As the following analysis will show, these family systems operate more emotionally than intellectually, revealing high levels of emotional fusion that, as Bowen suggests, result in emotional, physical, or social illness/dysfunction (305).

### A Father's Death in *Apenas diez*

*Apenas diez* begins as Andrea has traveled from Sweden to Uruguay to spend a month with her family. Her parents, Irene and Gonzalo, returned to Uruguay two years earlier, after living in exile since 1973. Andrea returns in 1991, six years following the end of the Uruguayan dictatorship, and her presence in Montevideo brings up difficult memories. Irene and her family remember that Irene's first husband, Gerardo, was kidnapped and taken to prison in 1973. Their memories attest to uncertainty and repression, as many thousands of Uruguayan citizens were imprisoned and tortured as the civic-military government took power.<sup>7</sup> Irene and Gerardo were young then, idealistic and politically active, and newly married with a young daughter, Andrea. Before the authorities arrested Gerardo, he and Irene knew that they were under threat of being detained, and they decided to leave Uruguay. When Gerardo did not show up to meet Irene, she panicked and fled the country, first to the embassy in Chile and then to Sweden, leaving Andrea with her family in Montevideo for ten months. After several days of brutal torture in prison, Gerardo was found hanged in his cell.

This string of events created traumatic stress within the nuclear triangle of Gerardo, Irene, and Andrea, separating them physically and emotionally. Gerardo's violent imprisonment, coupled with separation from family, were traumatic for Irene. When Andrea visits Uruguay in 1991, Irene and her second husband, Gonzalo, remember how desperate and lost Irene felt when she arrived in Sweden. The stability of her family and birthplace had been shaken, and this traumatic experience led "to a changed view of self and world" (Lombardi and Gordon 179) that provoked flashbacks and sleepless nights.

As Irene's sister, Adriana, and Grandmother Lil reveal, Andrea also suffered when she was left behind in Uruguay, sobbing as she called out for her mother and

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<sup>7</sup> At this time, thousands of Uruguayan citizens were harassed, imprisoned, tortured, and exiled. See Lessa 31-47, Rey Tristán 31-47, Weinstein 91-100, and Yáñez 147-51.

waking nightly from nightmares. As Cathy Caruth suggests: “To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (*Explorations* 4-5), and although Andrea has little memory of specific events, this trauma took hold of her, and continues in her family relationships as she grows. Both mother and daughter are marked by violence and separation, and the resulting traumatic stress charges their interactions with emotions.

Andrea is almost twenty years old when she returns to Uruguay, yet the tragic past of Gerardo, a loving husband and father who was violently ripped away from his family, informs the present, lingering as a constant reminder of loss, separation, and the threat of death. Although the family now lives in a democratic Uruguay, trauma is the continuation of the violent past in the present, what Edkins refers to as the non-linearity of trauma time: “Events from the period of the trauma are experienced in a sense simultaneously with those of a survivor’s current existence” (40). Irene and Andrea continue to struggle with tension, seeking closeness without fully recognizing their traumatic wounds.

In Sweden, they argued as Andrea insisted upon staying in Europe to pursue her dreams as a violinist. Once Andrea is in Uruguay, arguments continue as Andrea resists looking into the family’s painful past. When traumatic distress is high, as Charles notes, emotions can overtake rational reflection, intensifying reactivity (32-33). Bowen suggests that this type of emotional reactivity within the family system is evidence of lower levels of differentiation of self (a broken self) and dysfunction (200-01). Irene struggles with guilt, for having left her daughter and family, and for escaping brutal violence. Violence and death have also marked her with fear, and she wishes to protect Andrea. For her part, Andrea felt lost when her parents abruptly left her side, and then once again when she was taken to Sweden to stay with a mother she did not remember well. This traumatic separation provokes conflicting emotions in Andrea. She seeks trust and closeness with her family, yet she protects herself from delving into painful ruptures of the past. She is reluctant to talk about Gerardo, and resents her mother’s reminders that Gonzalo is not her father. Confused about her family identity, she distances herself from her father’s memory, seen when she visits her uncle Ariel, as she says: “[A] mí me da lo mismo cómo lo llamen ustedes.” Andrea acompañó sus palabras con un movimiento de hombros que pronunciaban en el aire una cargada indiferencia, un desdén que quería ser mostrado” (156-57). At first, she resists reconnecting with a past that she does not remember well, reacting with irritation when family members share memories. Bowen refers to such distancing as emotional cutoff, or “the way people handle their unresolved emotional attachments to their parents”, and it is an indication of emotional fusion/dependency within the family system, and not resolution (382).

The trauma that remains unaddressed has permeated Irene and Andrea’s relationship, bubbling up in patterns of arguments, closeness, and separation. Andrea travels to Uruguay after quarreling with her mother for several months about the trip. Going to Montevideo for a month means missed violin practice and less time with

Sergio, her boyfriend. Nevertheless, Andrea agrees to go, exemplifying a pattern of emotional response referred to in Bowen Family Systems Theory as the togetherness force, which “assumes responsibility for the happiness, comfort, and well-being of others; it feels guilty” (218), at the cost of one’s differentiation of self.

When stress increases within the mother-daughter dyad, a triangle forms with Irene’s husband Gonzalo. He is a respite for both mother and daughter, a seemingly neutral party who loves and supports them. He and Irene met in the Chilean embassy after she fled Uruguay. They traveled together to Sweden, and he comforted her during her first few years of exile when he saw her “en aquel territorio de angustias que por momentos habían bordeado la locura” (143). As the years pass, he listens as Irene laments Andrea’s increasing distance from her. Andrea can chat with Gonzalo about music, and often they spend time together in silence, allowing her a reprieve from arguments with her mother. Gonzalo balances the emotional system when anxiety is high, carrying a love for both women “que lo hacía tender puentes cuando ella y su madre se irritaban una a la otra” (49). Triangling with another family member, as Bowen explains, dilutes anxiety, bringing temporary harmony to the family system (400), however this reinforces the togetherness force that lowers differentiation of self and ignores the source of anxiety. Gonzalo reacts with acquiescence and compassion, denying his need for increased differentiation of self. He loves Andrea as a daughter, and he resents Irene’s constant reminders that he is not Andrea’s father. Each member of this triangle reacts to the emotions of the others, perceiving them as the reason for dysfunction, rather than the original trauma.

Irene and Andrea also form a triangle with Grandmother Lil, as she is a strong and loving presence, especially for Andrea. When she remained in Uruguay with Lil, she formed a strong bond with her grandmother. Lil became a mother figure for Andrea, and the little girl refused to leave her grandmother’s side, because, as Margarita Alfaro Amieiro writes: “La abuela Lil representa el espacio de la ternura y de las preocupaciones y cuidados” (304). When Andrea was three, Lil flew with her to Sweden, where she clung to Lil for months as she became reacquainted with Irene, who had not been present in her life for several months. Lil visited Sweden several times, and the grandmother’s presence was reassuring for Andrea as she grew. Although in 1991 Andrea has not seen Lil for seven years, they had been corresponding through weekly letters. When Andrea visits Montevideo, she decides to spend a night at her grandmother’s house. They speak with emotion about Andrea’s decision to stay in Sweden. Lil has always supported Andrea, but now she implores Andrea to remain with the family at the expense of her own dreams. Andrea feels guilty as she realizes that her grandmother is aging and opportunities to see her may be few. Lil has relieved some tension of the Irene-Andrea dyad, but at the same time the togetherness force pulls Andrea back into dysfunction.

### A Father's Death in *Es un decir*

Similar to the death of Gerardo, the murder of Mariela's father in *Es un decir* is violent and terrifying, as Mariela remembers: "Todo el pueblo le había visto muerto, humillado. Con los pantalones por los tobillos y la cara de niño pobre, un niño de clase baja con frío, hambre, todas las calamidades" (13). It is a time of retribution in postwar Spain, and as a man who fought against the Nationalists in the Civil War, he was a target of violence. He is killed on Mariela's eleventh birthday, and she hears the shots that kill him as she blows out the candles on her birthday cake. After her father's murder, Mariela feels lost and misunderstood, resentful of the silence and pity that surrounds her. When the police later come to inspect the house, they say nothing when they find the gun that was hidden by the perpetrators. Neighbors remain silent, out of fear or willful ignorance, refusing to approach the family to offer condolences or help with burial. The cover-up and impunity for the killers, as well as the community's refusal to speak about the father, intensify the trauma experienced by Mariela, her mother, and grandmother. Lombardi and Gordon argue that acknowledgment of one's trauma can be very powerful, writing: "It is when trauma is hidden, unspeakable, and unopposable, when it remains within an encapsulated shell of experience, that it does most damage" (174).<sup>8</sup>

The family continues with their routine, but they are isolated emotionally from family and friends, and one another. Mariela continues to attend school, and since her mother pays her little attention, she often leaves home, walking to the river or her father's gravesite. The original nuclear family emotional system consisted of Mariela, her father and mother. The grandmother's memories, as well as Mariela's conversations with neighbors, reveal that tension existed within the marital dyad. They disagreed on the importance of fighting for the father's political convictions, but he declared his opinions publicly and went to war despite his wife's misgivings. Also, Mariela's mother had married her husband somewhat reluctantly – she had been engaged to his brother (Mariela's uncle), whom she never stopped loving. The shocking nature of the father's murder as well as the silence surrounding it compound the tension that existed in the marital dyad, and this spills over to the new dyad within the family between Mariela and her mother.

The mother-daughter dyad is riddled with stress and tension, as they struggle with the aftereffects of trauma. Mariela seeks comfort and information, however, her mother prefers physical distance and silence. The resulting friction between them is alleviated somewhat as their dyad forms two triangles – one with the father as a memory (similar to the presence of Gerardo's memory in *Apenas diez*), and another with Mariela's grandmother.

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<sup>8</sup> Caruth, and Felman and Laub also highlight the importance of acknowledging and listening to trauma. See Caruth *Explorations* 11, Felman and Laub 57-74.



Through the grandmother's memories, the reader comes to know that the mother is scared and angry, wishing her husband had quieted his opinions and kept the family safe. Reacting emotionally to his death, she cuts off from him and Mariela. Yet the familial attachment remains fused/dependent as cutoff is an emotional act (Bowen 382). The mother attempts to alleviate pain by suppressing it. This type of numbing is a common response to trauma, with which there is "persistent effortful avoidance of distressing trauma-related stimuli after the event, such as trauma-related thoughts or feelings and trauma-related external reminders" (American Psychiatric Association 271), as is the case for Mariela's mother, who never speaks of her husband again, putting away family photos and all reminders of him.

As Mariela grows from a young girl of eleven into adolescence, she hopes to maintain a connection with her mother and keep her father's memory alive, but she is met with silence: "La escasa comunicación con mi madre se volvió inexistente, y si alguna vez intentaba darle conversación, me decía que me callara" (66). She is a lively, curious girl who yearns for connection, but as her mother rejects her, Mariela increasingly feels abandoned and resentful. Mariela and her mother's interactions become highly reactive, resulting in emotional illness/dysfunction. Unlike the patterns we have seen with Irene and Andrea in *Apenas diez*, Mariela and her mother function with conflict and distance, but very little closeness – at times they argue, but most often Mariela experiences emotional cutoff from her mother, and then cuts off emotionally in reaction to her mother. Whereas the mother distances herself from the father's memory, for Mariela the father's memory is a touchstone, as she seeks to feel close to him. She asks questions about him, visits his gravesite weekly with flowers, and lies on the ground where he died, tasting the blood-soaked dirt. Not fully comprehending what happened to him, she relives the trauma in repetitive actions and painful memories. For the trauma sufferer, the event may not be immediately understood in its horror, but rather it may be experienced "as a temporal delay that carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment. The trauma is a repeated suffering of the event, but it is also a continual leaving of its site" (Caruth *Explorations* 10). In this sense, repeating the traumatic event is helpful to Mariela, as it allows her to feel close to her father, and he is a way to escape the conflictual mother-daughter dyad.

Mariela and her mother also triangle with Mariela's grandmother. They turn to her for the support and closeness that they cannot find with each other. After the grandmother comes to live with them after the father's death, she says little at first, focusing on domestic tasks. Mariela follows her around the house, hoping to speak to her. As they begin to talk more, Mariela grows closer to her grandmother. They sleep in the same bed at night, and the grandmother prepares her meals and talks to her, unlike her mother. Most important is that her grandmother says a few kind words about Mariela's father. Although Mariela's mother will speak with no one else, she confides in the grandmother, speaking about the difficult circumstances facing the family. The grandmother shares with the reader that Mariela's mother spoke to her about her

husband and daughter, wishing only peace for them. One afternoon, Mariela overhears her mother pleading with the grandmother to stay with them. These details make clear that the mother looks to the grandmother for comfort when anxiety is high. Mariela shares how her grandmother relieves some of the family's tension: "[P]ronto entendí que la presencia de la abuela era necesaria . . . porque aportaba consuelo, o armonía, o normalidad, un estado indescriptible de confianza y bienestar" (25). The grandmother leaves, however, to take care of her husband's mistress. Mariela is devastated, but stays close to her until she leaves. When Mariela's mother leaves the house, seething, she walks by the grandmother without acknowledging her. A few months later, Mariela realizes that without her grandmother, there is no communication in her house. The grandmother played an important role of support and love in the home, but the anxiety affecting the Mariela-mother dyad remains unaddressed.

## II. The Aftermath of Violence and Repression

Death is not the only source of trauma for these families, and analysis of the emotional patterns within the family systems of each novel exposes anxiety resulting from the physical and psychological torment these characters have borne. As we see in Díaz and Silva Schultze's novels, the long aftermath of dictatorship is filled with pain and guilt.

Ariel, Irene's brother in *Apenas diez*, struggles to rebuild his life after five years of imprisonment and torture. As it was for thousands of political prisoners during the time of dictatorship in Uruguay, beatings, electric shocks, near-drowning, filthy conditions, and scarce food were his daily realities in prison (Caro Hollander 107-18, Weinstein 53, 104-07). Escaping such violence to live in exile weighs on Irene, who feels guilty for having survived. Sister Adriana attempts to mend the broken family in any way possible. After the father's murder in *Es un decir*, Mariela, her mother, and grandmother continue to live under the oppressive weight of fear and anxiety that characterized postwar Spain (Preston 471-517, Richards 26-88, and Ruiz-Vargas). They are aware of the possibility of physical, economic, and social retribution that may face them if they express their pain, and this constant, intense level of fear adds to their anxiety.

Mariela's mother is fearful after her husband's murder because she understands through the actions of the police and the non-action of her community that she is the widow of a man whose political loyalties brought about his death. When the Guardia Civil inspect her house after the father's murder, Mariela recalls observing her mother, who "se puso a temblar como si tuviera frío aunque tenía las mejillas incendiadas, y las manos se las pasaba por el delantal una y otra vez, una y otra vez, secándose el sudor pegajoso de la inquietud" (18), simply nodding her head when the policemen lie to her. Likewise, neighbors look at the family with pity but offer no support or details of what they witnessed. In the face of oppressive fear, Mariela's mother silences her pain so deeply that she becomes mute after the grandmother leaves their home. Her low level of

differentiation of self manifests in a severe emotional cutoff that becomes a physical illness. As Mariela is met with silence once and again, she also begins to quiet expressions of pain, although she feels compelled to tell her family's story. Several times, Mariela attempts to forget her questions and doubts, believing that a *señorita* does not complain or question.

Unable to turn to each other for comfort, tension between Mariela and her mother intensifies. Marilyn Charles and Michael O'Loughlin remark on "the terrible toll that trauma takes when there is no one with whom the trauma can be acknowledged and worked through. In the face of utter lack of recognition, what might be known together . . . becomes hidden" (3). As Mariela seeks closeness, her mother retreats first into absence, as she works long hours in the field, and then into total silence when she becomes ill. Her work, and later her illness, represent such a strong presence in their lives that they form a triangle with Mariela and her mother. This triangling diverts some tension between mother and daughter, placing the mother's job/illness as a focus of stress and avoiding the identification of the trauma affecting the mother-daughter dyad. As Mariela is continuously ignored, however, she struggles with feelings of abandonment: "Lo que necesitaba era una madre, pero procuraba no importunar a nadie" (112). These feelings grow as she turns into an adolescent, as she becomes embittered and angry about her mother's neglect.

Mariela's boyfriend, Tico, also forms a triangle with Mariela and her mother. Mariela first meets Tico when she is twelve and he is sixteen. His father tutors Mariela's neighbor, and Tico waits outside the house while he is working. Tico and Mariela spend several afternoons together, walking and throwing stones by the river. She is intrigued by the fact that his mother died, and asks him incessantly about their loving relationship. Tico becomes a form of escape, and also a member of the emotional triangle whom Mariela can control, as she says: "Utilizaba a Tico para poder superar mi propia pérdida: pero no la muerte de mi padre, no, sino la indiferencia que me hacía sentir mi familia" (46). He is a substitute for her mother in that she looks to him for validation and communication. As he is pulled into the triangle, Mariela interacts with him following the same patterns seen in the mother-daughter dyad. As Bowen reminds us: "When stress increases, and it involves additional people, the emotional forces continue the action between three poles in the system" (425). Since Mariela's mother will not talk to her, she seeks Tico out. When Tico shows a strong sense of self, however, she returns home. He is kind and patient with her, but Mariela responds with either intense closeness or emotional cutoff. She eventually tires of his goodness, and after a year, she distances herself. When one day she goes to see him, she discovers that he is dating another young woman, and she again feels abandoned.

In *Apenas diez*, as we have seen in Mariela's family, unspoken trauma manifests in the functioning of the family system. Ariel, Irene, and Adriana have silenced their traumatic memories for several years – first, during the years of dictatorship, and then once democracy is reestablished. Ariel, Irene, and Adriana relate to each other within a

flow of emotional reactions within their triangle, thus diverting and absorbing some of the chronic stress of unresolved trauma.

For several years Irene does not communicate her grief and pain. Letters exchanged with her family when she is first in exile, for example, are written carefully with a minimum of details so as not to raise suspicion. She says little to her children about the pain she endured in Uruguay and when she arrived in Sweden, focusing on nostalgic memories of Gerardo and the Montevideo she left behind. Irene feels guilty as well, anguished for those who suffered, but also relieved because she escaped death and created a safe life in Sweden. Irene does not voice her pain to Ariel or Adriana nor inquire about their suffering – she responds to fear, pain, and guilt with emotional distance. They perceive this as indifference, and Adriana in particular sees it as a personal affront to the family’s unity. Irene explains to Ariel later, when they meet alone one day, that she thought she could never understand what they went through because she survived, expressing:

su culpa por no haber caído presa como Gerardo, como Ariel, como tantos otros compañeros [y] esa constante sensación que persiguió a su hermana en el exilio y que la interrumpía cuando estaba disfrutando cualquier cosa; la constante recurrencia de esa pregunta que la hacía tomar distancia con lo que estaba viviendo: ¿por qué yo sí puedo esto? (207)

Edkins comments on this element of shame in the survivor’s psyche that we see in Irene, observing: “Witnessing violence done to others and surviving can seem to be as traumatic as suffering brutality oneself. Here a sense of shame is paramount. The survivor feels complicit in the betrayal perpetrated by others” (4). Irene feels a strong pull to be close to her family, but at the same time she values the life she has created in Sweden with Gonzalo and their children. They wait four years after the dictatorship ends to return to Uruguay, but the togetherness force (obligation and guilt) pulls her back.

Ariel, deeply wounded by torture and the guilt he feels for his inability to prevent Gerardo’s death, also avoids sharing his experiences. He tried to forget, and made a promise to himself not to share details of his years in prison. When Andrea arrives, Ariel feels unsettled: “[É]l hubiera preferido que justo en este momento de su vida, Andrea no hubiera venido a Montevideo, ... no lo obligara irse para adentro a recoger imágenes y fragmentos y retazos fugaces y dolientes de esa semana con Gerardo en el cuartel, no lo obligara a hablar de lo que no quería hablar” (77). Disturbing flashes of memory begin to fill Ariel’s mind, despite his attempts to keep them at bay. He remembers *la máquina*, or the torture machine, his shaved head that marked him when he left prison, and hearing Gerardo’s cries as he kept repeating “soy traidor” (78). These are intrusive thoughts that affect him despite his attempts to avoid trauma-related

thoughts and reminders (American Psychiatric Association 271). He feels misunderstood, finding himself angry and aggressive, unable to maintain intimate relationships. He and his wife divorce, he speaks less to his family after many arguments, and he spends most of his time alone at the workshop. He also drinks excessively. These problems are often seen in the trauma sufferer who may have an exaggerated blame of self for causing the trauma and decreased interest in activities (American Psychiatric Association 272). Over the past eighteen years, Ariel has resorted to emotional cutoff as he withdraws further into isolation, in reaction to arguments with Adriana and silence from Irene. He has separated emotionally from Irene because he could not protect Gerardo, and feels as though no one is interested in hearing his painful memories.

Sister Adriana always kept silent about her suffering as she chose to stay behind in Montevideo in 1973. She took on the role of caretaker, visiting Ariel in prison, writing letters to Irene in Sweden, and taking care of Andrea. She and her husband Roberto also suffered during the dictatorship, losing their jobs, risking their lives to help family members, and living in constant fear of being imprisoned. Adriana's sacrifice begins to gnaw at her as the years pass, and resentment builds as she feels like an unrecognized martyr. She resents Irene in particular, as Alfaro Amicero notes: "Irene... después de su regreso no será bien aceptada por su hermana Adriana que nunca vivió en el exilio y que no comprende, desde el rencor y la rabia, la situación de doble identidad en la que vive su hermana" (306). Adriana feels unappreciated, as she thinks to herself: "¿Qué tiene [Adriana] que Irene y Ariel nunca le han dado importancia? ¿Cómo han sido capaces de olvidar, tan pronto, todo lo que ella ha hecho por ellos?" (192). She strives to keep the family together, rejecting others' attempts to self-differentiate. The togetherness force keeps the members of the triangle emotionally fused and hinders the differentiation of self. For example, when Ariel tells her that Gerardo killed himself for giving names while under torture, she angrily denies it. She angers Irene by insisting that Andrea remain in Uruguay, and when Irene one evening comments that their father, Germán, was authoritarian, it was "como si a Adriana la hubieran puesto adentro mismo de un volcán" (172).

### III. Projection of Trauma and Family Emotional Patterns

As we have seen with Andrea and Mariela, emotional patterns of reactivity to traumatic stress can be passed down to subsequent generations, through the family projection process, "by which parental problems are projected to one or more children" (Bowen 425), and the multigenerational transmission process, which "describes [how] the pattern as family emotional process is transmitted through multiple generations" (Bowen 425). Marianne Hirsch's analysis of what she has termed postmemory is also relevant. Although Hirsch's analysis centers on the second generation that experiences trauma through the surviving generation's behavior, stories, and silences, she also

highlights that “[t]hese events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present” (5), which can be understood through Bowen Family Systems Theory as the family projection process. Cara Levey widens Hirsch’s analysis of postmemory to include the “overlapping generation” of young children born during a time of dictatorship/collective trauma (6-7), such as Mariela and Andrea who have been affected by trauma directly and indirectly. In addition to the violence that Mariela witnessed and the separation that Andrea endured, they have observed and learned their families’ behavioral and emotional patterns, which are informed by trauma.

Mariela and Andrea are young when trauma first affects them. The violent deaths of their fathers, and the resulting separation and silence, affect them profoundly. They form an integral part of the various triangles present in their family systems, and the level of emotional reactivity is passed onto them as they learn how to cope with trauma and its aftereffects. Trauma and its impact may be transmitted to children in speech, behaviors, or silence (Hirsch 5), and this silencing of trauma increases stress within the family system. The silence of Mariela’s mother affects the nuclear family emotional system, impairing Mariela emotionally through the impact of her mother’s undifferentiation (Bowen 379). She sees her mother overtaken by anger and fear, cutting herself off from the father’s memory and intimate relationships. Mariela learns patterns of anger, avoidance and cutoff that perpetuate the effects of trauma. Although Andrea in *Apenas diez* is more removed from the source of her family’s trauma, she too feels its impact. The family emotional patterns of avoidance, high emotional reactivity, and cycles of closeness, conflict, and separation are projected onto Andrea through the togetherness force that draws her into emotionally-charged interactions and cutoffs. Her postmemory of family trauma, understood as “a structure of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience” (Hirsch 6), shows itself through arguments and cutoffs. She becomes accustomed to this dynamic, but once she listens to Uncle Ariel, Grandmother Lil, and her mother as they share their pain, Andrea also opens up and changes her emotional patterns.

It can be understood that the trauma resulting from extreme violence and repression has brought about a breakdown of the families in each novel. This, in principle, goes against what the authoritarian regimes of Spain and Uruguay espoused. In Spain under Franco, for example, the family was upheld as the bedrock of society, an important social institution in the fight against forces that would threaten Spain’s unity and safety (Richards 62-66, Meli 363-67), and in Uruguay, the civic-military dictatorship was justified by its supporters as a measure needed to secure a stable and safe Uruguay (Tcach and Servetto 95-109, Weinstein 91-99).

#### **IV. Possibilities of Healing**

In Bowen Family Systems Theory, the path to increased differentiation of self, and thus less emotional fusion (dysfunction/dependency) within the family system, lies

in addressing stress in an intellectual and less reactive manner. As Bowen notes, “[A]ny process that lowers the anxiety reduces the intensity of the [emotional] patterns... Anything that improves open communication will reduce the tension” (436). In the case of the families in *Es un decir* and *Apenas diez*, this means reacting to chronic traumatic stress in a more direct manner. The affirmation of “neglected family truths” that have been masked is essential to healing, as Charles argues: “[I]t is only when we can relax from the struggle and embrace these truths that we can begin to decipher their meanings” (31). This alteration of patterns within the family emotional system is then transmitted to future generations.

For Mariela and her family in *Es un decir*, the severity of the trauma and the emotional reactions to it hinder the differentiation process. With a low level of differentiation of self, the family reacts based on pure emotion, keeping the system fused and ineffective in dealing with trauma. Mariela’s mother cuts off emotionally and never reconnects, leaving her personal experience of trauma unresolved when she dies. After Mariela’s grandmother leaves the family, she does not return. Although Mariela’s continued attempts to understand the trauma affecting her family are rebuffed, she finds new ways to address her wounds when her mother and grandmother are gone. She speaks clearly to the nuns at her school, expressing her thoughts and reflections. She also shares what she knows of her family with an unnamed listener/reader, to whom she directs her memories. The urge to bear witness can be strong for sufferers of trauma (Laub 77-78), and Mariela finds a way to do so despite the limitations facing her. She feels a strong need to gather information about her father and her family’s history, to know better who she is and to understand the violence that has ripped her family apart. Because her questions go unanswered in her family, she looks to neighbors for help. Although her family system has broken down, Mariela understands that she must restore her ruptured self by expressing her truth and following the path that calls to her. After her mother’s death, she remains at her convent school, accepting that she is strong and capable of making her own way.

As the family in *Apenas diez* reunites after the end of the Uruguayan dictatorship, they have more options available to them for healing. The high emotional fusion among family members that has guided their interactions unwinds as they share painful memories. One evening, Andrea expresses years of pent-up emotion: “[T]odos sabían que mi padre había muerto, pero que nadie me lo quería decir, que yo lloraba de noche, que no me podía dormir, ¿por qué nunca me contaste todo eso?... [Me] dejaron sola y además me mintieron y me mienten, me siguen mintiendo” (262-63). Irene and Ariel also begin to speak freely about Gerardo’s death and Irene’s exile. Through their conversation, they each are relieved of some of their guilt, and offer each other love and support. Likewise, Irene and Gonzalo speak truthfully about their conflicting emotions, acknowledging their reluctance to return to Uruguay and how difficult things were in Sweden. Andrea finally visits Gerardo’s grave with Irene, and asks more questions about him and their life before exile. When she sees his name on the grave, she feels

connected to her family's history. After a few honest conversations, Irene and Lil accept Andrea's decision to return to Sweden to pursue her studies in music.

The future is promising for Mariela and Andrea, as they have succeeded in altering some emotional patterns of dysfunction. Mariela remains stuck somewhat, as her relationships with her mother and grandmother ended without acknowledgment of trauma. The pattern of emotional cutoff begins to change with Mariela, as she understands the importance of being truthful, and demands the same from others. As she shares her memories with the listener/reader, she acknowledges her family's trauma, seeking authenticity and understanding. Careful examination of her family's suffering helps her to develop a high level of self-differentiation. Andrea, on the other hand, will benefit greatly from the improved emotional dynamic within her family. Alfaro Amieiro writes that, for Andrea, the future is free of painful burdens, and that it will be "el tiempo del volver a empezar, de un nuevo comienzo que ofrece todas las expectativas para llevar a cabo una vida en libertad" (303). Andrea leaves Uruguay confident in her family's love and support, while at the same time knowing that her mother and grandmother accept her decision to leave without guilt. She is then able to form a new dyad with Sergio in Sweden, beginning her life with full recognition of her past and present.

## Conclusion

Analysis of the family emotional systems portrayed in *Es un decir* and *Apenas diez* reveals that the chronic stress of trauma caused by political violence and social repression creates severe and long-lasting dysfunction for these affected families. This is a way of understanding the functioning and effects of the lived experience of dictatorship and its aftermath. The original trauma creates a rupture of self that ripples through the family system, binding members together in a loop of tension-reaction-tension-reaction. Marked by violence and repression, the family system is unable to function as a source of support for its members. Yet, the family is precisely what one needs when trauma occurs – the support of the family unit can mitigate painful circumstances. This family breakdown is emotional, in which the tension of trauma that cannot be fully expressed fosters patterns of reactivity and triangulation that prevent an increased differentiation of self with which family members could more effectively cope with higher stress. Moreover, as is evident with Mariela and Andrea, patterns of emotional reactivity tend to continue to the next generation.

This destabilization of the family system contradicts the goals stated by the totalitarian regimes in both Uruguay and Spain as they took and maintained power. As we have seen in each novel, the repression perpetrated under each regime undermines family cohesiveness, sows dysfunction, and exacerbates trauma. Additionally, the breakdown of the family system reflects the larger societal breakdown in Uruguay and Spain during the years of dictatorship and afterwards, when death, torture,



imprisonment, and exile devastated many citizens. Because family systems work as an integral part of the social system, family instability affects social relations, and the resulting fear, anger, and division tend to inform social interactions after the reestablishment of democracy. As seen in *Es un decir* and *Apenas diez*, addressing these consequences of trauma, not only in individual cases, but also within affected families, may bring healing and reduce family dysfunction in the future.

Although dysfunctional emotional patterns in reaction to trauma are passed down to Andrea and Mariela, their ability to increase their own differentiation of self demonstrates that change is possible. The same can be said for Irene and Ariel. Here, differentiation means addressing the trauma that has affected each family member, and consequently the family system. Facing extreme limitations, Mariela sets out on her own path, acknowledging her family's trauma, and searching for truth. Andrea begins to recuperate her painful past and reestablish family connections as she leaves for Sweden, pursuing her own dreams without guilt. A change has begun with which the ruptured self pieces itself back together within the family system.

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