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**TITLE:** Dancing through Trauma in Pedro Almodóvar's *Volver*

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay examines Pedro Almodóvar's *Volver* in light of present-day memory politics in Spain, positing the film to advocate affective confrontations with the past in contrast to Spain's limited transitional justice politics and 2007 *Ley de Memoria Histórica*. The protagonist's cathartic *cante jondo* gives language to fourteen years of silenced pain and trauma and sets into motion a healing materialization of specters. These dance-like acts of embodiment restore originary mother-daughter relationships and—in accordance with Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*—participate in making the world. However, questions arise regarding the sustainability of the film's graceful, fluid, and complete forms of restitution, particularly when we take into account the returns of rape and patriarchal violence in Almodóvar's later films. Ultimately, *Volver's* unsilencing of the past is argued not to bring an end to its violence and trauma, but to be one step in the long-term, disruption-full work of bearing witness to cultural trauma.

**KEYWORDS:** Pedro Almodóvar, *Volver*, Trauma, Historical Memory, *Historical Memory Law*, Flamenco, Franco

**RESUMEN:** Este artículo analiza la relación entre la película *Volver* de Pedro Almodóvar y la limitada *Ley de Memoria Histórica* española, arguyendo que *Volver* aboga por una rehabilitación afectiva de los traumas del pasado. El cante hondo catártico de la protagonista da voz a catorce años de dolor y trauma silenciados y también pone en marcha una materialización curativa de espectros. Estos procesos íntimos de encarnación poseen un carácter danzante que se encarga de restaurar relaciones originarias entre madres e hijas, participando así—según Elaine Scarry—en la creación del mundo. Sin embargo, surgen preguntas sobre la sostenibilidad de las formas gráciles, fluidas y completas de restitución de *Volver*, especialmente cuando tomamos en cuenta los regresos de violaciones y violencia patriarcal en películas almodóvarianas posteriores. Al final, el ensayo arguye que, en *Volver*, los enfrentamientos con el pasado no resuelven su violencia ni su trauma, pero sí son un paso en el largo y difícil trabajo de dar testimonio al trauma cultural.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Pedro Almodóvar, *Volver*, trauma, memoria histórica, *Ley de Memoria Histórica*, flamenco, Franco

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## Dancing through Trauma in Pedro Almodóvar's *Volver*

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In a talk Pedro Almodóvar gave at the British Film Institute in January 2015, the director reflected upon what he considered his films' lack of engagement with Spain's recent past of civil war and Francisco Franco's dictatorship. Almodóvar explained that his films have heretofore been representative of the democratic era in which he grew up, resulting in an absence of references to Francoism, much in line with the director's often-cited desire to create his films—particularly earlier ones emblematic of the 1980s *movida madrileña*—“como si Franco no hubiera existido” (Strauss 31). However, Almodóvar went on to communicate that his feelings towards representing this part of Spain's past with his cinema have shifted significantly, resulting in his becoming more and more “preocupado con la memoria histórica, con esa parte del Franquismo que no ha desaparecido de la vida y sociedad españolas,” even leading him to desire to create a film related to “los ciento y pico mil asesinados que todavía permanecen donde fueron enterrados, en cualquier zanja” (qtd. in Gómez).

The emotive anger with which Almodóvar was reported to speak of the still-missing remains of thousands of individuals buried in mass graves is in keeping with several related statements the director has made in recent years in which he has expressed deep sympathy for victims' families and strongly criticized the government for its lack of assistance in helping these families locate bodily remains and seek justice. Almodóvar's concerns with missing bodies and this traumatic past are particularly evident in his participation in “Cultura contra la impunidad” (2010), a fifteen-minute documentary in which famous actors and artists interpret the role of victims of the Spanish Civil War or Franco's

regime. These victims' family members have demanded justice for those they have lost and are still waiting for answers. The one-minute long stories, narrated in the first person, begin with Almodóvar's interpretation of Virgilio Leret Ruiz, the pilot known as the first officer to be killed in the Spanish Civil War when he refused to join his unit in turning on the Republic in support of Franco. The documentary was presented in Madrid by the Asociación para la Recuperación de Memoria Histórica (ARMH), an NGO founded in 2000 to assist families in finding the remains of their loved ones and the organization that first brought significant political attention to the need for the location, exhumation, and dignified burials of the victims of Spain's recent past.

Despite Almodóvar's claims that his concerns with historical memory are recent, this article contends that his films are already involved in recuperating Spain's recent past and helping victims work through cultural trauma, a concept which is understood here as what

occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. (Alexander I)<sup>1</sup>

However, the memory work of these films differs from the type of film Almodóvar has recently proposed in that they represent the Francoist past in a more symbolic fashion. Rather than speak directly to issues of justice and restoration, these films engage in a

suggestive illustration of the past, which approximates what Jo Labanyi has described as an “aesthetics of haunting” in which specters from a past with “unfinished business” remain in the present, stressing “the legacy of the past to the present: a legacy which—as in most ghost stories—is one of injustice requiring reparation” (113).

The temporal location of Almodóvar’s films in the democratic present, then, does not preclude the persistence of specters from the Francoist past. This is particularly true in the director’s 2006 *Volver*, in which, in accordance with Jacques Derrida’s articulation of spectrality, the film’s characters “live *with* ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship” of ghosts, or “*others* who are not present, nor presently living, either to us, in us, or outside us” (xviii). *Volver* is in fact full of disembodied, spectral presences that linger, reminding characters of painful pasts and indicating the need for restoration and proper burials. Among these presences is mother and grandmother Irene (Carmen Maura), presumed to have died in a fire nearly four years prior to the film’s present, whose re-appearance is initially assumed to be phantasmatic until eventually being understood as fully corporal. A second such presence is the husband of protagonist Raimunda (Penélope Cruz), Paco (Antonio de la Torre), who spends much of the film as a corpse in a deep freezer after being killed by his daughter Paula (Yohana Cobo), who defends herself from his attempts to rape her.

Drawing on Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*, this article argues that *Volver*’s disembodied specters originate from an act of violence that caused nearly unspeakable bodily pain: Raimunda’s rape by her father fourteen years prior, which resulted in the birth of her daughter, Paula. This act of violence severed Raimunda’s originary relationship with her mother, whose obliviousness to Raimunda’s pain “unmade” their relationship, following Scarry’s argument that intense pain “destroys a person’s self and world” (35). In keeping with Cathy Caruth’s work, the trauma Raimunda experiences from this violence is not

a simple and healable event, but rather an event [...] not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (4)

It is a devastation that resists “simple comprehension” and haunts the victim with “not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way its violence has not yet been fully known” (Caruth 6). However, through her vocal performance of “*Volver*” midway through the film, Raimunda begins to find language with which to unsilence and share this past. This “rebirth of language” gives expression to that which had been unspeakable, thereby setting into motion healing acts of “materialization, or the embodying” of spectral presences (Scarry 172, 276). By transforming those painfully missing into physically present bodies and interring the haunting specters of patriarchal violence in order to protect future generations, these acts initiate the restoration of originary relationships, thereby “making the world” in a way that echoes Almodóvar’s concerns with Spain’s pained and missing bodies (Scarry 23).

This article proposes that *Volver*’s sustained emphasis on these acts of embodiment can be imagined as a cathartic dance that accompanies Raimunda’s *cante jondo* of “*Volver*.” To be clear, there is no literal dancer or flamenco dancing in this scene or in the film; but, as I will demonstrate, *Volver*’s graceful handling of bodies and specters helps characters confront past violence, find justice, offer dignified burials, and repair broken relationships. The healing brought about by these embodiment processes approximates the catharsis found in *baile jondo* in which “body and earth are joined,” with the dancer experiencing deep rootedness (Claus 95). However, while proper burials and the materialization of specters within *Volver* approximate *baile jondo*’s catharsis, they also maintain an uplifting, gravity-defying form, rather than the intense, abrupt, and downward-oriented movements

of *baile jondo*. Likewise, the gentleness with which the film treats stories of rape, murder, and shattered relationships does not align with trauma theorists' articulations of the discontinuities, disruptions, and difficulties that are inevitable in processes of recovery. Additionally, *Volver* does not rely on the incoherent fragmentation Janet Walker describes as characteristic of trauma cinema.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, I argue, a more characteristic form of *baile jondo* in which body and earth unite can be encountered across the series of Almodóvar's films that includes *Volver* and the films that follow, which more fully demonstrate long-term, nonlinear processes of dealing with patriarchal violence and trauma. The long-term commitment of these films to giving creative expression to nearly unspeakable pain and comprehension-resisting trauma thus contributes to achieving the catharsis found in *baile jondo* when the body joins the earth, enabling a painful past to be interred once and for all.

The journey from trauma to embodiment happens most explicitly on a personal level for Raimunda, but it is also a collective experience, not only for the other characters within the film impacted by the embodiment of specters, but also for the film's national (and transnational, as will later be explored) audience. As Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla's recent book argues, *Volver* can be understood to uncover

individual and shared traumatic memories and experiences in a suggestive and oblique manner, which forces the spectator to establish connections between the text and the national context. (*Aesthetics, Ethics and Trauma* 46)

Following this and taking into account Almodóvar's aforementioned desire to create therapeutic cinema for all affected by what he has termed "el holocausto franquista," we can interpret the past rape of protagonist Raimunda by her father, her silent survival, and the

attempted repetition of this unpunished crime in the present to function as an allegory of the persisting trauma of Spain's Francoist past (qtd. in Harguindey). This trauma endures in the present following the 1977 *Ley de amnistía* and broader societal *pacto del silencio*, or political "institutionalized oblivion"—part of what Cristina Moreiras Menor describes as a broader cultural process of *desmemoria*—which have prohibited transitional justice politics, standing in stark contrast to the democratic transitions in much of Latin America and parts of Africa, Asia, and Europe (Resina, "The Weight of Memory" 226).<sup>3</sup>

With its moving embodiment that unsilences a traumatic past, *Volver* artistically participates in the prevalent and intense debates taking place during the film's production regarding the *Ley de Memoria Histórica* and "recuperation of historical memory."<sup>4</sup> This giving language and expression to trauma in order to restore and remake that which has been destroyed calls global audiences to engage in an "ethics of listening and seeing" in which "spectators become conscious of our position of responsibility. We bear witness to the others' experiences via the cinematic medium" (Gutiérrez-Albilla, *Aesthetics, Ethics and Trauma* 29). This act of witnessing furthermore has the potential to provide a sense of not-aloneness not only for those giving testimony, but also for spectators who identify with Raimunda's traumatic experiences, sensing that they too "are not alone any longer" (Laub 91-92). In viewing *Volver*, these spectators may discover

the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound,

which might indeed contribute to the re-making of the world (Caruth 8).

## Seeking *baile jondo*

The importance of a proper, dignified burial is identified within *Volver's* very first scene in which women dutifully care for the tombstones of those they have lost in dance-like rhythm to the upbeat tune of the zarzuela "La rosa del azafrán" and the moving presence of the Solano wind. The many fresh flowers placed on the grave markers and the attention to detail in cleaning the tombstones, even fervently polishing the engraved letters despite the continual blowing up of dust, suggest the essential nature of burial sites and acts of honoring those who have passed. This sentiment is furthered by Agustina (Blanca Portillo), the childhood friend of Raimunda and her sister Sole (Lola Dueñas), who is at the cemetery to care for her own eventual resting place. Agustina talks of how she finds great peace in spending hours by her future grave, to the initial discomfort of teenager Paula. Paula has grown up in Madrid, geographically near—but culturally worlds apart from—the Manchegan village of origin of her mother and aunt, where Agustina still lives and this scene takes place. As they leave, Raimunda explains to a puzzled Paula this rural tradition of caring for one's grave before passing as if it were a home. From this assertion we might surmise that not burying bodies in an intimate and affective manner is to leave the spirits homeless, wandering spectral presences like the ones we will soon encounter within the film. In light of Scarry's work, these wandering spirits whose materiality has yet to be discovered can be considered materially unrepresented, thus having "no limits" with respect to their "extension out into the world" (207). The resulting omnipresence of missing bodies and disembodied specters creates a deep sense of unrest to which *Volver* gives artistic expression and ultimately begins the process of restoring.

This journey toward healing is most palpably experienced midway through the film during Raimunda's performance of the tango-flamenco "Volver." Immediately

preceding this scene, Raimunda admits to Paula that Paco was not in fact her biological father and promises to tell her one day who her father was, beginning to un-silence her past and Paula's origin story for the first time. This act of bearing witness continues to unfold in Raimunda's vocal performance at the party she hosts for a film crew. The strumming of the guitars by the band prompts Raimunda to begin reciting the song her mother once taught her to sing for children's singing competitions. Sole and Raimunda reminisce about those recitals, and Paula interjects that she has never once heard her mother sing. Raimunda's look of astonishment and regret as she hears her daughter say this indicates the weight of this silenced part of Raimunda's past, prompting her to perform the song with the band.

This performance's advocacy of giving voice to long-repressed trauma is clearly signaled by Raimunda's opening remark regarding the "mucho tiempo" during which she has not sung, a period demarcated by the painful estrangement between Raimunda and her mother. In the years that have followed her rape, Raimunda has not spoken of her traumatic experiences, which points to bodily pain's "ability to destroy language, the power of verbal objectification, a major source of our self-extension, a vehicle through which the pain could be lifted out into the world" (Scarry 54). However, Raimunda begins to recognize the importance of breaking this silence following the re-occurrence of paternal violence within her own family, which threatens to continue destroying ordinary mother-daughter relationships and unmaking the world. Through her commanding performance of "Volver," Raimunda finds language with which to express this past, beginning to materialize her experience into something containable. In this way, Raimunda's performance can be considered an act of giving testimony in which the protagonist repossesses her life story and "continue[s] and complete[s] the process of survival after liberation," enabling that which "could not

be articulated” previously to “be told, to be transmitted, to be heard,” no longer allowing the tyranny of this untold experience to perpetuate itself by living outside the material world (Laub 85).

At the same time, this performance marks a return to Raimunda’s childhood performances of the song and her since-severed originary relationship with her mother. This return is affectively represented in the shot-reverse-shot sequence in which a tearful Irene watches Raimunda perform while hidden in a car and Raimunda longingly gazes in Irene’s direction. The powerfulness of Irene’s presence for Raimunda in this moment is highlighted as Irene ducks behind the car window in fear that her daughter has spotted her. Irene still remains a disembodied specter for Raimunda until several scenes later, but her presence is experienced profoundly by Raimunda for whom a tearful, bodily form of healing starts to take shape. Irene’s witnessing of Raimunda’s giving language to her experience is a form of being present for the moment in which “the person in pain rediscovers speech and so regains [her] powers of self-objectification [...] to be present at the birth, or rebirth of language” (Scarry 172). This rebirth of language which Irene witnesses serves as a catalyst for the rebirth of Raimunda and Irene’s originary relationship and sets into motion a dance of embodiment that this article will now explore before returning to further analysis of the aesthetics of “Volver.”

Though it is Raimunda’s performance of “Volver” that most forcefully sets into motion the materializing of wandering spectral presences, the need for engaging these spirits is established early on in *Volver*, beginning with the aforementioned gusty Solano in the film’s opening scene in the cemetery. This active recognition of “a tension between the past and the present, between the dead and the living” continues into the next scene in which Raimunda and Sole take Paula to their aunt’s home (Eng and Kazanjian 1). Unbeknownst to all but the aging Aunt Paula (Chus Lampreave)—whose

cognitive skills have begun to fail her, making her stories unreliable—Irene is still alive. She has been living in Aunt Paula’s home for the last four years, taking care of her dying sister while hiding from others so as not to reveal a grave crime she committed. Though Irene is careful to conceal her physical presence from others, traces of her existence cannot be completely erased. Several people in the village report sightings of her, believing to have seen her ghost, and, while in Aunt Paula’s home, Raimunda and Sole cannot escape the strong sense of their mother’s presence, particularly the smell of her farts, which the two daughters fondly remember. Perceiving these traces of Irene, the two daughters imagine their mother’s presence in a way that precedes the process of embodiment by which Irene’s profound absence will materialize into a bodily presence for her daughters.

This stirring of specters—part of the film’s dance of embodiment—continues from here, representing the film’s call for restoration and a future not characterized by cycles of incestuous violence. No guilt or wrongdoing is associated with the murder of Paco, who would have raped Paula if she had not stopped him, nor with Irene’s murder of her husband, which takes place as soon as she learns of the horrible crimes he committed against Raimunda, many years after the fact. Irene’s “feminist justice that human courts of law still fall short of actualizing” in setting fire to the home where her husband lay with his lover goes beyond the law not only in punishing rape, but in rehabilitating the present so that Raimunda might know a future no longer characterized by paternal violence (Pérez Melgosa 222). Likewise, the murder of Paco not only protects Paula from suffering rape, but also prevents cycles of violence from continuing, altogether eradicating “bad spectres of masculinity” associated with Francoism and gender violence more broadly (Allbritton 61).

While it is Paula and not her mother who physically ends cycles of sexual violence, Raimunda immediately assumes responsibility for Paco’s body and murder. In addition

to the maternal love and protection implied by Raimunda's taking "full responsibility for the crime" (Kinder 5), this appropriation of culpability allows her to imagine avenging and putting an end to the abuse she suffered, seizing the act "from her daughter as a way of grappling with her own father's abuse of her" (Restuccia 135). Whereas Spain's 1977 *Ley de amnistía* and 2007 *Ley de Memoria Histórica* refused to name the past's perpetrators, much less pursue punishment for their crimes, *Volver* imagines forms of restitution in which victims might envision enacting bodily justice. Nonetheless, Raimunda's careful treatment of Paco's body that is eventually buried by the Júcar river—his favorite resting place—and the interring of Raimunda's father's ashes in the village cemetery indicate that this elimination of abusive fathers is not to be carried out with raging revenge that might simply reverse "the roles of perpetrator and victim, continuing to imprison the victim in horror, degradation, and the bounds of the perpetrator's violence" (Minow 13). What seems to be advocated, instead, is a graceful endeavor "to repair the injustice, to make up for it, and to effect corrective changes in the record, in relationships, and in future behavior," in line with Martha Minow's articulation of restorative justice (91).

Put slightly differently, the burying of Paco's body, which immediately follows Raimunda's performance of "Volver" and unsilencing of her past, can be considered an act of embodiment. In accordance with Scarry's work, this act deprives the external and spectral world "of the privilege of being inanimate [...] its privilege of being irresponsible to its sentient inhabitants" (285). After cycles of patriarchal violence have been ended by Paula's just act, moving Paco's corpse from the restaurant's deep freezer to a proper burial site transforms the spectral omnipresence that radiates from the constantly humming freezing—a continual reminder to Raimunda and Paula of the bodily pain and trauma they have suffered—to a "sphere of extension contracted down to the small circle of one's immediate

physical presence," in this case, many meters underground and many kilometers from home (207).

While justice and the eradication of patriarchal violence within *Volver* depend upon laying to rest the bodies of Raimunda's father and Paco, healing involves the search for the bodies of painfully missing mothers. Specifically within the film, these are Agustina's mother, who disappeared nearly four years ago, and Irene, whom all assumed to have died with her husband in the fire that the Solano wind swept through their home, two mothers whose fates we eventually learn are closely intertwined. Despite Agustina's bodily pain due to her battle with cancer and "inevitable transformation of life into death," she does not cease searching for her mother who disappeared the same day of the fire that burned down Raimunda's parents' home (Marsh 340). It is not until *Volver's* end that the spectator learns along with Raimunda what Agustina already suspected: that her mother and Raimunda's father were involved in an affair, and Irene started the fire that killed the two lovers.

Agustina's pained uncertainty regarding her absent, disembodied mother points to a longing for her originary relationship, which has been unmade as a consequence of patriarchal violence. This is presented early in the film when Agustina remarks that she hopes someone somewhere is taking care of her missing mother the same way that she looks after the aging Aunt Paula, followed by her kissing of the photo of her mother that hangs on the wall. The photo of Agustina's young "hippie" mother holding her infant daughter and her fashion-forward jewelry Agustina has kept serve as tangible traces of a mother whose corporal presence we will not encounter. The photo and personal artifacts call to mind the many memorials across the globe that similarly remember those disappeared with photographs and personal details, such as the many former torture-centers-turned-memory-spaces in Argentina, invoking a transnational phenomenon of disappeared

bodies. The remains of these omnipresent specters lie in unknown locations, and justice has yet to be found for them and their pained family members, despite what Kathryn Sikkink has described as an international “justice cascade.”

Agustina’s resistance to report her mother’s disappearance to the police—what Raimunda and Sole tell her is the protocol for such a situation—denotes her mistrust of Spanish institutional authorities. This outright refutation of the police’s capabilities, particularly in light of the desperate and disastrous appearance Agustina makes on her sister’s sensationalist talk show, suggests a deep criticism of how state institutions have thus far handled searches for missing bodies, speaking directly to ongoing debates within Spain about the then forthcoming *Ley de Memoria Histórica*. In this negation of the state’s effectiveness, a desire for a more intimate approach in accordance with the film’s emphasis on female solidarity is demonstrated, for, as Agustina says, “los trapos sucios los tenemos que lavar entre nosotras.”

Agustina will not have the opportunity to reunite with her mother in the flesh, but she will be cared for in her final days by another maternal presence, that of Irene, who will atone for the unintentional victim of the fire she set. Agustina’s pained, overwhelmed, and cancer-ridden body finds relief upon Irene’s appearance in her home, which Agustina says she has long awaited. This arrival in *Volver*’s closing scene is accompanied by the same Solano gale that stirred in the cemetery at the beginning of the film, which we might interpret as Agustina’s mother’s disembodied presence accompanying Irene in tending to Agustina in these last days of life. Further acknowledgement of the need for proper burials is made as Agustina comments to Irene, who tucks Agustina in bed while administering her injections, that it was in this very same bed that she was born, that her mother used to sleep, and that Aunt Paula rested during her wake. Corporal birth, life, and death have all been experienced in this intimate

space, making it the ideal place for Agustina’s pained body to find its final rest with the resolution she has longed for regarding her mother’s whereabouts. This healing knowledge allows Agustina’s mother’s restless spirit, which has stirred great anxiety within Agustina, to materialize into physical remains resting peacefully in the cemetery where Agustina’s well-cared-for home awaits her.

Irene’s process of embodiment begins with the previously mentioned sensory traces in Aunt Paula’s home, is followed by rumors from women in the village who believe to have seen her ghost, and culminates in her in-flesh appearance to her daughters, granddaughter, and Agustina. This transformation brings healing to many: Irene cares for Aunt Paula’s every need in her final days and takes care of all funeral arrangements; she assists Agustina in dying peacefully, accompanying her in this final chapter as Agustina’s mother might have done; and, most significantly for this essay’s purposes, she helps Raimunda begin to heal from the pain and trauma of being raped by her father and distanced from her painfully oblivious mother. When Raimunda first encounters her mother’s corporal presence hidden under Sole’s bed, she runs away, overwhelmed with pain, but—following Paula’s prompting—she returns. Raimunda and Irene tenderly walk arm-in-arm and then sit side-by-side on a park bench while the camera moves back and forth with close-ups of the two women’s faces. Irene expresses her deep regret regarding how blind she was to what happened in her own home, narrating Raimunda’s story of rape, impregnation, and devastating estrangement from her family. While Raimunda listens, tears stream down her face, as she finally receives what she has desired for years: the recognition of her trauma. Through Irene’s confession and the remaking of her and Raimunda’s relationship, represented cinematically as the camera zooms out to show Raimunda’s laying in her mother’s lap as a child might do, we are invited to witness how “the repeated failure to have seen in time [...] can be transformed

into the imperative of a speaking that awakens others" (Caruth 91).

*Volver* concludes with a moving embrace between mother and daughter after Raimunda runs to Agustina's house in search of her mother. Raimunda tearfully tells her mother she does not know how she has lived the past fourteen years without her, and Irene tells her to stop so as not to make her cry, for ghosts cannot cry. A healing Raimunda leaves Agustina's home, comforted by the promise of a restored relationship with her mother, and Irene heads towards the stairs, wiping with a handkerchief the tears of a ghost-turned-human.

## Rebirthing flamenco

This article now returns to Raimunda's performance of "Volver," which I have argued serves as a catalyst for *Volver's* intimate, graceful movement of bodies and spirits; that is, the interring of Paco's haunting corpse and phantoms of patriarchal violence, the resolution Agustina receives regarding her mother's bodily remains, Agustina's joining of her mother in her tenderly cared for new home, and Irene's transformation from a painfully missing specter into a fully corporal mother. In this performance of "Volver," the aesthetics with which Raimunda cathartically brings her trauma center stage are complemented by the song's lyrics, which tell of a painful and intentionally-silenced past that forcefully returns and must be confronted. In this way, the song acts as an auditory echoing of the film's central narrative.

Furthermore, the need for rehabilitating a painful past is embodied by the form of "Volver," a new hybridized flamenco version of Argentinian Carlos Gardel's 1935 tango with which artist Estrella Morente (the voice behind Raimunda's lip-synching) subsequently erupted onto Spanish stages. Flamenco, a genre quintessential to the folkloric and monolithic image of Spain that Franco's regime sought to fossilize nationally and export internationally, is employed in this pivotal moment

in the film, but not in a manner that invokes a nostalgic return to this period. Rather, the form of "Volver" suggests a need for rebirthing that which was appropriated and violated by Francoism, in accordance with Gutiérrez-Albilla's argument that a recuperation of "traditional stereotypes of Spanish culture [...] so as to disassociate or rescue them from their ideologically reactionary connotations" is common to Almodóvar's cinema ("Returning" 330-31).<sup>5</sup> Raimunda and the band's raw performance of "Volver" does not resemble the "carefully cultivated, cosmetically retouched, and strategically orchestrated" form of *nacional flamenquismo* promoted under Franco; rather, it is a cathartic narration of a painful past that more closely approximates the *cante jondo* form of flamenco (Washbaugh 60). *Cante jondo*, one of the deepest and most serious forms of flamenco, was equated by the poet Federico García Lorca "with ancient Greek tragedy in seriousness, intensity, and in its cathartic release of tension" (Handley 51). It was also prohibited in Francoist Spain for the political threats it posed in elevating regional politics and Andalucía's racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity. Raimunda's deep, healing song might be argued, then, to recuperate modes of flamenco and historical memory that predate Franco in favor of fuller forms of expression.

"Volver" not only recuperates the cathartic *cante jondo* tradition, but also rehabilitates the appropriated style of flamenco produced by Francoism by finding a new form of expression in converting Gardel's tango into a flamenco. This fusion of tango and flamenco that emotively break years of silence shares parallels with the combination of *cante jondo* and the blues in the performance of "Saeta" in Almodóvar's *La flor de mi secreto*, which José Colmeiro argues demonstrates that "del dolor y del sufrimiento puede salir en forma catártica algo nuevo y regenerador" (123). This regenerative form of flamenco is furthermore one with transnational connections, as Marvin D'Lugo has examined, pointing to the intended international audience of Gardel's

original version, which famously appeared in the 1935 film *El día que me quieras*, “designed to circulate internationally [...] able to affirm the emotional bonds uniting a diasporic Hispanic community,” leading the adapted version found in *Volver* to promote

in its listeners and performers identification with the motif of personal displacement and migration, most recently updated in the narratives of political and economic exile in both Spanish and Latin American cinemas. (416)<sup>6</sup>

The transatlantic connections invoked by this song are most particularly Argentinian-Spanish ones, a linking not uncommon to other Almodóvarian films, as Juan Carlos Ibañez has examined. In his analysis of *Todo sobre mi madre*, Ibañez demonstrates that Almodóvar had first-hand experience with the impact of Argentinean actors from leftist Peronist theater groups exiled in Spain and suggests that Argentine Cecilia Roth’s role in *Todo sobre mi madre* invokes “the shadow of the traumatic Argentine political and social experience” (165). Following Ibañez’s line of argument and this essay’s consideration of *Volver* within the context of Spain’s memory debates, I would like to propose that the tango origins of “Volver” also call to mind parallel processes of Argentinean transitional justice politics. As in Spain, the thousands of bodies buried in mass graves and undisclosed locations during Argentina’s last dictatorship are still being unearthed today. Though, in contrast to Spain’s *pacto del silencio*, Argentina’s transition to democracy was accompanied by the appointment of a truth commission and the annulment of the military’s amnesty law within newly elected President Raúl Alfonsín’s first week in office. The transitional justice progress made by Alfonsín was furthered through the administrations of Presidents Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2015), with hundreds of the dictatorship’s perpetrators

prosecuted and political and financial support offered to human rights organizations and public memorial sites. Raimunda’s performance of this reworking of Gardel’s “Volver” might thereby be considered to imagine a much more extensive model for Spain’s recuperation of historical memory than that proposed by the *Ley de Memoria Histórica*.<sup>7</sup>

The transnational and transgenerational roots of “Volver” thus suggest the need for more collective and inclusive approaches to dealing with issues that impact global, connected communities, including the recuperation of historical memory, presented by the performance of “Volver” as a collective and affective “physical experience” (Gutiérrez-Albilla, *Aesthetics, Ethics, and Trauma* 43). While “purist” forms of flamenco might be soloistic in nature, expressing “an individual’s innermost feelings and inner intensity,” the experience itself does not remain individualistic (Claus 94). Raimunda’s performance of “Volver” moves Irene to tears, captivates her on-screen audience, and is often commented upon by film reviewers as central to the film. For Gutiérrez-Albilla, this contributes to an intimate and interpretive encounter for the viewer with Almodóvar’s cinema that “foregrounds the potential transformation of our ethical and political relation to personal and historical traumatic experiences” (*Aesthetics, Ethics and Trauma* 175).

Furthermore, this emotive performance can be argued to contribute to the remaking of the world in its cathartic conversion of unspeakable bodily pain into a filmic language that expresses, embodies, and bears witness to trauma that is intensely personal and simultaneously collective. As Alexander writes, cultural trauma is best understood not as a group experiencing pain, but “the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity” that can eventually allow collectivities “to define new forms of moral responsibility and to redirect the course of political action” (10, 27). With the aforementioned memory debates taking place in Spain, particularly regarding

the unearthing of mass graves, we can indeed see Spain's violent Francoist past contributing to a sense of cultural trauma and collective identity in the present. Almodóvar's strong statements about the importance of the work of the ARMH point to his desire for these new "forms of moral responsibility," and this article argues that acts of creating, materializing, and embodying within *Volver* contribute to this work.

### Finding *baile jondo*

For Gutiérrez-Albilla, this proposed future within *Volver* in which a "feminine ethics of embodied care" is embraced "may be considered a utopian goal, [but] it is, perhaps, a necessary one" ("Returning" 336). However, I would like to suggest that this graceful, curative utopia results rather suddenly in *Volver*. The attempted rape of Paula and her subsequent murder of her father in self-defense, as well as Raimunda's history of abuse and estrangement from her mother, are worked through relatively seamlessly without any trace of the fragmentation, nonsynchronous sound, jerky footage, or unusual angles Walker describes as characteristic of trauma cinema. Nor does *Volver*'s linear narration of the process from confrontation of trauma to healing represent the disruptions, incomprehensibility, or—despite the film's emphasis on returning—reoccurrences of "repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" trauma theorists describe as essential to recovery processes (Caruth 91). Using Pierre Janet's terms, *Volver* might be considered a form of narrative memory in its coherence that makes sense of the past and its logical form that is easily related to others, rather than intensive, uncontrollable, and episodic memories that cannot be synthesized into a story (qtd. in Van der Kolk, Brown, and Van der Hart).<sup>8</sup> In accordance with Ruth Leys's criticism of Janet's advocacy of transforming traumatic memory into narrative memory in order to bring about recovery, *Volver*'s fluid approach partly minimizes the impact of the

trauma suffered from sexual violence, murder, and the silencing of such violence, focusing too much on a forgetful and forgiving moving forward. The rather swift restoration experienced by the film's characters seems incongruent not only within the film's narrative, but also on the symbolic level as a form of healing from cultural trauma after decades of political violence and repressive silence.

Moreover, Almodóvar's later films suggest that this painful past continues to exert its violence on the present, indicating the insufficiency of *Volver*'s dance-like moving of bodies and specters. In *Los abrazos rotos* (2009), Penélope Cruz, as Lena, is again the victim of male violence who attempts to break free from her abusive relationship with Ernesto and begin a more democratic one with Harry. In *La piel que habito* (2011), contrary to *Volver*, confronting the past and taking justice into one's own hands has catastrophic consequences when Robert takes vengeance on his daughter's rapist by imprisoning and transgendering him, partially attempting to recreate his wife and daughter, both of whom he lost to suicide. The destructive and dystopic near future of *La piel que habito*, taking place in 2012, characterized by Robert's psychopathic vengeance, which results in the death of nearly all the film's characters, provides a sharp contrast to the rural utopia brought about by *Volver*'s beyond-the-law justice. Lena's difficulty escaping from an abusive relationship with Ernesto in *Los abrazos rotos* and *La piel que habito*'s multiple violations of women and attempt to create a skin that would protect one from all forms of trauma suggest that the present continues to be painfully marked and affected by the past.

In *Los amantes pasajeros*, a film Almodóvar himself has described as "the most political film I've ever made," a return to a disastrous economic and political state—present-day Spain under *Partido Popular* Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy—is represented by a drugged, comatose economy class, corrupt and scandalous business class passengers responsible for the country's dire situation, and

a plane that aimlessly circles in the air, finally landing in an abandoned airport (Gritten). The politics of this film focus on present-day corruption and unemployment, but Spain's past is invoked in the characters' repeated references to a *pacto del silencio* that had been arranged on a previous flight on the same aircraft when those in business class killed an economy passenger. The past's specters thereby persist in a moment in Spain in which those in power have ties to the country's past violence and silence. Finally, in *Julieta*, illness, death, and loss plague generations of estranged mothers and daughters, though the film's ending offers hope that healing might be possible.

In these more recent Almodóvarian narratives, trauma continues to exert pain and unmake the world, suggesting that *Volver*'s cathartic unsilencing of the past and uplifting dance of embodiment did not bring an end to this violence. Rather, they were one step in an ongoing series that more closely mimics *baile jondo*'s intense and uncontrolled movements. If trauma cannot be resolved in a tidy way, succumbing to "closure and coherence," it should be expected that a single film or novel cannot fully capture the uncontained journey from violence and pain to restoration (Whitehead 142). This essay thus posits interpreting the more graceful and utopic restoration experienced within *Volver* not as a complete embodying and burying of past trauma that will forever remain peacefully interred, but as one act in a much longer—possibly never-ending, as Dominick LaCapra suggests—process.<sup>9</sup> These films thereby participate in a dynamic, nonlinear *baile jondo* of imaginative cultural work that rebirths language in order to communicate, bear witness to, and materialize personal and cultural trauma, particularly—but not exclusively—that of Spain's Francoist past. This performative embodying of pain is done "over time and space [...] through the forms of stories that enable forms of thought, forms of commitment, forms of being, and forms of justice," in contrast to works that overtly call for immediate action (McClenen

and Slaughter 11). To this end, this essay has sought to shed light on how Almodóvar's own recent remarks that favor nonfiction narratives more likely to result in direct action under-privilege the therapeutic labor of symbolically working through cultural trauma. In more closely bearing witness to trauma's lingering and language-shattering effects, these works construct a sense of not-aloneness for not only their characters, but also their audiences, who might experience some degree of healing in engaging with long-term processes of recovery not unlike their own. In turn, the cathartic companionship birthed by these acts of witnessing might serve in the global labor of materializing and burying specters from painful pasts, continuing the work of "making the world" (Scarry 23).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The concept of collective or cultural trauma is a contested one, and attention has been drawn to methodological issues involved with theorizing collective trauma from a psychoanalytical lens, as if to suggest that a collective experiences the same psychological processes an individual might. Wulf Kansteiner argues that the concept of trauma "neither captures nor illuminates the forces that contribute to the making and unmaking of collective memories [...] the delayed onset of public debates about the meaning of negative pasts has more to do with political interest and opportunities than the persistence of trauma" (187). From Kansteiner's perspective, a more illuminating approach to understanding what is often meant by collective memory can be found in communication and cultural studies focused on the formation of historical consciousness created by the dynamic relationship between memory makers, memory users, and objects of tradition and representation. Jeffrey Alexander similarly suggests the constructive nature of collective memory, but he does believe that cultural trauma exists in a profound fashion.

<sup>2</sup> See Cathy Caruth and Jill Matus, for example.

<sup>3</sup> See Priscilla Hayner's *Unspeakable Truths* in which she examines truth commissions and transitional justice politics in over twenty countries in these regions, highlighting commissions in South Africa, Guatemala, Peru, Timor-Leste, and Morocco as particularly effective ones.

<sup>4</sup> With the term “recuperation of historical memory,” I make reference to the controversies surrounding Spain’s lack of transitional justice politics as well as the labor of recuperating memory taken up by much cultural production, analyzed in depth by Jo Labanyi, Cristina Moreiras Menor, and Joan Ramon Resina (“Short of Memory”), among others. See Resina for a critical reflection on this commonplace phrase.

<sup>5</sup> Franco’s promotion of flamenco is parodied in films such as Luis García Berlanga’s *¡Bienvenido Mister Marshall!* and Juan Antonio Bardem’s *Muerte de un ciclista*. See Daniela Flesler and Adrián Pérez Melgosa for more regarding how Franco’s Ministry of Tourism endorsed a stereotyped national image centered upon flamenco music and dance, bullfighting, and Catholicism.

<sup>6</sup> See also Debra Ochoa’s analysis of how the use of Andalusian flamenco in a film that takes place largely in Castilla-La Mancha “illustrates how culture transforms as it moves from one location to another,” reflecting the migratory nature of all cultures and problematizing Spanish tradition and identity (138).

<sup>7</sup> This connection is further enriched by Almodóvar’s strong support of Spanish Judge Baltasar Garzón. Garzón’s extensive involvement in pursuing those accused of human rights violations internationally has included his sentencing of Argentine naval officer Adolfo Scilingo to over one thousand years in prison for his role in the *vuelos de la muerte*, the common Dirty Wary practice of drugging detainees and dumping them from naval aircrafts into the Río de la Plata where they were “disappeared.” In response to the Spanish Supreme Court’s indictment of Garzón for overstepping his jurisdiction when he began to investigate crimes against humanity committed during Franco’s regime, Almodóvar participated in a lock-in that protested Garzón’s prosecution in April 2010, commenting that if Garzón were to be benched, it would be “como si Franco volviera a ganar” (“Almodóvar, Pilar Bardem y otros actores ...”).

<sup>8</sup> Drawing on Steven Marsh’s work, Gutiérrez-Albilla’s recent *Aesthetics, Ethics and Trauma in the Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar* makes the argument that this narrative is not entirely linear based on the spectral presences that cause “folds, breaks, and gaps of/in time” (44). Nonetheless, I would maintain that *Volver* presents working through trauma as a rather seamless and coherent process.

<sup>9</sup> LaCapra posits that even when traumas “are worked through, this does not mean that they

may not recur and require renewed and perhaps changed ways of working through them again,” potentially resulting in an endless process (148).

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