

Intergenerational War Memories and Exile in Beatriz Copello's *Forbidden Steps Under the Wisteria*

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Abstract: This article explores the politics of memory and identity in Beatriz Copello's novel *Forbidden Steps Under the Wisteria* (1999). Copello was born in Rosario, Argentina, and emigrated to Australia in the early 1970s. Her semi-autobiographical novel explores the lives of three generations of women through a long migratory journey from Russia via Europe and America, coming to an end in Australia. The main plotline follows the story of Gabriela from her birth to her father's death in a car crash during her teenage years. The novel's experimental character and peculiar writing style moves from the symbolic and imaginary world of oneness with nature to the real world of prohibitions and the loss of innocence, and to becoming a woman. It also intertwines issues of identity, place, and time. Through her depiction of traumatic as well as inspiring memories, Copello finds a voice of her own which emerges through her ancestors' experiences of war and her own exile to a new sense of reconciliation and belonging. Copello's novel will be discussed within the context of Jacques Lacan's approximations on language, identity and the symbolic realm.

Keywords: intergenerational war memory; exile; displacement; embodiment; female empowerment; coming of age literature.

From Argentina to Australia: A Journey in Being, Becoming and Belonging

Born in Argentina in 1942, Beatriz Copello moved to Australia in the early 1970s. During her childhood and teenage years, her country of birth was afflicted by political and social turmoil, which eventually made her decide to emigrate, for she felt she was not able to develop fully in a country that was silencing and eliminating all those who were considered to challenge the established rules and norms.¹ In the annotation of her Doctoral Thesis, she writes: "For some unknown reason I never felt that I belonged to Argentina. I always sensed that it was not the place for me. In Argentina I felt suffocated, constricted, and repressed. In Argentina I had no wings, or rather my wings had been clipped" (*The Writing* 55). In her writing, Copello constructs a space in which she can look back through memories—both individual and collective—to understand her identity process of growing up in Argentina as a child and young

¹ From 1950 to 1975, Argentina underwent a transitional and unstable period that altered between democratic states and military regimes, which ended with the military coup of 1976, deposing the democratically voted President Isabel de Perón. The National Reorganization Process, as these dictatorships called themselves, ruled the country from 1976 to 1983. The Junta immediately abolished the national constitution, depriving the citizens of most of their fundamental civil rights. Soon it was also announced that the Death Penalty was to be re-established. Although Argentina had already suffered under other military regimes, this was by far the worst of dictatorships (Corradi 92), the so called Dirty War that violated human rights and which resulted in thirty thousand political activists 'disappearing,' an estimate provided by CONADEP in *Nunca Más* in 1984 (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas).

woman. This is the case of the novel *Forbidden Steps Under the Wisteria* (1999), followed by *Beyond the Moons of August* (2003), which Copello wrote as part of her doctoral thesis.²

Exile is a key motif in most of Copello's fiction. The consequences and far-reaching implications of exile have been given different interpretations. Many critics and authors have expressed their different views on the matter, depending on their original background, motivations, generational status, gender, etc. For example, John Barbour's study of Edward Said's memoirs *Out of Place* (1999) notes how exile has had a paramount role in Said's identity and in his worldview. Barbour writes that "the condition of exile [is] the source of his most deeply held beliefs about himself and the world" (293). Moreover, he argues that Said has a deep yearning for belonging to a particular homeland; exile for Said is a constant reminder that he is not at home, that he does not feel at home anywhere, he is permanently dwelling in an in-between space. For Said, being in exile means being always more than one thing, having more than one homeland, more than one identity. Therefore, his concept of exile is of someone who is not fixed, not static, but in-between, a hybrid subject in transition, dwelling in a liminal space. Similarly, in *Understanding Stuart Hall* (2004), Helen Davis explains that when Hall first arrived from Jamaica into England to pursue a university degree in Oxford, he soon felt a familiar yet uneasy disjunction. Even if he knew the English culture quite well—Hall's mother held deep feeling for England as the mother-country—Hall soon understood that he could never be English, he would never fully assimilate into the new culture: "this experience is what he has termed 'diasporic,' suggesting a continual negotiation between the situation of exile/loss and arrival/acceptance (Davis 2004: 6).

A contrasting approximation on the personal implications of exile is one articulated by the Chilean-born writer, Roberto Bolaño, from his exile in Barcelona where he spent the rest of his life. In 2000, Bolaño gave a speech on literature and exile in the Austrian Society for Literature in Vienna, where he claimed that he did not believe in exile, "especially not when the word sits next to the word literature" (31). It is here that he questions the complaints and lamentations experienced by those who move away from their native lands, and he describes these emotions as "baffling nostalgia" (32) He wonders how "someone can feel nostalgia for the land where one nearly died. Can one feel nostalgia for poverty, intolerance, arrogance, injustice?" (2011: 32). He also argues that, since books are the only homeland of the true writer, writing about the homeland ultimately means reflecting on the myth, the dream of returning home.

The concept of home is above all a state of mind. It is where one feels one belongs. The word "belonging" can be interpreted as deriving from the compound of 'be' and 'longing,' that is to say, being in one place while actually longing or desiring another. Many people who are forced to leave their home look back on what they have lost and perhaps even romanticise what they

² Copello earned a PhD in Creative Arts from the University of Wollongong in 2003. Her other fiction includes poetry collections *Women, Souls and Shadows* (1992); *Meditations at The Edge of a Dream*, (2001); *Under the Gums' Long Shade* (2008); *Lo Irrevocable del Halcon* (2013); and two other novels *A Call to The Stars* (1999) and *Lesbian Love Lesbian Stories* (2014). Copello's literary accomplishments include: First prize for the short story "Scale" at Taylor Square Arts Festival (1995); First prize in the 2000 Sydney Writers Festival Pitching Literary Competition; Second prize for the short story "La Calma del Regreso," Argentinian Cultural Club (2012); First prize for the short story "Aritmomania," Literary Group Palabras (2013).

have left behind. Their new home is a coming to terms with a different environment and the problems of accepting and being accepted in the new home. Major problems in being accepted, or “abjected,” as Julia Kristeva would term it in her work *Abjection: The Powers of Horror* (1982), are issues of language, ethnicity, culture, religion and gender. These issues make up the Lacanian “symbolic order,” the “Law of the Father,” which is patriarchal and essential to social and linguistic communication. Thus, the abject can be understood to be “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva 4). In this context, exile can be understood as the act of rejecting a citizen from an established social order.

As mentioned above, Beatriz Copello’s novel *Forbidden Steps Under the Wisteria* is a semi-autobiographical narrative which traces her recollections of her childhood in her native Argentina. Her life in exile grants Copello access to a certain freedom and creativity, together with the impulse that allowed her to leave behind the ‘forbidden steps’ under the branches of the wisteria in her childhood home. It is there that Gabriela, Copello’s alter ego, danced as a child, against the wishes of her father, the patriarch of the family. Gabriela chooses her own destiny and unties the bond that unites her with her female ancestors who dwell inside her own Self, thereby overcoming the traumatic war memories of these ancestors and the lived traumas of the author’s own childhood. By analysing how these memories unfold in her narrative, this paper argues that writing has helped Copello in healing the wounds of a traumatic past and becomes a means of connecting to a chorus of voices, thereby establishing her identity of an Argentinian Australian citizen and creative writer.

Ficto-memoir

Forbidden Steps links Gabriela’s story to what Copello defines as “auto-biographical fiction or ficto-memoirs” (*The Writing* 89), a term for literary pieces that bring together personal memories and fictional writing. Examples of well-known ficto-memoirs are Jean Rhys’ *Voyage in the Dark*; Marguerite Duras’ *The Lover*; or Simone de Beauvoir’s *She Came to Stay*. In other words, ficto-memoirs are based on authentic memories and real events but employing fictional techniques to make life stories more readable and interesting. Using Jungian terminology of archetypes and psychological development, Copello claims that the novel is based on “the different *personae*” within her (*The Writing* 68). This permits her to enter a dialogue with each persona in order to give voice to the various issues in her unconscious. The final lines of the novel read: “This is a true story” (109), highlighting the fact that it is a true-to-fact account. Moreover, several details in the plot match the autobiographical nature of the novel. There are, for example, many references to the city Rosario, where Copello was born, and descriptions of streets and environments within the city.

Identity, place, and time intertwine in Copello’s text; it depicts life experiences of three generations of women through a long migratory journey from Russia to Europe to America and finally arriving in Australia. The story is a first-person narrative and the whole text is designed in the form of a diary, but with entries marked by titles rather than by dates. The main character and narratorial voice are that of Gabriela Vaccaro, nicknamed with the endearing forms of her name, ‘Gabrielita’ or ‘Lalita,’ by her family. These fictional names are used by Copello for her *alter ego* character on her poetic journey into her childhood experiences and memories. The written style of the novel changes from the symbolic and imaginary world of oneness with nature to the real world of prohibitions and the loss of innocence to becoming a woman. It is a

journey from poetry which defined childhood as wholeness, to poetry which becomes a list of social do's and don'ts. The novel comes to a sudden and unexpected end with the tragic death of her father in 1965 in a car crash. The sequel novel, *Beyond the Moons of August* takes up the life story again when Gabriela (and Copello herself) emigrates to Australia.

Copello's use of English plays a major role in the writing as it is her adopted language. However, the memory of her mother tongue, Argentinian Spanish, is the bridge that connects her to her native land. Colloquialisms, such as 'ombu' (South American tree), 'mate cocido' (a typical beverage similar to green tea), 'gaucho' (a native of the Argentinian Pampas who rides a horse), 'negrita' (young black girl), and Romani dialect are also explained at the end of the novel, in a glossary which contains the translation and explanation of thirty terms and expressions. Copello is often questioned about her literary production being mainly in English. She confesses she feels very uncomfortable when people make assumptions about the language she uses to express herself in, since she considers that her ethnic identity may become more significant than her narrative creativity. She claims that she feels "perfectly comfortable writing in English and being part of and understanding the Australian culture" (*The Writing* 90). Indeed, she considers herself a new Australian, not a foreigner. In this sense, she accepts the social codes of the symbolic order but at the same time, she will alter the patriarchal structure of language when it suits her. Moreover, I argue that writing her second language allows her to gain some distance and control from a very emotional description of her own intimate past experiences and thus she is able to acquire more insights into the exploration of her 'Self.' The fact that Copello decides to record her own personal self in her narrative may provide her with a therapeutic drive as a way of overcoming her childhood traumas: writing becomes a form of resilience and healing. Simultaneously, she disrupts the symbolic order by refusing to adhere to linguistic rules.

As mentioned above, the diary entries are separated by topics rather than dates. Although the text follows a chronological order, there are several time and place digressions. The writing is experimental in form and free in style and it incorporates a variety of genres: there are letters, poems, lists of instructions and rules of behaviour related to etiquette and how to become a 'proper' lady. Copello plays with capitalisation and margins, preferring a free design on the page. By ignoring the rules of textual structure, her narrative conveys a sense of fluidity and flexibility which break down the patriarchal structure of language.

The first textual example (figure 1) is a letter that Gabriela's headmaster sent to her parents, informing them of her misbehaviour in class and the consequent punishment by her father, who forced her to copy "I must behave at school" 150 times. This old-fashioned method, which used to be widely practiced by both parents and educators in Argentina and elsewhere until quite recently, shows the traditional approach towards education held by Gabriela's father. It is also important that it was her father, and not her mother or both parents, who took on the task of punishing her. The title of Copello's novel includes the word "forbidden" and in Lacanian terms it is the Father who says "No!" to the child. In the original French, Lacan uses a pun in the phrase *le non [nom] du père*. The Father says No! and in order to take on the Father's "name" (i.e. to be legitimate) the rules have to be obeyed.

Dear Parent,
Today Gabriela misbehaved. She hit some children without any cause or provocation. Make sure that she is punished for this action.
Mr R. Pereyra
(Principal)

As the result of the note my father made me write one hundred and fifty times:
I must behave at school. I must behave at school. I must behave at school.
I must behave at school. I must behave at school. I must behave at school.
I must behave at school. I must behave at school. I must behave at school.

Figure 1: *Forbidden Steps Under the Wisteria* by Beatriz Copello (1999). Example from page 35. The text is repeated on more than 22 lines.

The second example (figure 2) of this creative irregularity in the page design depicts the moment when Gabriela begins to menstruate and suffers all the implications of having her period, including the unpleasantness she associates with the fact of becoming a woman. This may be read as a poem, an example of concrete poetry in which the arrangement of the words on the page produces a visual impact on the reader. The fact that all the words are in capital letters suggests an assertive tone: Copello stresses every single word and wants the reader to pay close attention to them.

You are a woman now

RAGS * TOWEL * SANITARY NAPKIN * PINS * BELT* MODESS * TAMPON
BLOOD
CURSE.
WOMANHOOD.
PAIN.
PERIOD PAIN.
CRAMPS.

Figure 2: *Forbidden Steps under the Wisteria* by Beatriz Copello (1999). Example from page 49.

The inverted pyramidal shape may stand for the letter V, as in vagina, or it can even express the shape of a vagina. The first line contains an enumeration of hygienic products within the semantic field of sanitary products and menstruation. From the second line onwards, the writer uses only one noun word per line arranged like a staircase, to make these single words stand out and catch the reader's visual attention. The first word to appear on this second line is 'blood,' which is not only the primary bodily manifestation of the menstrual period, but also the stained sanitary products from the previous line. This is followed by the word 'curse' and immediately after 'womanhood,' which can be read either as women being cursed when they have the period, or as menstruation being a curse of womanhood. Either way, the connotations are far from positive and reflect the negative patriarchal conception of the female body. The three nouns that follow, 'pain,' 'period pain,' 'cramps' belong to the semantic field of pain. The writer emphasises how much it *hurts* to be/become a woman. On discovering her first period at eleven, Gabriela feels both frightened and excited by the sudden change in her new condition: "Red drops that sent me into a panic ... I felt proud" (49). A feeling of female empowerment experienced by this young adolescent vanishes, however, when she grows older: "... having

grown up to the category of WOMAN [Sic!] in one afternoon filled me with a sense of power. In the years to come this feeling of power faded away” (49).

Gabriela feels the natural innate wisdom of all women who go through the same experience of belonging in “nature’s awakening of the sacred power inside every woman’s body” (49). At this crucial moment of transformation, when she leaves girlhood and becomes a woman, she becomes conscious that she is linked in time to all her female ancestors and they become one with her. The embodiment of her female ancestors is comforting and reminds Gabriela of their previous experience, an aspect that will be developed later in this article. The voice inside her head expressed a sense of mutual communion, speaking to and through herself: “My wisdom, centuries years old, spoke to me when I needed it. I am Gabriela I kept saying to myself. We were one when the floods came. Warm. Sticky. Dark red” (49).

The notion of blood is explicitly gendered within patriarchal thought, as it becomes a ‘curse’ for a woman in that it regulates her body into a timescale that defines her in different ways. To begin with, to prove she is a virgin, her hymen will bleed when first penetrated and therefore indicate that she is marriageable. On the other hand, the absence of menstruation (no blood) can be a possible sign of pregnancy (for better or worse) or else a menopause, when she may no longer be desirable. For men, the symbolism of blood signifies their social ego: the shedding of blood has to do with fighting, blood also symbolizes bonding and loyalty between men (as in ‘blood brothers’), royalty and nobility (as in ‘blue blood’), and it is also related to eugenics (as in ‘pure’ blood). In many patriarchal cultures, the wife’s sexual fidelity is rewarded in the child she bears: the child has a legal right to the father’s surname and inheritance, which Lacan defines as *le nom du père*. This becomes one of the founding stones of capitalism. In keeping with this, Gabriela’s father marries a virgin, but he himself has many mistresses, women he falls in love with and then abandons. Some of his lovers become pregnant and his father, the Vaccaro patriarch, pays for the illegal abortions to protect the family’s name and social standing. On the other hand, Gabriela’s mother is subjected to the social shame caused by her husband’s open infidelities but also to the poverty that comes with it as all his money is spent in casinos and on women. At one point, Gabriela’s mother reveals a secret to her when she is older. She tells her daughter that she became pregnant by her husband and decided that she had to seek a backstreet abortion, because she knew she would be trapped in a loveless marriage and money was short. The scene takes place in the poorest and most disreputable part of the city and is described in brutal and humiliating terms, where a woman and an old man perform the operation, after forcing a rubber tube into her mouth to stop her from shouting out:

“Stop. Stop.” I wanted to scream but the fat woman was already on top of me holding my legs apart. Brandishing a long metal instrument [he] advanced toward me. “Fun can be very painful and costly,” he giggled. The pain was unbearable. I cried through the tube, but the woman slapped me and told me to stop. He scratched and scratched my insides. The last thing I remember before fainting was hearing “the butcher abortionist” singing a dirty song (68).

Gabriela’s mother manages to survive the abortion, but she is rushed into hospital with severe haemorrhages and loses consciousness for several days. When she awakes, she finds her husband is there at her bedside. He tells her he forgives her, but his family might not. Their

marriage takes a turn for the worse when he becomes obsessed with his wife, suspecting that she may have a lover (he, on the other hand, has many). He decides that the best way to make sure she does not leave him is by making her pregnant again. The entry following this episode in her mother's life bears the title "After the sin, a rose bud grew in my belly" (69) and Gabriela's sister is born. At the age of twelve, Gabriela visits her paternal grandmother Vaccaro as she lies dying. The old woman gives her the following advice: "Remember Magdalene, never forget her. She is within you. I'm within you, and my sisters too. Don't let them change you. Be true to yourself Gabriela. We'll be with you until the end of your days" (71). Gabriela thus inherits a female genealogy and heritage which is different from that of the males in the Vaccaro family, but still within a patriarchal system. She is taught by the Vaccaro aunts how to be a child of God, how to dress well, how to be a lady. As can be seen in the chart below (figure 3), these rules of etiquette are very restrictive, and they are thought to construct an ideal image of a woman following the standards of a patriarchal society.

Rules to become a lady. There are many rules to be followed if a woman is to become a lady. One never stops becoming a lady. Ladyhood is sainthood.

Rules

The bra strap should never show.
Never wear overpowering perfume.
Never wear colours which are too bright.
Never sit with your legs apart.
Gloves are an essential piece of clothing.
You must not only be a decent woman, you must also appear to be one as well.
After visiting someone for tea or dinner you always send a thank you card afterwards.
Read good books so you always have topics of conversation.
Smile and be gracious.
Don't walk barefoot. You'll get feet like the Indians.
Learn to be a good cook and a good housekeeper. Later you will be able to instruct your servants.
Never, never talk to servants about personal things.
Women who smoke are not ladies.
A little lipstick is fine.
A skirt too short doesn't say much about a girl.

Figure 3: *Forbidden Steps Under the Wisteria* by Beatriz Copello (1999). Example from page 72, abbreviated.

Gabriela Vaccaro's experience as a small girl introduces her to puzzling situations that she cannot understand. She learns the Ten Commandments from the nuns and each prohibition begins with a "thou shall not." Disobeying means she will go to hell. Gabriela, however, learns quickly how to disobey and climb the forbidden steps defined by her family, one by one. Her best friend, Gladys, who she is forbidden to see by both her parents because she is black, becomes the one she shares her secrets with.

At this point, it might be useful to position *Forbidden Steps* within the context of Jacques Lacan's theories on language and ideology, and knowledge and identity. Lacan breaks away from Freud by believing that there is no simple notion of either truth or self; indeed, all identity processes are based on language, which is neither fixed nor stable, but constructs both conscious and unconscious lives (see Lacan 2002 [1966]). Thus, at the beginning of the novel, Gabriela looks back on her childhood and sees the 'reality' of her first memories as a fantasy world where she is a tree, a flower, a spider, and she feels she is inseparable from nature itself. The

pronoun she uses to refer to herself is not yet the ‘I’, but the ‘we’ of the Imaginary, which refers to we-ness being part of all:

... And we grew and grew, out of nothing; we grew into a magnificent tree, an enormous tree which shaded the whole garden. There we hid among the branches, while the afternoon sun made unsuccessful attempts at kissing my forehead. We hid there for hours, no one could see us, and we played. We were a branch, a leaf, roots sucking water, sap running up and down. Although I lived intensely, I was not born yet (3).

The stage which Lacanian theory defines as the symbolic order begins when the child acquires language, whereby the (metaphorical) Father figure looms large and introduces (or rather, obliges) the child to enter the symbolic order. Patriarchal language is the Law of the Father: the language that socialises the child and places it within the rules and dictates of that society.

The next example (figure 4) is a list of ‘commandments’ or ‘forbidden steps’ relating to Jacques Lacan’s Law of the Father, the Symbolic Order. They illustrate secrets that Gabriela is asked to keep from one or another parent.

I had so many things to remember.

“Don’t tell your father we went to see my mother. He thinks she is a bad influence on me and on you too.”

“Don’t tell your mother I’ve been trying to get this lipstick stain off my collar.”

“Don’t tell your mother I spoke with that nice lady.”

“Don’t tell your father I hit you.”

“Don’t play with yourself or you’ll go blind and when you die you’ll go to hell.”

“Don’t tell your father the neighbour gave us a lift into town. Your father gets so jealous.”

“Don’t tell your father I’m saving money to pay for your dancing lessons.”

“Don’t tell your father I let you dance under the wisteria.”

“Don’t play with boys.”

“Don’t ... Don’t ... Don’t ... Don’t

Figure 4: *Forbidden Steps Under the Wisteria* by Beatriz Copello (1999). Example from page 44.

In Gabriela’s case, her mother also represents the forces of the symbolic Father as she also teaches Gabriela how to be and become a woman, forbidding her certain pleasures. It is important to understand that mother and father are not necessarily biologically woman and man. The father can ‘mother’ and the mother can ‘father’ and indeed, it is impossible to remain outside the symbolic order. The structure of society is based on, and expressed through, language. The mirror stage in Lacanian theory takes place when the child sees, and begins to recognize, itself. Gabriela walks through the garden, sees the flowers looking, smiling and nodding at her and she begins to dance and then finds that she is facing a mirror: “I looked at myself. The mirror reflected only one body, my body. I saw myself as I was ... I saw myself as Gabriela, an ancient soul in a child’s body” (34).

At school she gains a reputation of being the “eccentric—existentialist” girl (97). Her eccentricity is about leaving the circle of ‘normality’ or what was considered acceptable for a girl in those times. She breaks free from those limitations by exploring her own sexuality when she masturbates, entering forbidden territories, forbidden steps. She consistently tries to escape

the norms by crossing boundaries; her desire is to follow her own rules. She deconstructs the binary opposites of sin/desire (or forbidden/pleasure): “I touched myself where I was not supposed to touch ... and it was nice” (18). The fact that her ancestors ‘haunt’ her memory and embody her allows her to explore the intergenerational identity that will become her own.

The headings used to introduce each short section that forms the novel are of different types and purposes. Some headings are self-explanatory and openly revealing: “Indian legends by Grandfather Vaccaro” (26); “Christmas presents” (51); “A Meeting” (11). Some contain norms, instructions and prohibitions: “I was not allowed to dance or sing” (13); “Your body is not your own. It is the temple of God. Don’t play with your private parts because if you do, you will go to hell (A nun at the hospital and my mother)” (18); “Girls are not important” (16). Other subtitles are more symbolic and contain quotes or short fragments of poetry, in all cases the source is indicated: “But time, unfortunately, though it makes animals and vegetables bloom and fade with amazing punctuality, has no such simple effect upon the mind of man (From *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf)” (21); “Hay lenguas que matan (Alfonsina Stormi)”³ (10); “Teach me dear creature, how to think and speak:/Lay open to my earthy-gross conceit,/ smothered in errors, feeble, shallow, weak,/ The folded meaning of your words’ deceit. (*Arabian Nights*, Shakespeare)” (79). The variety of headings seems to be incongruous. It is almost as if Copello is experimenting with language, experimenting with writing in such a manner that it becomes labyrinthic. The titles are puzzling and do not make it easy for the reader to know what to expect in these sections.

The Transitory State of Being and Becoming: A Quest for Self

When the novel begins, Gabriela Vaccaro, the narrator and main character, has been embodied by her female ancestors, all of whom haunt her memories and become an influence in her life. The initial section describes “a new life” (3) which—rather than being a brand-new life, like the birth of a human being—is more like a re-birth, a reincarnation, a transition of one body into another. This new beginning encompasses both the arrival of a new flesh and soul into the world and the moving of somebody to a new place, a new world. Thus, each body is reincarnated into another body. The self is not an island, but connects with other selves, both alive and dead. The body becomes a ‘homeland’ of memories of bodies in transition.

There also seems to be a contradiction between the living and the unborn: “Although I lived intensely, I was not born yet” (3). There is a fluid, changing process of a constant and continuous ‘becoming someone,’ while simultaneously being a nobody or nothing, existing and non-existing at the same time, which seems to contrast with a process of expansion: “I grew out of nothing ... The being everything from nothing” (3). Either Gabriela, the narrator, embodies another being, or else another being (or ‘spirit’) has been trapped within her body and talks through her, someone or something in-between worlds: “I pretended to be a child ... But what was I doing in a child’s body? (3). When Gabriela looks at herself in the mirror, she sees only one body but with a split soul, like a double consciousness of being someone else trapped inside the body of a child: “I saw myself as Gabriela, an ancient soul in a child’s body” (34). This other being is a conscious long-living entity: “Gabriela was four, not me. I was ancient, as ancient as anyone could be. My feelings were old” (6). This is a recurrent image in the book,

³ [There are tongues that can kill]. Alfonsina Stormi was a poet born in Rosario, Copello’s home city.

the perception of the narrator, Gabriela, as someone beholding her ancestors inside, or the other way around —the ancestors being trapped inside the body of this young girl.

This being or spirit that embodies Gabriela has blurred memories of a traumatic past which includes sheer violence, the denial of human rights, a dreadful war, perhaps the Holocaust: “Faded faces of people in trains, unable to breathe. People transported like cattle. People squashed in trains. People shitting themselves. Foul smell ... and the noise of the train running on the tracks” (6). Gabriela experiences recurrent flashbacks and nightmares of war images, soldiers marching and approaching towards her, trains, screams, bodies in trenches, guns, military boots. A suffocating feeling invades her whole being, and as if the small girl had been in the war herself, the war memories of her female ancestors manifest themselves in her own body and mind. This pattern of being re-born into a new body and place is not only a cycle that Gabriela experiences within herself, but also a flash-forward in her own life, as in Copello’s life. It is an escape from a constricted and suffocating Argentina to Australia in search of a new life, a metaphorical re-birth in a distant place full of new promising opportunities, where they, both Gabriela and Copello herself, have the freedom to develop and create their own identities, if possible.

In “Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile” (1996) Marianne Hirsch coined the term ‘postmemory’ to describe the secondary, or second-generation memory of the children of Holocaust survivors in exile. Hirsch provides the following definition of postmemory:

Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by the traumatic events that can be neither fully understood nor re-created (659).

In the case of Gabriela, this postmemory is manifested in the form of actual dreams and recollections she has on account of the war memories of the female ancestors that embody her. Gabriela struggles but fails to make sense of these memories which are not hers, but they are inherited memories of the previous generations of women in her family. Even if she has not been in the war, Gabriela recreates, or re-enacts, PTSD symptoms, such as sudden uncontrollable fear, nightmares, and flashbacks.

As for her contemporary family members, Gabriela’s father is a central but nonetheless controversial figure in her life. Gabriela loves and admires him but fears and challenges his authority. The father is both controlling and repressive: “Father had forbidden me to dance under the wisteria because he did not want me to become a dancer. I did not obey, I danced forbidden steps under the wisteria” (13). As was mentioned above, he represents the Lacanian ‘Law of the Father,’ or *le nom/non du père*, both a father and a Fatherland that are as oppressive as the military regime in power in Argentina when Copello decided to go into self-exile to Australia. Notwithstanding these authoritarian features, Gabriela confesses a profound love and admiration for her father, whom she idealises deeply: “next to my daddy, my god, my idol, my super being” (5). This recalls Sylvia Plath’s controversial poem “Daddy” (1962) a poem published posthumously in the collection *Ariel* (1965) in which Plath refers to a complex relationship with her dead father whom she loved and loathed at the same time. Copello’s

poetry, like Plath's, could also be classified within the genre of confessional poetry since her writing explores her own experiences and deals with deep personal traumas. Gabriela feels trapped in the middle of her father's infidelities; he even takes her to meet some of his lovers and she lists them by name: "ANITA – MARTHA – ISABEL – JUANITA – ROSA – ELSA – CARMEN" (11). This bizarre situation puts Gabriela in an in-between family position, as she needs to hide information from her mother and keep uncomfortable secrets for the father.

Gabriela's Mother, in turn, is portrayed as deeply unhappy due to her husband's infidelities. She is also an impatient and easily irritated mother: "This child is crazy, she cries for no reason. What's wrong with you?" (5). She seems unstable and bipolar, with intense mood swings: "She went from kisses to slaps, from hugs to pushes, from caress to insults. The game was: hate/love, love/hate" (5). It is this erratic mother, however, who fosters an artistic inclination in her daughter by saving money to send Gabriela to dance lessons and letting her dance under the wisteria tree without her father's approval. The wisteria tree and flower symbolise long life and immortality, love and sensuality, and the expansion of self-consciousness. Dancing under the wisteria carries all these implications for the narrator: taking those forbidden steps was necessary to escape an unhappy childhood in such a dysfunctional family.

Digging into a Painful Past: Trauma and Resilience, Writing and Healing

Digging up one's personal history to bring alive negative memories from a traumatic past is a painful intimate process that involves a great deal of maturity and courage. As Homi Bhabha argues, "Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" (63). Hirsch refers to the act of remembering and overcoming a traumatic past event as a need "to re-member, to re-build, to re-incarnate, to replace and repair" (661).

In Copello's novel, the thin line that divides fiction from non-fiction is blurred, which implies that bringing back memories from the life she had in Argentina and writing about these memories involves not only a painful personal experience, but also the complexities of her own self. Copello reflects on this process of remembering in the novel when she writes:

It is hard to delve into the past. Memories fade, lose colour, vivacity. Memories are like flowers placed inside a book to dry. They retain their shape but slowly, gradually, they turn pale and their freshness, their vigour goes away forever. So many years have passed. How difficult it is to bring back to life those faded memories, to bring back the dead (54).

One of the most traumatic events that Gabriela experiences was having been sexually molested at a young age. Gabriela's relatives on her father's side, the Vaccaros, were a rich conservative upper-class family. Gabriela's grandfather owned a family house by a lake called Melincue, which was a four-hour drive from where Gabriela lived, in the city of Rosario. This summer house was "not just any house, it was a mansion" (23) with 3 storeys, 36 rooms, an engine room, a workshop and the boatsheds. Every summer she spent her holidays there with her extended family. It was a place she loved, as she enjoyed all the fun activities, such as playing around with her cousins, swimming, boat rides, having meals with her uncles and aunts, walks by the lake, and her grandfather's late-night stories about the house and the original inhabitants

of the Pampas. All this happiness was ruined one year when she became the victim of a sexual abuse.

One summer, Gabriela's father invited a friend and his family to spend a few days in this family vacation resort. This man, Colonel Martin, was a member of the Argentinian army. Right after his arrival, Gabriela realised he treated her in a different manner, asking her questions she did not fully comprehend, such as "Do you let the boys touch your pussy? Would you like me to kiss you in your pinkie?" (24). Gabriela started feeling uneasy in his presence. He followed her around, entering the toilet after her and showing himself partially naked in front of her while "holding his thing in his hand" (24.). Gabriela felt more and more frightened by his constant chasing but was also ashamed of the whole situation so she decided not to confess what was going on: "I was embarrassed to tell my mother, but I also was frightened that she would not believe me and would say that I had invented stories" (24). One day, the Colonel seized the chance to be alone with Gabriela in an upstairs bedroom away from the main crowd. The narrator describes what happened next with the following words: "He started to rub my forbidden parts with one of his fingers ... with the other hand he rubbed himself ... he was stroking his penis faster and faster until a disgustingly smelly substance came out of his thing. His final moaning and the ejection of a gooey liquid made me realise that he had what he wanted" (25). During the act, Gabriela was unable to fight back. Even if she sensed something was wrong, she felt "immobilised by terror as well as curiosity ... Mute and paralysed I didn't utter a sound" (25). Right after the abuse, Gabriela ran downstairs naked, feeling dizzy and sick. She fell ill with a temperature for a few days and since she was bed-ridden, she managed to avoid the Colonel's harassment. Once he and his family had gone, she pulled herself together. On his departure, the Colonel left a doll for Gabriela, which she buried in the sand, a highly symbolic act that stands for the loss of her innocence.

Copello does not dwell too much on the painful episode of Gabriela's sexual abuse although it is clearly traumatic for the child: she becomes ill, and she buries her doll. According to Finkelhor and Browne's analysis of the impact of sexual abuse on children, there are four trauma-causing factors: "traumatic sexualization, betrayal, powerlessness, and stigmatization" (531). The authors emphasize that these are to be understood as broad categories. Gabriela is powerless when her body is invaded in exchange for a gift and the prohibition of confiding in her father. No one seemed to understand the ordeal she was going through, neither her family nor the so-called spirits of her female ancestors. She was physically and emotionally unattended. The fact that the abuser is a Colonel transforms the personal pain into political horror. His social status can be understood as a metaphor for the physical and social abuse during the dictatorship in Argentina: a country governed by fascist dictators who practiced state terrorism and systematically violated the human rights of political activists who opposed them.

Thus Copello's ficto-memoir can also be approached as a work of traumatic recovery and personal "scriptotherapy," a term coined by Suzzette Henke in *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life Writing* (1998). Scriptotherapy refers to the therapeutic treatment in which writing is used as an instrument in the process of healing—the re-enactment of the traumatic memories on paper provides a valuable discursive space for overcoming psychological wounds. The benefits of writing to overcome traumatic experiences have been described as a process of "active coping" with trauma (Harber and Pennebaker 372). Writing,

by concentrating on the structural rules of grammar, both restricts and channels the emotional flow, thereby transforming the victim of the narrative into the author whose task is to render the events in a comprehensible manner. Moreover, sharing or publishing memoirs, even fictional memoirs as in Copello's case, may become an important factor in alleviating personal suffering, as the recovery process may then be considered within the context of rebuilding personal, social and/or political relationships. As suggested by Judith Herman (1997), this is a process that joins victim and witness into a common alliance.

The difficulty of remembering and expressing traumatic experiences in writing has been discussed by many therapists and trauma critics. To be true to oneself in writing comes through facing the pain and being able to put it into words. Dominick LaCapra and Cathy Caruth, among other trauma theorists, have argued that major traumas are unrepresentable because they disrupt the process of memory and consciousness. Nevertheless, the trauma may emerge "in the form of flashbacks, repetitive phenomena, and traumatic nightmares" (Masterson et al. 1). In overcoming these obstacles, the therapeutic values of writing—in the case of Copello—are significant. Scholars have highlighted the pivotal role of discourse when it comes to the development of resilience to overcome a traumatic life event or experience (see Ungar and Liebenberg; Cyrulnik). The reconstruction and recreation of these events and memories through a narrative text allows the individual to understand and eventually overcome the negative experience. Copello writes: "It is very therapeutic because once you put your thoughts, your pain or your anger on paper, it's no longer inside yourself. You objectify it, you've got it out in front of your eyes" (*The Writing* 70). However, even if she acknowledges the cathartic experiences of writing, she claims that: "I don't write to cure myself, I write to entertain mainly" (*The Writing* 70).

It may be concluded that Copello depicts her native land as a place of censorship and prejudice, a place of violence and a child's sexual abuse which seems to pass unnoticed by the adults. In her writing, Copello repeatedly transmits a feeling of displacement, of not-belonging, of being different at home, abandoned by family, ignored by friends, and bullied at school. The childhood of Gabriela/Copello was ruled by patriarchal norms of conduct, it *hurt* being a woman in such a society. Being away from that hostile environment allowed Copello the possibility of reaching a multitude of inner voices in a space free of restrictions of gender, class, nationality and ethnicity. A space which becomes an exchange with ancestral voices in the transition of being and belonging. Exile has granted Copello an access to creative production and her artistic expression through writing. Likewise, by choosing her own destiny, Gabriela unties the bond that unites her with her female ancestors who dwell inside herself, thus overcoming the traumatic war memories of these ancestors and the traumas of her own childhood. By closely mirroring her childhood memories and her growing up in Argentina, Copello's semi-autobiographical fiction becomes self-reflective and therapeutic. The social and cultural constraints that Copello has experienced in her condition of an immigrant has to do, mainly, with a certain tension about the language of her artistic production. Even when this is not to be observed in the novel discussed in this article, Copello frequently declares that she has been questioned about using English, rather than her native Spanish, to express herself in writing. Copello's use of her adopted language allows her to gain some distance from and control over a very emotional description of her own intimate past experiences and thus she is able to acquire a more critical insight into the exploration of her 'Self.' The fact that Copello decides to record her own personal self in her narrative may provide her with a therapeutic drive

as a way of overcoming her childhood traumas: writing becomes a form of resilience and healing.

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