

# ***Me acuerdo ... ¿Te acuerdas?: Memory, Space and the Individualizing Transformation of the Subject in Twenty-First-Century Mexican Fiction***

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## **1. Twenty-First-Century Transitions and the New Individual**

Since the mid-nineties, Mexican literature has witnessed a departure from a traditional interest in collectivizing discourses of identity. Particularly, the generation of writers born in the late 1960s and early 1970s has displayed a growing faith in individualism as a means to resist totalizing state-driven cultural visions (Raphael, 113), and as a crucial element of authorial freedom (Chimal). Literary critics have, in one way or another, identified individualism as the main characteristic of contemporary writing.<sup>1</sup> Individual literary endeavours have replaced ideas about a homogenizing ‘*literatura nacional*’ (González Boixo, 17)<sup>2</sup> that explores and assists in the definition of ‘lo mexicano’ (Bartra, 41), a vague ideological notion that would capture the ‘true’ characteristics and *façon d’être* – the spirit – of the Mexican people. As González Boixo explains: ‘[l]ibrados de la idea de nación, la nueva generación, “los nietos de Rulfo”, podrán escribir sobre cualquier tema, desde su preciado “individualismo”’(17).<sup>3</sup>

Opposing a triumphalist notion of unrestrained personal freedom however, twenty-first-century Mexican literature consistently shows anxiety-ridden and uprooted characters. The stories of these characters lay bare the struggle of the individual subject to construct her or his own identity when confronted with the limits of self-determination. Characters are placed at odds with the many social forces that determine and influence people’s lives without offering them anchorage or guidance. In addition, in a significant number of stories, characters are faced with their own desire and their embodied experience as elements that inform and constrain their self-representations.

1 For a sampling of materials reflecting this argument, see Maldonado 14–15; Beltrán 91–112; Raphael 91–112; and González Boixo 17–18.

2 All emphasis is respected as in the original sources unless otherwise specified.

3 See also Beltrán.

'El carcinoma de Siam', a disturbing short story by Ignacio Padilla (b. 1968), provides a reflection on these disputes. 'El carcinoma' narrates the bitter lives of a pair of conjoined twins, ironically named Cástor and Pólux by their mother. As the story opens, Cástor lies contentedly on a hospital bed waiting to be surgically detached from his now dead brother. From his expectant position, he chronologically recalls his entire life, his 'existencia doble' ('Anacrónicos', 39), attached to his weak, cerebral and studious brother. He evokes anecdotes told by his mother, events that he did not remember but that he had imagined so many times 'que había acabado por apropiarse del recuerdo' ('Anacrónicos', 39). He visualizes himself from the moment they were born and put together in a double incubator, when Pólux was 'tan quieto, tan pesadamente sorprendido de esa monstruosidad que no le permitía moverse a sus anchas por el brevísimo espacio de la incubadora' ('Anacrónicos', 39). Thus, from the very beginning of the text, the space shared by the brothers, particularly the space of the body, is presented as a contested site, a grotesque space of struggle for two souls 'cuya única enmienda posible era el sacrificio de una de las almas en aras de la conservación del cuerpo mismo' ('Anacrónicos', 40). The destructive, irreconcilable opposition between monolithic corporeality and dual spiritual existence is underscored by the divergent personalities of the brothers: Pólux is calm and introverted, whereas Cástor is vindictive and malicious. Whilst Pólux attempts to fight his deviant situation through education and social participation, Cástor neglects himself as an act of defiance over his impossibility of self-determination. His cold and detached reasoning, close to that of a psychopath, is an act of rebellion against a situation where his agency is permanently yielded, even if partially, to an undesirable Other. What is more, from the operating room, Cástor uses his personal memory to justify his damaging behaviour; by articulating an individual narrative of his life he casts a clement judgement on his actions, declaring them fair: 'Cástor supo que nadie ... podría culparlo de haber llevado las cosas al extremo' ('Anacrónicos', 40).

The name of the story reveals its darker anthropological tenets. The 'carcinoma' of the title refers to Cástor's viewing of his brother as a cancer: 'El tumor sería extirpado, pues estaba seco' ('Anacrónicos', 50). He characterizes his lifelong companion as a useless disease that held part of his biology captive and now be removed. Cástor's inability to build emotional attachments translates into an unwillingness to share any living space. It is a refusal of his own duality, a sort of self-negation that repudiates his embedded Otherness and that reveals a tyrannical and violent disposition. The story positions the body as a stage upon which to negotiate identities; yet, though on one hand it shows the struggle for self-definition, on the other it reflects on the risks of totalitarian suppression of difference.

Focused on this pair of 'seres irregulares' ('Anacrónicos', 42), Padilla's fantastic story confronts the strongholds of individuality – personal memory and the individual body – with the reality of shared communal spaces marked by heterogeneity and difference. 'El carcinoma' can be read as a metaphor of contemporary postnational unbelonging, where Cástor and Pólux epitomize marginality and divergence in a 'mundo cicatero' ('Anacrónicos', 40). They are born into an inhospitable world that does not provide sources of collective identification such as a family or a community; they are orphans that live in hiding and that only receive attention of the press because of their 'existencia aberrante' ('Anacrónicos', 42); they do not have friends; and they are certain they have been abandoned by God. The existence of the twins can only be incorporated into society once their physical deviation has been suppressed. Hence, Cástor takes self-destruction as a source of free individual affirmation and he nearly drinks himself and his brother to death. However, only Pólux dies, leaving his body behind as a quarry of 'vísceras para el cuerpo sobreviviente' ('Anacrónicos', 50). The restoration of the unitary body, and its assemblage with 'spare' parts sourced from a defeated Other, point to an ethically problematic construction of the space of the self. Subject-formation in this scenario is the result of displacing and effacing difference, taking the space of the Other and establishing an ideal of normality.

About to be detached from his dead brother, Cástor realizes that '*era feliz y estaba en casa, se sabía casi dueño de su cuerpo y lo sería por completo al despertar, cuando los médicos al fin hubiesen roto el puente de carne y vísceras que por veinte años lo había unido al vientre de su hermano*' [emphasis added] ('Anacrónicos', 38). The reclaiming of the physical space of the biological body turns out to be Cástor's possibility of becoming settled and feeling at home. Home here has the same meaning that, according to Mallet, several postcolonial writers give to the term as 'a space of belonging and being with clearly defined, fixed boundaries in which the subject is free of desire, at rest, secure and comfortable' (78).<sup>4</sup> In this sense, home suggests an inside/outside binary demarcation. In the conclusion of the story, Pólux dies as a consequence of Cástor's uncontrolled drinking and Cástor has the opportunity to live on in a unified and restored body; the restoration of the body representing Cástor's 'homecoming'. Through the perspective of an inside/outside division, the conclusion of the story can be interpreted as Cástor's overcoming of his expulsion to the outside of his own bodily-self from the moment of his birth, finally reasserting control over his inner homeliness. The materiality of the body becomes at once the space where subjectivity is formed and the one stable source of belonging. Cástor's sabotage of his own body is a revolutionary

4 See also Ahmed.

stance against a social context where he would always be marginal and his identity split. Yet, despite his apparent victory, Cástor's tale leads to a rather pessimistic message: it is evil that prevails, through sabotage and excess; it is the embracing of one's own bodily decay and entropy and not the attachment to an external community – represented by a broken physical bridge of entrails – that anchors the subject and gives her or him a sense of identity.

Padilla's short story fictionalizes with Manichean simplicity the tensions experienced by contemporary subjects after the 'the crisis of the nation-state' (Castells; Appadurai). In such alluded context, different forces of freedom, selfishness and ethical responsibility pull individuals into conflicting and unstable avenues of self-identification. The story also echoes a wider concern with identity and individual subject-formation in contemporary Mexican literature after 'la comprobación de la quiebra de la sociedad Mexicana actual' (González Boixo, 17). Yet it also expresses a widespread scepticism toward collective forms of organization, whilst at the same time denouncing the darker edges of individualization. In what follows, then, I propose that in twenty-first-century Mexican fiction individually embodied subjectivities are emerging as a counter to collective, abstract and ideological conceptions of identity. Stories like 'El carcinoma' show that the body and personal memory are privileged literary prisms through which to interpret a confusing and conflict-burdened way of being-in-the-world, as opposed to the identity quest that fixated on 'lo mexicano' after the modernizing surge of the post-war period (Bartra, 41).

Mexican fiction in the twenty-first century seems to be thematizing what Beck calls the 'detraditionalization and the creation of global media networks' where

the [personal] biography is increasingly removed from its direct spheres of contact and opened up across boundaries of countries and experts for a *long-distance morality* which puts the individual in the position of potentially having to take a continual stand. At the same moment as he or she sinks into insignificance, he or she is elevated to the apparent throne of a world-shaper. (Beck, 137)

It is in personal biography that the contradictions of individualization are manifest. Available identity labels such as nation or gender do not suffice to attain the '*biographical combination possibilities*' (Beck, 135) that generate unique individual subjects in late modern societies.<sup>5</sup> It is no coincidence, then, that

5 Beck also argues that this uniqueness is composed by a self-fashioned combination of a set of 'standardized' institutional prescriptions. In other words, biography is self-produced by using '[self]construction kits' that standardize individuals as much as they individualize them (135).

Mexican writers have taken on the life-story to delve into the complexities of the disorienting experience of the transition from one century to another, particularly after the authority crisis of the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), Mexico's only ruling party from the 1920s until the democratic transition of 2000. The lives of characters in twenty-first-century fiction explore new sources of identity because the literature of national identity has been exhausted. As Bartra puts it, for most of the twentieth century 'una gran parte de la población llegó a estar convencida de que su mexicanidad se comprobaba y se correspondía con las peculiaridades del sistema de gobierno' and to many Mexicans, political crises meant 'que la realidad nacional está derrumbándose' (115). Opposing some of the collectivizing claims of postmodernism (Jameson 320–21), or maybe moving past the postmodern moment into a new stage of non-rationalist and embodied individual subjectivity, for new generations of Mexican writers – generally urban, mobile and educated – the collapse of the national urges a move to the individual.

This shift in focus in contemporary Mexican literature is revealed in a re-scaling of the uses of history as a narrative locus. In other words, historical settings are used not as a revisionist practice to re-evaluate the past but as a set of familiar tropes that help orient the narrative. There is a qualitative movement from novels that explore collective identity through history (and time) to a *spatialization* of history, in which literary spaces become a channel for querying individuation and new forms of personal emergence. Though preserving the use of historical tropes, new novels spatialize historical time and transpose it from an overarching narrative to individual journeys of subject-formation.<sup>6</sup> Through the spatialization of history, the temporal logic of the new narratives – the chronology of events, historical accounts, and the assertion of a passing of time – appears traversed and intersected by displacements, fragmentations, mappings, dislocations, juxtapositions, over-extensions and by the blurring of explicit and implicit spatial referents such as countries, cities, places and territories. Spatialization becomes the aesthetic backbone of these fictions, adding a supplementary dimension of complexity to the relationship between historical time, collective and individual identities and narration.

To study the new emphasis in personal emergence and the form it takes as reflected in the uses of time and space, I propose a comparative analysis of subject-formation in coming-of-age novels from authors of two transitional literary generations in Mexican letters: José Emilio Pacheco's (b. 1939) novella *Las batallas en el desierto* of 1981, and Álvaro Enrígue's (b. 1969) *Vidas perpendiculares* of 2008. Closely linked to the classical German *Bildungsroman*, coming-

6 Some examples are *No será la Tierra* (Volpi, NST), *Amphytrion* (Padilla, *Amphitryon*) and *Nadie me verá llorar* (Rivera Garza).

of-age stories represent the emergence of characters into adulthood as the establishment of a relationship between their protagonists and the social body. Due to their emphasis in the formation of their characters, this type of fictions puts forward specific conceptions regarding how the individual subject develops identity ties and a sense of belonging.

*Las batallas* and *Vidas* are particularly insightful to address the construction of identities because the protagonists articulate their narration using their personal recollections. In these texts, the personal memory of the characters is in constant dialogue with historical facts. There is a complex relation between history, memory and identity. As Assman explains, '[k]nowledge about the past [or history] acquires the properties and functions of memory if it is related to a concept of identity' (113). Hence, to survey how narratives of the past – both personal and collective – relate to personal emergence and identity, I propose an analysis of the uses of nostalgia in both texts. Nostalgia is informative because, in the same way that memory links personal identity to history, 'nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory' (Boym, xvi). This is of particular relevance in *Vidas* and *Las batallas* because their respective publication dates coincide with moments of transformation in the social and economic organization of Mexico. These changes prompted a reconceptualization of the multiple relations between individuals, communities, nationalist discourses and the state. Pacheco's novella criticizes the regime of Miguel Alemán Valdés at a time when the country experienced the negative results of the presidency of José López Portillo (1976–1982). In the novel, the 'disasters' of López Portillo's regime are insinuated as a continuation of the changes effected by Alemán (García Núñez, 356). Similarly, *Vidas* was published while Mexico experienced the disenchantment of a thwarted democratic transition accompanied by economic stagnation and a surge in drug-related violence.

It has been argued that Pacheco belongs both to the 'Generación de Medio Siglo' and to the following 'Generación de 1968'.<sup>7</sup> The influential and innovative literature of the Generación de Medio Siglo gave a critical account of Mexico's jolting and inconsistent insertion into the global discourse of cultural modernity during the 1950s and 1960s. Authors from this generation later continued to produce works concerned with a self-reflexive literary practice and Mexico's cultural identity (Krauze, 35–38). The lines between this generation and the Generación de 1968 are diffuse, yet it is widely agreed that from 1968 onwards literature showed 'un mayor énfasis social y nacional' (Krauze,

7 For Pacheco's inclusión in the 'Generación de Medio Siglo', see Ávila Storer; Sánchez 107; and Volpi *La imaginación* 48–51. For his involvement with the 'Generación de 1968', see Krauze; Vaughan 482; and Sefchovich.

39).<sup>8</sup> Pacheco's inclusion in both generations shows the relevance that the transformation of Mexican reality had for his writing as part of an experience mediated in literature. Similarly to Pacheco's works most of Mexico's canonical novels from the 1950s onwards are concerned with episodes of national history. Historical time is the cornerstone of their reflections regarding communal identity, particularly understood as an identity framed by the nation. In fact, in the second half of the twentieth century there was a surge of novels that had an 'afán revisionista' which 'busca ... polemizar sobre el convulso devenir político y social del país' (Díez Cobos, 25). There is a vast number of works that illustrate the concern with national historical episodes that establish a direct relation with the social national reality, with exemplary cases such as *Al filo del agua* (Yáñez [1947]); *Pedro Páramo* (Rulfo [1955]); *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (Fuentes [1962]); *La noche de Tlatelolco* (Poniatowska [1971]); *Noticias del Imperio* (Del Paso [1987]); and *El seductor de la patria* (Serna [1999]), to provide a reduced set of prominent examples.<sup>9</sup>

Thirty years Pacheco's junior, Álvaro Enrigue belongs to a more diffuse and undefined generation that nevertheless has been witness to significant transformations of the Mexican neoliberal modernity (Raphael). Whereas the modern age inaugurated in the 1950s was accompanied by mass industrialization and urban growth, the generation of authors born from the late 1960s onwards matured in their literary careers through the tumultuous turn of the century ruled by the 'logic of late capitalism' (Jameson) which in Mexico was driven by the Brady Plan, NAFTA, the 'tequila crisis', the Zapatista uprising, the downfall of the 70-year authoritarian ruling party (the PRI) and the disappointment after the democratic turn of 2000 which failed to bring the promised prosperity (Harvey, 98–104).

Both *Vidas* and *Las batallas* are coming-of-age stories set in mid-twentieth century Mexico in the context of an intense period of modernizing transformations. Both novels explore history through personal memory. In *Las batallas* the main character and narrator revisits a crucial episode from his childhood after 'tanto tiempo de rehusarme a enfrentarlo' (Pacheco, 76–77). For its part, in *Vidas* a several times reincarnated being attempts to chronicle his personal history from his incarnation as a Mexican teenager by writing an autobiography using the memories of all his life cycles. Following Beck's insights regarding individualization and biographical patterns in industrial societies, my analysis uses memory in the form of nostalgia to explore how literary understandings of identity, collectivity and the nation have transformed to reflect the contemporary experience of late modernity in Mexico.

8 See also Cohn.

9 The names and publication dates mentioned here are from the Spanish first editions but a recent available translation is included where available in the 'Works Cited' section.

## 2. *Bildungsromane*, the Individual and the Nation

At the opening of *The Age of Empire*, reflecting on the role personal history plays for the historian, Eric Hobsbawm identifies what he refers to as a 'no-man's land of time' (3). This allegorical land, Hobsbawm explains, is the 'twilight zone between history and [personal] memory, between the past as a generalized record which is open to relatively dispassionate inspection and the past as a remembered part of, or background to, one's own life' (3). Hobsbawm employs the metaphorical language of space to refer to the experience of time that allows the internalisation and apprehension of past experiences, the territory where both subjectivity and citizenship emerge. According to the historian, 'this zone stretches from the point where living family traditions or memories begin ... to the end of infancy, when public and private destinies are recognized as inseparable and as mutually defining one another...' (3). In his description of this blurry region of human time, it is the 'awakening', the awareness that personal memories link us to our broader social context, that generates the subject and the subject's (political) relations to society. Inadvertently, when referring to the weight that the autobiographic has for the role of the historian, Hobsbawm's 'land of time' sheds light on an instance of reflection equally relevant to the novelist, who articulates her or his own time in narration. Specifically, this twilight zone seems to fit the Bakhtinian definition of the *Bildungsroman* where 'man's individual emergence is inseparably linked to historical emergence' (*Bildungsroman*, 23), and where the text constructs 'an image of *man growing in national-historical time*' (*Bildungsroman*, 25). In this nationally-bounded sense, for Bakhtin, emergence in the *Bildungsroman* calls to be spatialized, attached to a chronotope, 'to a connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature' ('Chronotope', 84). Thus, in its spatiotemporal literary configuration, the coming-of-age novel gives aesthetic form to the area of contact between the emerging subject and the collectivity. The coming-of-age tale fills in the gap unattainable to the historian, acting as a representational zone of negotiation of subjectivity and of the individual's relation to the social and the national through the political: the setting for the birth of citizenship and political consciousness.

Pacheco's *Las batallas* draws on the generic conventions of the *Bildungsroman*, specifically from the 'relationship between this change [in the protagonist] and the specific national setting in which the protagonist moves' (5). Thus, the novella centres its plot in the changes undergone by a young child as he grows up in a society experiencing a transition from an import substitution model to a transnational market economy. Set in Mexico City in 1948, *Las batallas* presents a tale of conflicting emergence critical of the

aggressive pro-capitalist policies undertaken during the presidency of Miguel Alemán Valdés from 1946 to 1952. The novel parallels the painful entrance of the main character into the adult world with the fast-paced and traumatic attempt of the country to enter the rhythm of Western modernity. According to Cynthia Steele, this period, also known as 'alemanismo'

... resulted in an increased polarization of the class structure, the destruction ... of the environment through unregulated urbanization and industrialization, and a displacement of what the narrator [of *Las batallas*] considers to be 'traditional' Mexican culture ... by U.S.-based mass culture and consumer commodities. (91-92)

However, if in the German *Bildungsroman* there is a 'positive effect' on the reader, prompted by the depiction of the transformation of the protagonist (Boes, 5), Pacheco's text generates a sense of loss and unease. In the novel, a man named Carlos recalls the year of 1948, when he was nine years old and fell in love with Mariana, the mother of his best friend. Powerless to act on his feelings due to his age but also unable to repress them, Carlos recalls how he escaped from school and declared his love to Mariana. After the event, his family and classmates choose to believe he has been seduced by Mariana, thus unleashing several disciplinary discourses: he is shunned at school, he is forced to confess his 'sin' to a Catholic priest, and he is taken to the psychiatrist where he is coldly examined by a pair of emotionally-detached medics. After his declaration of love, Carlos is treated as an object with no possible agency, an object onto which society projects its fears and deviations. From his disempowered position he has to submit to the discourses that attempt to suppress the fact that for society he 'no es normal' (Pacheco, 49). These discourses, however, inadvertently incorporate Carlos into their system of hypocrisy. For example, he learns about masturbation from the priest who tries to dissuade him from practicing it, and although he confesses his alleged sin he does not feel any guilt: 'Como es de rigor, manifesté propósito de enmienda. Pero no estaba arrepentido ni me sentía culpable: querer a alguien no es pecado ...' (52). Social emergence in *Las batallas* is far from a process of maturing and positive learning. Instead, it seems to be a disciplining exercise in which the subject is normalized and made socially competent. In this sense, the experience that marks Carlitos becoming an adult man transforms him into an adequate subject that can be incorporated into the structure of the state where 'individuality would be shaped in a new form and submitted to a set of very specific patterns' (Foucault, 783). In the case of Carlos, the disciplining exercise is eventually successful but only to the point that he adapts to his new circumstances. His awareness of the contradictions of the social and political structure constantly surface in his ironic revisiting of the past.

After this traumatic incident, Carlos and his family experience a period of readaptation, which includes a change of schools and a significant improvement in the family's economic and social standing due to the successful incorporation of Carlos's father into the new economy: 'mi padre había vendido la fábrica y acababan de nombrarlo gerente al servicio de la empresa norteamericana que absorbió sus marcas de jabones' (Pacheco, 67). Carlitos embraces the new capitalist values marked by US culture and seems to move on from his past. Nevertheless, in the last episode of the novel, he runs into a former classmate and becomes devastated when he realizes that all the people and places from the time when he fell in love with Mariana, including her, are gone. More than thirty years after the episode, Carlos tells his story in the first person, analysing the changes he experienced from a double perspective tinged with irony in which the voices of a disenchanted adult Carlos and a naïve young Carlitos overlap. Carlos's urge to recuperate this incident from his childhood means coming to terms with Mexico's rupture with social and economic pre-capitalist structures. As Jiménez-Sandoval explains: 'la historia de Carlitos se yuxtapone con la historia de México que está por atravesar una transformación total ...', and in this way, '... es un intento por revivir un pasado que pueda recuperar el *ethos* del país que se perdió ante una modernización fallida' (431). Hence, as in the *Bildungsroman*, *Las batallas* transforms Carlos's story into the allegory of Mexico's transition to a new stage of modernity. There is, however, an unresolved conflict between the ideal discourse of the nation's path and Carlos' frustrated and dissatisfied social conformism which reveals that in the *Bildungsroman* 'there is always some kind of remainder, some identity claim that resists nationalism's aim for closure in ... the normative regime of the nation-state' (Boes, 3). In *Las batallas* this 'excess' derives from an unsolved discrepancy between national, social and individual aspirations. Although present, this incongruity still plays out as a parallel between Mexico (the 'imagined community'), Mexicans (its imagined society) and the life of Carlos (the individual subject). The three layers of the narrative rhetorically homogenize a very diverse real historical experience.

Recapturing the same historical period as *Las batallas*, *Vidas* also redeploys some of the conventions of the *Bildungsroman* by focusing on the coming of age of a Mexican teenager, Jerónimo, who experiences continuous relocations, first from a provincial city to the capital of the country, and then to Philadelphia in the United States. The moment of Jerónimo's narration in his present life corresponds with the modernizing trajectory that Mexico had followed throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Along with its modernizing impulse, the country witnessed a period of urban expansionism and of cultural flourishing due to the active support that the state gave to education and the arts.

In the novel, these transformations are thematized in Jerónimo's displacement from the small, repressive town of Lagos de Moreno to Mexico City, a booming and cosmopolitan metropolis. Also, Mexico's growing cultural capital, including its contradictions and its political instrumentalization by the populist state discourse, is voiced in Jerónimo's talentless *muralista* uncle who 'nunca iba a ser prominente en los circuitos del arte de la ciudad de México porque, en realidad, los obreros y el tequila con pólvora le cagaban la madre' (Enrigue, 40). Indalecio, the mediocre mural artist, is unsuccessful not due to his lack of ability but because he fails to align himself with the socialist discourse of the revolutionary ruling party, which at the time was the only route to 'acomodarse en el medio pictórico' (18). Eventually, he and his wife relocate to the United States where Indalecio is commissioned to paint murals at government-run schools. Hence, the relocation of Jerónimo and his family north of the border to the city of Philadelphia represent the exponential growth of the transnational migratory movement from Mexico to the United States,<sup>10</sup> and the popularization of Mexican culture 'mythologized as an exciting artistic renewal' (Indych-López, 13) in the United States at the time.

There are significant similarities between *Vidas* and *Las batallas* such as the shared historical setting, the ironic and critical tone in relation to Mexican life in the 1940s and 1950s and the existence of a love story between the young main character and an older woman – Mariana in *Las batallas* and Tita, the wife of Jerónimo's father, in *Vidas*. One of the significant features of *Vidas*, however, is that its narrative expands from one contained life journey to multiple dissonant trajectories. In his life as a Mexican teenager in the 1950s, Jerónimo is able to remember all of his previous embodiments which varied in gender, race, class and the age at time of death. He attempts to chronicle his personal history by writing an autobiography using memories from all his materializations and he does so by giving voice to each of his personas. In this way, the narrative voice undergoes constant changes in gender, geographic and temporal location and grammatical person. Although his life as a teenager is told chronologically, the voices of a male member of a prehistoric tribe, an Indian Brahmin, a Greek female aristocrat, a Mongolian matriarch nomad and a 'cazamonjes' priest in Naples appear in temporal disorder.<sup>11</sup> Many other incarnations are also mentioned. While in *Las batallas*, personal emergence and collective historical emergence are connected symbolically, representing one as the echo of the other; in *Vidas* personal emergence is not a metonymy for the nation nor does it represent the role of the individual vis-à-vis her or his

10 Jerónimo's Mexican life coincided with the beginning of the Bracero program (1942–64).

11 Enrigue explains that he wrote the story of the cazamonjes inspired by a reference in a book about Francisco de Quevedo. In it, it was stated that in the 17th century in Naples there were secular priests whose duty was to hunt monks (Medina Portillo).

historical conditions. Jerónimo's transition to adulthood implies a constant inner negotiation between the collective and the individual, in his attempt to write an oxymoronic 'autobiografía de todos nosotros' (Enrique, 207). In the end, however, Jerónimo's emergence as an individual means coming to terms with his many inner voices, the memories that exceed his present body and experience, encompassing them in his one, singular identity. This could point to a primacy of the individual over collectivity, in which collective bonds and the relationship between the individual and history are only some of the many elements that constitute the self.

What begins to appear is a decisively different conception of human existence between the model of the novel of formation followed by *Las batallas*, where Carlitos sourly accepts the new form of social participation and involvement, mourning the loss of those things he cannot preserve, and what occurs to Jerónimo in *Vidas*. Jerónimo's emergence is not only as a subject, but specifically as an individual subject fundamentally detached from the social spheres of belonging provided by his immediate context. In the sense of emergence, Jerónimo's coming-of-age story is empty. While he grows up and matures in his Mexican life, he already '[s]abía muchas cosas que los niños no solían ni debían conocer: toda la gama de los olores y formas que puede tener una vagina o el agarroso sabor del semen en la boca' (Enrique, 190). Playing with the conventions of the *Bildungsroman*, Jerónimo as an individual has already emerged out of infancy many times in his past. By belonging to many historical moments he becomes dehistoricized.

Thus, in contrast to Carlos's story, Jerónimo's autobiography is concerned not with the understanding of the nation's history and the relationship of the citizens to it, but with pointing beyond the nation to a deterritorialized conception of identity that transcends national discourses. In *Las batallas*, Carlos bears witness to the transformations in Mexican society due to explosive industrialization and urbanization through an exercise of memory: 'Historia colectiva e historia personal están por lo tanto estrechamente vinculadas ... y la historia colectiva también sirve para nutrir y preparar la historia individual de Carlitos' (Benmiloud 312). *Vidas* responds to a completely different moment in which Mexico emerges to the realities of contemporary globalization where for upper- and middle-class urbanites the nation-state is no longer a sufficient category to attach their sense of belonging and to interpret their own biographies.

Here, I take on Ulrich Beck's argument regarding 'individualization' in industrial societies experiencing the later stages of modernity. When referring to the post-war condition in Germany, particularly after the 1970s, Beck identifies a 'triple individualization' (128), which implies a "categorical shift" in the relation between the individual and society' (127) that gave birth to a

'new mode of societalization' (127). Beck's 'categorical shift' refers to the erosion of traditional forms of organization and belonging such as the family, class, religion and the nation. The loss of primacy of traditional models of belonging entails a sense of insecurity and disenchantment for individuals who are charged with the burden of a multiplying set of life decisions or choices in 'lifestyles, subcultures, social ties and identities' (131) that 'must be made,' or otherwise 'the individual will have to 'pay for' the consequences of decisions not taken' (135). This movement of the self to the centre of the social world contains in itself a fallacy of choice since the individual is removed from her or his traditional sources of belonging only to be reinserted under the control of standardizing institutions such as the labour market, the educational system, and a media-driven consumerist society. Although 1990s Germany is in more than one way radically different from Mexico, Mexico's opening up to the international neoliberal trends followed the same patterns in certain social spheres. Moreover, and as Beck asserts, the process of individualization is supported by a structure of media consumption that allows the transformations in modes of 'societalization' to happen 'simultaneously *transculturally* and *transnationally*' (132). In the next section I propose an analysis of the concept of 'nostalgia' and the connection it establishes between collective attachments and past historical moments, to elucidate how the differences in assumptions about space, time and identity that underpin *Vidas* and *Las batallas* reveal a transformation in the conception of the subject and her or his relationship to the social body.

### **3. The Impossibility of Longing**

Nostalgia can be understood as a longing for a place and a time that has been lost or cannot be attained but it is also, in words of Svetlana Boym, 'a romance with one's own fantasy' (xiii). Nostalgia is both spatial and temporal; it paradoxically intertwines grievance with desire. Most critics agree that *Las batallas* uses nostalgia in the form of longing for the innocence of childhood and in the yearning for the vanished pre-capitalist city (Steele, 107; Lozano Herrera, 138, 140; Trejo Fuentes, 217–18). Indeed, *Las batallas* is full of evocations; objects from a bygone era are named as if to fill the lost space with meanings. With a carefully descriptive economy of words, the text depicts the way things were, highlighting their loss: 'Miró hacia Insurgentes: los Packards, los Buicks, los Hudsons, los tranvías amarillos, los postes plateados, los autobuses de colores, los transeúntes todavía con sombrero: la escena y el momento que no iban a repetirse jamás' (Pacheco, 69). The novella juxtaposes the old ways (hats, tramways) with the foreign brands as markers of the objects that arrive

to share the space of the streets while exerting a displacement over the old forms that is both subtle and aggressive in its pervasive visibility. Despite the presence of these nostalgic evocations, some critics have argued that *Las batallas* produces memory without nostalgia. For Ignacio Sánchez Prado ('Pacheco'), nostalgia would imply an accepting passivity that contradicts the narrator's irony in accounting for what Verani has termed 'la historia secreta de una traición nacional' ('Umbrales', 18). His conclusion regarding a lack of nostalgia is validated by a quotation from the adult Carlos in which he states: 'Se acabó esa ciudad. Terminó aquel país. No hay memoria del México de aquellos años. Y a nadie le importa: de ese horror quién puede tener nostalgia' (Pacheco, 77). Writer Vicente Alfonso also supports this dismissal of nostalgia. Alfonso conceptualizes nostalgia as a positive longing. According to his definition of the term, Pacheco's stories present a negative relationship to the past that does not correspond to the critic's optimistic nostalgia. He finds that Pacheco's fictions 'son viajes al pasado, pero al horror del pasado. Al narrar, los personajes no añoran tiempos diluidos, antes bien tratan de exorcizar los fantasmas que aún quedan de entonces' (Alfonso). This conclusion is followed by others such as Verani ('Voces', 8–13) and Zamora (152) who also consider the horror and deception as a contradiction to nostalgic emotions. Carlos's refutation of nostalgia is elucidating in that it conveys the text's inherent paradox, which divides the reception of Pacheco's novella. It is true that in a sense, Carlos dismisses the process of longing for the past of his childhood, though not without contradicting himself. His own narration contests his claim that there is no memory of that time. His recollection is an exercise of that diluted and hazy, equivocal memory. The fragility of Carlos's statement casts doubt over its own veracity and prompts the reader to question whether there could be something equally ambivalent about the possibility of nostalgia in the text.

The debate between the manifestations of memory and their relation to nostalgia in *Las batallas* can be explained if Carlos's narration is taken as a prefiguration of a new form of 'societalization' where the nation is no longer a coherent and sufficient source of anchorage and belonging. In other words, Pacheco's novel of formation elaborates on the initial impact that the capitalist and industrial aperture of Mexico had in the social configuration of the country. This impact is assessed from a moment in the future, in the early 1980s and, as such, personal memory and historical memory become the conflicting elements that assist this judgement. What Carlitos witnesses as a child growing up during *alemanismo* begins the process leading to the widespread individualization and the loss of traditional communal arrangements that urban generations of writers would experience at the turn of the century. To understand the apparent contradiction between readings from

critics that support nostalgia and those who deny its existence in the text, this prefiguration can be restated as a tension between two distinct forms of relating to the past, identified by Boym as ‘restorative nostalgia’ and ‘reflective nostalgia’ (xviii). In a non-scholarly publication, Sánchez Prado offers some preliminary notes for reading of *Las batallas* under the lens of Boym’s theories (‘Apuntes’, 27). His reading, however, does not fully incorporate the ideological elements of ‘restorative nostalgia’, particularly in its connection to nationalist discourses and claims to truth. Instead, the critic uses Boym’s category to suggest that the novella is in fact ‘restoring’ a subjectivity tied to bourgeois capitalism and that this restoration is partially based in forgetting. In his argument, the workings of memory seem to be diluted in favour of a criticism of neoliberalism in Pacheco’s text. Moreover, the element of loss that, according to Boym, is present in both categories of nostalgia, is for Sánchez Prado only relevant in reflexive nostalgia. In his conclusion, however, he ambiguously rejects its actual presence by saying that ‘los afectos prohibidos inscritos en la nostalgia se vuelven imposibles al lado adulto’ (‘Apuntes’, 27). My examination proposes a return to Boym’s original interest in ‘the inter-relationship between individual and collective remembrance’ (Boym 41).

For Boym, ‘restorative nostalgia’ is the kind of nostalgia that ‘attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home ... [as it] protects the absolute truth’ (xviii). This type of longing has had a key function as a motor of nationalist movements such as – but not limited to – fascism in Europe. This is the nostalgic reminiscence denied in *Las batallas*: the ideal of a purified homeland shared by all Mexicans, who bound together by progress, would finally fulfil the nation’s destiny of abundance: ‘Nuestros libros de texto afirmaban: Visto en el mapa México tiene forma de cornucopia’ (Pacheco, 15). In his narration, Carlos is critical of the regime of the PRI, the ‘Señorpresidente’ and his entourage. Carlos’s narration captures the narrative of progress deployed by the Mexican state through ‘... alegorías del progreso con Miguel Alemán como Dios Padre ...’ (14). The performance of state power is evidenced as part of a state-driven nationalist narrative in which children like Carlitos are indoctrinated: ‘Nos enseñaban historia patria, lengua nacional, geografía del DF’ (14). Carlos’s testimony shows what Bartra has identified as the articulation of cultural myths that underpinned the ideological grip of the Mexican authoritarian state apparatus from the 1920s until the 1990s: ‘La razón de Estado, al aplicarse a la cultura, se transforma en una razón telúrica: la geografía como inmenso marco vivo de la historia: la tierra como madre fértil en cuyo cuerpo crecen las profundas raíces de la cultura nacional’ (Bartra, 41). The experience of Carlos’s contact with institutional discourses lays bare the impossibility of a ‘restorative nostalgia’ for his sceptical gaze because the homogenizing ideology conveyed by the political powers is flawed. In his experience, the

supposedly unitary ‘transhistorical home’ is closer to an unequal, spatially segregated potpourri:

Para mí, niño de la colonia Roma ... [l]os ‘turcos’ no me resultaban extraños como Jim, que nació en San Francisco y hablaba sin acento los dos idiomas; o Toru, crecido en un campo de concentración para japoneses; o Peralta y Rosales. Ellos no pagaban colegiatura, estaban becados, vivían en las vecindades ruinosas de la colonia de los Doctores. (Pacheco, 18)

*Las batallas*'s spatially-aware portrayal of the city is significant because nostalgia implies a assembly of temporal and spatial experiences. In other words, in nostalgia ‘[w]e are confronted with a remembered place structured temporally’ (Trigg, 54). As Pacheco’s text shows, in 1948 Mexico state discourse took over lived experience not only through a temporal articulation that appropriated the past (history of the motherland) and located Mexico in a forward-looking hope that would turn the country into ‘[l]a utopía al fin conquistada’ (15). This discourse also incorporated in its texture the space of the city, effectively transforming and reshaping it: ‘a cada rato suspendían las clases para llevarnos a la inauguración de carreteras, avenidas, presas, parques deportivos, hospitales, ministerios, edificios inmensos’ (20). Therefore, *Las batallas*'s rejection of nostalgia comes from the narrator’s awareness of the totalizing narratives of history and the ways in which they were instrumentalized to serve the interests of the authoritarian rule of the PRI. At the same time, this rejection springs from the effacing of the meaning of ‘home’ as safe and nurturing from the space of the city. While being transformed and redesigned by the rhetoric of progress held up by the state, Mexico City loses its stability as source of ‘truth’, leaving instead the contradictions of progress: ‘... la inflación, los cambios, el tránsito, la inmoralidad, el ruido, la delincuencia, el exceso de gente, la mendicidad, los extranjeros, la corrupción, el enriquecimiento sin límite de unos cuantos y la miseria de casi todos’ (15). The unsettling ending of Carlos’s love story where his personal memory is contradicted by social memory reinforces this sentiment of instability and uncertainty, questioning the accord between the real space of the city and his memory of it. A few months after confessing his feelings to Mariana, he is told that Mariana has died. Driven by the necessity to verify this information, he goes in search of her only to find that she does not live in the same apartment anymore and no one in the building has ever heard about her: ‘Cosas que te imaginas, niño. Debe de ser otra calle, en otro edificio’ (76).

Despite being critical of the past, there is an undeniable element of longing in *Las batallas* that cannot be dismissed. Here, the complexity of Boym’s analysis of nostalgia as a multisided phenomenon allows thinking about a ‘reflective nostalgia’. For Boym, reflective nostalgia ‘dwells on the

ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity' (xviii). This form of nostalgia embraces the details captured by personal memory that relate more to the social experiences of the past than to the nationalist overarching narratives that try to appropriate them. Although dissatisfied with this period, even as a child, Carlos foresees the longing of the past to come. When he falls in love with Mariana he tells himself: 'Voy a guardar intacto el recuerdo de este instante porque todo lo que existe ahora mismo nunca volverá a ser igual. Un día lo veré como la más remota prehistoria. Voy a conservarlo entero porque hoy me enamoré de Mariana' (Pacheco, 37). Young Carlos is aware of the historicity of his personal experience and decides to hold on to it as a constitutive part of himself. Although there is a rejection of the capitalist transformation and of state discourses of prosperity and national belonging, this rejection comes into conflict with Carlos's attachment to his personal history, written under a violent and disciplining context. In Carlos's account, there is no rejection or denial of his personal past: '... ni siquiera ahora, tantos años después, voy a negar que me enamoré de Mariana' (65). There is a nostalgic exercise which faces the contradictions that modernity causes in the individual in the context of his emergence to a community that can no longer assure a stable belonging and that shows its initial signs of erosion. Here, it is central to note that *Las batallas*'s nostalgic tension is still expressed in terms of the nation. Despite the fact that the episode contained in Pacheco's novella refers to an individual experience of memory, it is inextricably linked to its social context. As Steele has argued, *Las batallas* 'is permeated by a sense of tremendous collective loss that transcends the individual and psychological dimension' (91). In the novella, personal history is Mexican history and the loss of Mariana conveys a collective sense of loss of the pre-capitalist ways of life for society as a whole. To make this evident, in his narration, Carlos refers to an imagined 'nosotros': 'Mientras tanto *nos* modernizábamos' [emphasis added] (15). Carlos's view is critical of the state but still regards his emergence from childhood into the social world as the formation of a bond between him, as an individual, and his community (his family, his social class, the state) in which the community continues to be a source of belonging though a scarring and questionable one. In its inability to resolve the contradictions between personal and collective memory, between rejection of the past and longing, the novella prefigures the problems that the nation and national history bring about to the construction of individual and collective identities as its protagonist witnesses the erosion of the national fabric.

*Vidas* touches upon the same transition to industrial modernity as *Las batallas*, recounting the life of Jerónimo from his birth in 1936 to the moment he is nineteen years old and has become an adult. Enríque's approach to this

period, however, neither embraces nor rejects nostalgia. Instead, the novel suppresses the necessary conditions for nostalgia to exist by advancing a different premise from where to construct the coming-of-age story, one where identity-formation is not linked to a collective destiny. This, I argue, operates as a literary interrogation of the impact that individualization has had on subject-formation at the dawn of the twenty-first century in Mexico. For Shaw and Chase, as for Boym, for nostalgia to take place there must exist a linear sense of time where once it passes, time is lost forever (Shaw and Chase, 3). Following from this assumption, *Vidas* nullifies the possibility of nostalgia by invalidating the linear perspective of time through the theme of reincarnation. Instead of presenting it as a moment forever lost, the novel displaces the Mexico of the 1950s and incorporates it within a cyclical conception of time, fitting it into a recursive temporality where the city and its organization becomes just one of the many manifestations of human possibility. Under a view of reincarnation inspired in Hinduism, particularly in the *Bhagavad Gita*, the loss of the city is not insurmountable if set in the larger narrative of Jerónimo's eternal existence where loss is always simultaneous to finding and recuperating: 'En su calidad de niño de cuarenta mil años sabía de amores y tenía clarísimo que la ciudad de México era el mayor que había tenido en este turno, aun si era un amor cojo: también sabía que los héroes de verdad se enamoran de las feas' (Enrigue, 157). As he looks at the city for the last time before moving to Philadelphia, Jerónimo appreciates his love for it as part of the many loves of his existence and he does so without idealisation by acknowledging that Mexico City is ugly. The changes that city and society are undergoing at the moment of Jerónimo's narration do not appear as the end of an era, as in *Las batallas*. Places, for Jerónimo, can become cherished but in his consciousness of time they are seen as transitory. The character can develop attachments to places but with the awareness that he is in permanent movement, which allows him to anticipate future detachments. A cyclical conception of unbounded, infinite personal time, and the simultaneous presence of memories from diverse spatially-located moments over that time, combine to modify Jerónimo's experience of the past by bracketing the meaning of 'forever'. Here, 'forever' stops being a future unreachable by Jerónimo to become his present state of existence where he can no longer lose anything forever because he inhabits the temporality of infinity; for Jerónimo 'forever' is a continuous present. Time, under this perspective, can always be re-claimed, relationships re-established, past conflicts solved or re-lived and crisis, in cyclical time, is both recurrent and transitory: 'eventually time lost will be instituted once again' (Shaw and Chase 3).

The temporal logic of the novel challenges conceptions of permanence and loss and replaces the rationality of forward-looking progress with the accept-

ance of multi-directional transformation. *Vidas*'s disarticulation of nostalgia brings to mind Beck's description of the way in which people experience growing individualization in societies of the late modernity. As the author explains, people cannot visualize 'a unified image' of society because 'the temporal horizons of perception narrow more and more, until finally in the limiting case *history shrinks to the eternal present*, and everything revolves around the axis of one's personal ego and personal life' (Beck, 135). Beck describes the way in which, due to individualization, historical knowledge becomes so fragmented that history loses its cohesive force since people understand only a personal present tense. The perception of time in Beck's process of individualization can be read as one of the principles underlying Jerónimo's narration of his memories. As Assman argues, '[m]emory is knowledge with an identity-index, it is knowledge about oneself, that is, one's own diachronic identity' (114). A diachronic identity implies a present sense of identity that comprizes the many senses of belonging embraced by the subject throughout her or his lifetime. Under this perspective, identity shifts from being a set category, to become the very essence of subject-formation as an ongoing negotiation of social forces, external influences and attachments that enter personal historical narratives. Jerónimo's perennial transformation is thus a confirmation of the centrality of the individual over a collective understanding of history, in which the latter fails to be grasped.

A second condition for nostalgia's existence is a certain belief that the present is defective, incomplete or that it has failed to fulfill expectations (Shaw and Chase, 3). *Las batallas*'s contemplation of the past can be nostalgic because, looking back from a distant present, Mexico city did not crystallize the promised utopia of '[c]iudades limpias, sin injusticia, sin pobres, sin violencia, sin congestiones, sin basura' (Pacheco, 15). The present from which Carlos speaks is decisively deficient, with its origins in a traumatic transition to modernity. In contrast, in *Vidas*, the sense of a deficient present is invalidated using the early 1950s not as the moment that needs to be recaptured but as the starting point for the narration: the point of arrival and not the point of departure. Both accounts – that of Carlos and that of Jerónimo – coincide in their insightful concern with personal memory and both consistently thematize its workings, shortfalls and implications vis-à-vis a collective (post/national) life: 'Me acuerdo, no me acuerdo...' (Pacheco, 1), says Carlos in the opening line of *Las batallas*; '¿Te acuerdas?' (Enrique, 234), Jerónimo asks insistently in the last scene of *Vidas*. Yet, Jerónimo's account looks at the 1940s and 1950s with irony but this period is not evaluated as a failure: in the narrative there is no Mexican past or Mexican future to assess the situation during *alemanismo*. Moreover, Jerónimo has already experienced the shortcomings of human social organization many times before. His Mexican

present is no more a failure than his many pasts: there is no difference between the violence of prehistory and of Roman times; between the corruption within the Greek empire and the kingdom of Naples in the fifteenth century; or between the moral hypocrisy in the fifth century BCE and in twentieth-century Lagos de Moreno.

It is true that Enrigue's text is critical of poverty and conservadurism in Mexico but this criticism does not address the specificities of the transformations of Mexico in the middle of the twentieth-century. Mexico, it seems, is chosen as the place from which to disarm the nostalgic gaze not through the denunciation of unifying discourses of home and origin nor through the problematization of the personal memory of modernity as a contradictory experience. Instead, by choosing Mexico as the setting in which Jerónimo casts his personal memory and by positioning this memory in a cyclical time that cannot be subdued by the logic of modernity, the novel dismantles any nostalgic readings of the past – personal and collective. As follows, *Vidas* subtly challenges the very concept of Mexican history as a source of communal identity and belonging. This is made possible due to the way in which personal memory is articulated as a meta-historical narrative in the novel. During his Mexican life Jerónimo becomes aware of all of his past lives; he summons them and gives them a voice. In this manner, Mexico enters a horizontal flux of spatial and temporal coordinates of belonging where all places of origin hold equal importance. In this way, the novel uses the chronotope of the early 1950s in Mexico as a setting from which to recast memory as a problem of a hyperindividualized subject, a subject who exceeds identity labels (Mexican, male, child, upper-class, educated, Catholic) and for whom spatiotemporal location is contingent. This displacement of Mexico as a central and stable literary space counters nationalist discourses that build a communal identity through an appeal to 'a political and territorial ideology' that claims, seeks or defends a territory 'in the name of the 'nation'' (Storey, 15). The very concept of the nation – of a shared origin, history and homeland (Anderson) – does not hold any meaning in the context of a territorial multiplicity that fosters many conflicting and passing belongings. Jerónimo's 'expansive' self complicates a picture of emergence since his belonging to the Mexican social body is blurred and made ambiguous by his meta-historical status, that is, by his belonging to other social bodies in the past.

#### **4. New Emergence: Recovering the Voice and Making Memory Present**

What kind of emergence, then, is being represented in Enrigue's novel of formation? There are two moments of emergence in *Vidas* that I consider

indicate a reflection not on the Mexican past but, instead, on the social conditions at the transition of the centuries, particularly for urban and mobile subjects. These moments, which I analyse below, focus on the emergence of an individual detached from his social context, a character that in a sense transcends this context. What this means for literature is the renewal of the language and the form of the Mexican novel to articulate identities beyond the traditional narratives centred on the nation and its identity. I have signalled before how spatial reflection becomes central to this mode of literary surveying of a new way of being-in-the-world; Jerónimo's trans-historical placement and displacement is a prime example of such spatialisation of history.

The first aspect to note about the type of subject that *Vidas* develops is Jerónimo's position regarding his social context in his present life. Arguably, Jerónimo is the embodiment of a contemporary sense of 'unbelonging', where no group or framing suffices to 'root' him and where pre-existing power structures unsuccessfully attempt to define his position regarding a dubious inside/outside binary. The son of a rich family but living 'una vida autoabsorta de idiota' (Enrique, 42), he is removed from his class privileges and exiled to live with the servants at the age of six because his legal father suspects he is not his son. The label of 'bastard' sets him outside the family unit but his mother secretly visits him, positioning him in an ambiguous situation of rejection and acceptance. He is also banned from attending school and therefore from making friends with children of his age and instead is sent to work at the family's bakery. His legal father abhors him and he has a detached, guilt-ridden relationship with his mother, who eventually gives him up to her sister Matilde in order to run away with her lover. Jerónimo is mostly silent and is always put in competition with his younger brother, with whom he fails to establish a significant brotherly bond because they are separated at a young age. During his childhood, his only contact with the social world is an old, similarly lonely woman, 'la señora fenicia'. The extent of his loneliness is exposed in their interactions: 'Buenos días, Jerónimo. Buenas noches, Jerónimo. No siempre con sarcasmo' (79). The novel's humour underscores the pathetic elements of Jerónimo's isolation, in which his rare moments of company are full of spite and hostility.

When he suddenly moves to Mexico City, he is stigmatized as an outsider, having a different accent, manners and way of dressing than children from Mexico City. Nevertheless, Jerónimo does not identify with his provincial background because, living as a servant, he did not have a deep grounding in Lagos de Moreno. When Jerónimo moves to the United States, he is again set aside as having a 'papel intermedio' between foreigners and locals: 'mi lengua nativa no era el inglés, pero no tenía pensión completa porque pasaba los

sábados y domingos con mis tíos en el centro de la ciudad' (163). Moreover, he is a voracious reader, has an uncommon wisdom for his age and an introverted personality that sets him aside from his peers. Jerónimo has an indefinite standing regarding all the communities to which he apparently belongs while at the same time being (at least partially) excluded from them all.

In its comical account of Jerónimo's coming of age, Enrígue's novel shows that disciplining institutions such as the family, the school and the discourse of nationalism fail to contain the character in a stable set of identity labels. Jerónimo's marginality highlights what Beck calls '*the contrasts between institutionally planned and socially valid normality*' (134). The critic argues that traditional institutions such as religion or the family promote ideals of normality increasingly impossible to achieve. The façades projected by traditional institutions appear as the normative discursive ideal that cannot encompass the actual subjectivities of late modernity. From his alienated position, the emergence of Jerónimo is already set to be individual and to depend upon the development of '*an ego-centred world view*' that is able to resolve the 'frictions, disharmonies and contradictions within and among [his] individual biographies' (Beck, 137). This individualized emergence is represented in two ways: as the recuperation of the personal voice and as the intersection of Jerónimo's contradictory memories in one present and concrete spacetime.

Emergence in *Vidas* is, firstly, attached to the recuperation of a unitary voice of enunciation. The irony-loaded text sets off with an apparently objective narration of the life of Jerónimo, where the first episodes are recounted in a plain and dispassionate tone by an apparently detached researcher who acts as a limited narrator. These episodes alternate with first person accounts by different characters (Jerónimo's past selves) who tell their own life experiences and displace the narration from the moment of enunciation to the moment of the events narrated; from the abstract, undefined Mexican space from which the narrative is composed to the past sites where Jerónimo's lives unravelled. In this manner, the workings of personal memory – understood as all the recollections of one individual – and their role in the constitution of an individual's subjectivity are represented through the narration of the memories of an array of characters that are essentially the same being.

It can be argued that Jerónimo's early years are less personal to himself as a child subjected to his mother's desires than are his past lives where he had been a full adult and was in command of his actions. This distinction is made clear in the alternation of narrators and the composition of the novel as a 'surprise' autobiography. It is unclear who the limited narrator is until the last third of the novel, when it is revealed that Jerónimo is telling his own story to his teacher and friend, John, a Jesuit priest. This detachment of Jerónimo from the narration of his own life is progressively blurred by episodes where

Jerónimo's past lives share the same textual space, generating a constant leap back and forth in time. This movement in space and time through narration grows in frequency and tends towards a presentation of simultaneity in situations temporarily and physically removed from one another. For example, in an early scene, Jerónimo intends to compare the amount of suffering he had to undergo in his different childhoods. Thus, he presents a numbered list of his previous infancies. The list commences with a descriptive title, for example, '1. Niño judío (Florencia, 1531)' (Enrigue, 96), and then includes three subsections neatly labelled: 'a. *Vejaciones*', 'b. *Compensaciones*', 'c. *Comparativo*' (96–97). Here the place of the past is clarified, contained by textual markers, ranked and dominated by the narrator. But in the next chapter, the testimony of Jerónimo as a young Greek woman is suddenly interrupted by an episode in Jerónimo's life in Mexico City when his grandmother and the father of his friend Severo come to take him and his friend away: 'Me aplané como pude las faldas de la túnica y corrí a darle la bienvenida. En el umbral de la puerta que abrió la criada estaban la abuela y el padre de Severo' (108). In the first instance, memory is inspected like an object of scientific study. As memories unfold, however, this exercise of quantification of the past soon loses its currency. By mixing temporalities, spaces and their textual display, the novel questions the dispassionate arrangement and rational appropriation of the past and instead suggests an individual arrangement that is fluid, subjective and nonhierarchical.

The constant alternation of narrators is broken when Jerónimo is sent to Philadelphia to live on his own and he parts from his mother and his aunt Matilde:

Jerónimo tiene la certeza de que cuando se subió a la escalerilla del Pullman iba de la mano de Matilde. Cuatro días después se bajaron en Penn Station. Ella *me tendió* la palma para ayudarme a bajar y yo la rechacé ... Así, pisé Filadelfia, mi nueva ciudad, no sé si siendo yo mismo, pero más pleno de mí que nunca. [emphasis added] (158)

The change from the third to the first person symbolically articulates Jerónimo's emergence into adulthood as the moment where he obtains a personal voice and, at the same time, the instant where he is able to affirm his self by 'owning' the spaces he occupies, as for instance qualifying Philadelphia as 'mi nueva ciudad' (158). This emergence is represented physically in the refusing of his aunt's hand, which evokes the image of the little child attached to her or his caregivers. In a motif that recalls Padilla's short story, by letting go, the 'bridge' that attached Jerónimo to his infancy is severed. He descends from the Pullman without help, taking responsibility for his own life which in his case means becoming the enunciator of his memories.

This transition is then translated to the composition of the novel, where episodes of alternation between Jerónimo's present and past incarnations appear more frequently until they disrupt the structure of individual phrases. For instance, in the final chapter, the text mixes the moment when Jerónimo returns from his date with Tita with the moment when, as an Indian Brahmin, he leaves his hometown to follow the Buddha. Whereas at first these transitions are marked by the end of a section, and then by the end of a paragraph and the beginning of another, at the end of the novel the convergence places in contiguity, disparate elements in the same sentence: 'Salvo los monos [in India], todo estaba dormido y desde el interior del taxi la ciudad de México, en su hora desolada –la mejor–, se veía como una belleza muerta' (225). It can be noted that Jerónimo's emergence into adulthood is accompanied by a train journey across the Mexican and American territory that leads to an eventual transnational relocation. In a sense, Jerónimo's belonging to himself, to a point where he is 'pleno de sí', involves a detachment from his previous context of belonging in his Mexican life: his family, his city, his country and his mother tongue. This is accompanied by a break in syntax in the text, a juxtaposition of contradictory, non-sequential elements that rearticulate the personal narrative and break any attempted unity of the main character. Jerónimo's reappropriation of his memories does not translate into internal agreement. On the contrary, Jerónimo's inner disjunction, as reflected by his narration, produces an incomplete and fragmental individualized subjectivity that 'is self-produced and continues to be produced' (Beck, 135).

While Jerónimo's emergence as an adult in his life as a Mexican teenager involves an appropriation of the narrative voice, at this moment Jerónimo is not yet sure of being himself (although he is 'pleno'). During his time in Philadelphia, the novel's protagonist undertakes a series of readings in order to understand his past. However, this process is not complete until the character's contradictory memories are summoned all together in one concrete space-time. At the opening of the novel, the limited narrator talks about Jerónimo's first memory, which combines both his past and present lives. When the brother of his legal father visits the family, this recollection 'se le desató al contemplar la cara del hermano de don Eusebio, una cara levemente demencial con unos ojos demasiado verdes que parecían tener la facultad de partirla a uno en dos el cráneo' (Enrique, 27). This remembrance from Jerónimo's childhood is interrupted as the next section begins with a first person narration by a blacksmith from the Germanic tribes settled in the northernmost region of the Rhine during the Roman Empire. The text abruptly dislocates the reader turning from Lagos de Moreno to the village of Marsia. 'Estaba lloviendo en Marsia' (28), says the narrator who follows the toponymic information with a description of the landscape and its character-

istics: 'como casi siempre'. The episode in Marsia ends when '[u]n legionario de ojos verdes helados blandía su espada' against the narrator who closes his eyes 'antes de que la descargara contra mi cabeza' (30). This concludes the recollection and cuts back to Jerónimo's infancy. However, instead of following a chronological evolution, the prolepsis takes the story to the time before the visit of the uncle and before Jerónimo had this recollection. These leaps in spacetime from the encounter in Lagos de Moreno to Marsia, and then to the time before the encounter, construct personal memory as a space of simultaneity in narration. The sentiment is achieved through the ubiquity of the eyes of Jerónimo's uncle.

The eyes of Jerónimo's uncle operate metonymically to signify a recurrent malevolent presence in Jerónimo's existence. At the beginning of the novel, Jerónimo's encounters with this pair of eyes are separated from his present life spatially and temporally. In the memory from Marsia, for example, the spatial distance is achieved through the description of the foreign Germanic landscape. In the same way, temporal separation is conveyed by some sparse historical indicators such as the presence of legionaries and the mention of the tribe of the Usipetes. This spatiotemporal distance is overcome once Jerónimo sees his uncle when he is already a teenager in Philadelphia and fortuitously runs into him. At the moment of their encounter, staring into his uncle's face, Jerónimo recovers an instantaneous memory that is played out in a cinematic fashion:

Entonces lo reconocí: sus ojos fríos mientras me partían la cabeza en la Marsia inclemente, el cuello de la gabardina alzada en la noche de la tormenta de Lagos en la que padecí mi primer recuerdo, la facha impenetrable del padre Santiago y otras mil vidas que se habían ido acumulando una sobre otra en la pared ya infranqueable de mi descomposición eterna. (194–95)

Jerónimo's revelation summons all of his memories into his present existence, which grants him a self-awareness that can now be paired to the ownership of a narrative voice. What is noteworthy, then, is that Jerónimo's burdensome yet cathartic grasp of his entire personal memory only becomes clear 'en la floración de la culpa' (195). With self-awareness comes, for Jerónimo, the realization of his patricidal pasts; he has murdered his father in several of his past lives. Anxiety becomes part of Jerónimo's emergence. What is more, he does not have a group to depend on or a set of beliefs to overcome his angst. He emerges as an individualized being whose experience cannot be shared and whose bonds of belonging are temporary and will be broken. Emergence, in the novel, happens as a two-fold process. On the one hand, Jerónimo's concentration of all his memories into awareness produces

an affirmation: he is able to master his personal narrative and rewrite the murderous cycle that has repeated through time by avoiding a confrontation with his father. On the other hand, it generates apprehension because he becomes mindful of his past crimes and of the futility of attempting to reconcile his 'autobiografías acumuladas' because 'serían infinitas si fueran honestas y quisieran ser completas' (211).

## 5. Embodiment and the Spatialization of the Self

Until now, I have referred to the relevance of space in the description of the new type of subject-formation that is proposed in a number of works of twenty-first-century fiction in Mexico. To frame this discussion, I have showed that in the second half of the twentieth-century, Mexican fictions operated under a revisionist historical logic that employed spaces such as the geography of Mexico City to allegorize the relationship between the individual, the social body and the nation. I exemplified the literary thematisation of history, identity and space through an analysis of nostalgia in Pacheco's novella. A clouded sense of belonging is particularly evident in *Las batallas* where Carlos's relationship to the city shows the tension that originates from inscribing the transformations of the urban landscape in his personal memory. Here, nostalgia is a particularly useful category because its analysis reveals the ways in which temporal understandings and spatial perceptions are configured in memory. Moreover, it shows how personal and collective memory intertwine in Carlos's narrative and how his personal emergence, his harrowing growth into adulthood through the partial interiorisation of social discourses, is necessarily a social emergence. However, as I have shown, in *Vidas* memory operates as a way of exploring identity beyond collectivizing labels and outside society's discursive control. An analysis of nostalgia in this case – or of its impossibility – reveals a re-scaling of the role of Mexican national identity in the literary conception of Enrique's subject. Jerónimo is now a Mexican teenager but this label is greatly surpassed by the life experience of his multiple reincarnations. Specifically, *Vidas* exposes a disparity between history, as a collectivizing discourse, and personal history, as a source of subject-formation. This disagreement in *Vidas* plays out as an actual incompatibility between collective historical narratives and personal narratives. For example, Jerónimo holds lengthy discussions with his history teacher, where the character 'discutía con tanto desnudo su [the teacher's] necia jerarquización de ciertos hechos que en realidad no importaron en lo más mínimo' (165). Jerónimo's experience does not challenge historical narratives in a revisionist attempt to rewrite history from a different angle. It goes further, questioning whether Jerónimo's experi-

ence can even fit historical narratives at all.

Above I have argued that in recent Mexican fiction history is spatialized. I have explained that spatialization is explored as a means of examining contemporary subjectivities outside the traditional framework that reads history in literature as a discourse directly linked to collective often national identity, as in many of the novels by Carlos Fuentes (b. 1928), Elena Poniatowska (b. 1932), and Fernando del Paso (b. 1935). In *Vidas*, history is still a theme of reflection and the main character mentally travels through many historical locations taking the reader on a journey through space and time. Jerónimo, nevertheless, appears to be beyond history. By appertaining to many temporalities, his identity cannot be pinned down, grounded to a stable source of belonging. From this perspective, Jerónimo's meta-historical status operates under the logic of individualization where, according to Beck, '[a]s people are removed from social ties and privatized ... forms of perception become private, and at the same time ... they become *ahistorical*' (Beck, 135). Beck here is referring to the fact that individualization in late modern societies leads to a loss of historical awareness and temporal referents because the temporal horizons are reduced to that of the individual's personal life. Although apparently opposed to Jerónimo's extensive historical knowledge, this phenomenon coincides with the way in which Jerónimo's temporal horizon is the one and only overarching axis to conjugate historical experience within the text. Since history becomes flattened from its collectivizing narrative thickness into one individual memory, national discourses of identity built on history lose relevance.

Jerónimo's movement through space as a form of recuperation of personal memory replaces the representation of the collective spirit in historical discourse. Beck argues that '[w]hile governments (still) operate within the structure of nation states, biography is already being opened to the world society' (137). Jerónimo's multiple embodiments and his movements through time and space represent that opening of his biography to the world since, as Beck says 'world society becomes a *part* of biography' (137). Spatialization acts as a different manner of framing the subject's coming-of-age experience. What happens in the novel, thus, is an 'explosion' of trajectories where the many intersected identities of Jerónimo are spatially represented as 'three-dimensional volume[s] that the 'self' both occupies and is' (Kirby, 184). This means that Jerónimo's displacements and replacements are embodied and his subjectivity shaped by actual lived material experiences. His incarnations 'están todos inmersos en el mundo de los sentidos, escupen saliva, se limpian las uñas, y como no son momias, sudan' (Fuentes, 'Las Vidas').

The three-dimensionality of each embodiment gives substance to the otherwise merely discursive (ideological) notions of subject-formation and

identity. This is particularly relevant vis-à-vis discourses of national history. In *Las batallas* ‘Mexicans became modern’ but such an assumption leaves little, if any, space for Carlos’s individual body, affects, and desires. The relationship between Carlos’s social emergence and his personal maturity is abstract, forged in the contradictions between social and national discourses. For example, his family rejects Carlos’s friendships using abstract categories for Othering: not ‘cristeros’, divorced, not decent (Pacheco, 21). In a way, Carlos’s identity is defined as a discursive subject-position that counters and incorporates national and social historical narratives. In contrast, Jerónimo’s incarnations are beyond a location in national and social discourse although they are labelled: cazamonjes Napolitano, Niña criolla de Curazao, Principito maya. The protagonist’s personal history falls outside national history precisely because it is not only territorial or more exactly, it is multiterritorial and the boundary of its situatedness cannot be imagined, much less drawn. Moreover, Jerónimo’s displacement is accompanied by a chronological disorder that prevents the creation of a universalizing and ordered narrative such as the ones provided by ‘world history’. In other words, the movements in space and time break the syntax of episodes, paragraphs and sentences and also, the syntactical arrangement of forward-looking all-encompassing historical narratives.

The gaps of Jerónimo’s disordered account expose a refusal to be captured and incorporated into any legitimizing process of a national culture or a national identity. Through a very explicit and sensorial embodiment, history is spatialized, used as a setting more than a narrative, losing its social homogenizing currency, as exemplified by Jerónimo’s incarnation as a Greek woman in the first century. Throughout several passages, she recounts how she had reached an age where she was ready to ‘ser traficada’ (107) by which she means entering a marriage of convenience. She says: ‘Yo tenía dieciséis años, las nalgas duras y el pelo rubio. Tal vez tuviera los ojos demasiado saltones, pero contaba con el mejor par de tetas de Filadelfia’ (107). In her narration, Jerónimo’s incarnation shows a profound awareness of her social role and her economic and ethnic standing in her historical context. Her gendered, youthful body influences this position. As with Padilla’s short story, in the Greek woman the body is a space of subject-formation that, placed in a determined context, is generated and generates social discourses and a subject-position. As Kirby explains, ‘subjects ... are tied into political commitments and ethical positions by nature of being tied into particular material spaces, like bodies or countries’ (175). What happens in the novel is an uncanny dissolution of identity markers, a blurring of borders and categories, which become tenuous. Having also being formed as a subject in the lived body of a Greek woman, what is Jerónimo then?

## **6. Ambivalence and National Context: Challenges for the Individualized Literary Subject**

In *Vidas*, the emergence of subjectivity is addressed in a playful, cynical manner as a messy process that leaves plenty of open ends and inconsistencies. The self can be narrated and made sense of through the verbal concatenation of personal memories but contradictions cannot be disentangled. This, I propose, is the kind of subjectivity that is being conveyed in twenty-first-century Mexican fiction. The emergence of the subject is no longer as social as it is individual. In a fast-changing sociopolitical context, people have lost their traditional bearings and cannot comply with institutionalized narratives of normality and belonging.

I have so far offered a reading of Enrigue's novel to show that subjectivity in contemporary Mexican literature is influenced but not determined by sociohistorical circumstances. Moreover, novels like *Vidas* demonstrate that due to growing and faster transnational and virtual mobility, individuals can now identify with multiple historical narratives. In twenty-first-century fictions, the contemporary subject is open-ended, in constant formation, and its boundaries do not 'necessarily overlap' with each other nor are 'effected simultaneously' (Kirby, 188). If, as Althusser reminds us, becoming a subject is the result of a haling or interpellation by ideological forces (104–106), it becomes evident that the contemporary individual is a disoriented subject who is interpellated, by political, historical and economic discourses and that faces limitations, oppressions and power struggles brought about by new institutions of socialisation such as the labour market and the media. At the same time, nonetheless, this interpellation 'creates more than it ever meant to, signifying excess of any intended referent' (Butler, 122), meaning that the subject that emerges does not fit neatly in the identity labels the names she or he is being called. It is in this excess, in the 'slippage between discursive command and its appropriated effect' (122) that individuals can find a ground for negotiation and resistance. The fear that Beck voices regarding new individualized subjects is that the 'excessive demand' of choices and stances generates the 'opposite reaction of not listening, simplifying and apathy' (Beck, 137). Contemporary Mexican authors such as Enrigue seem to be rising up to the challenge of indifference, dwelling on the 'signifying excesses', without losing their scepticism.

It should be noted that in this analysis I have only discussed one conception of the subject – although arguably the paradigmatic case – in contemporary Mexican writing. The individualized subject of late modernity that is represented in several works of twenty-first-century fiction is not the only representation of subjectivity available in Mexico's literary production.

In fact, there are other subjectivities being put forward as well, some of which thrive in the exploration of territorial attachments, such as the very visible 'literatura del desierto'.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, there are many questions left unanswered in the ambiguous positioning regarding identity and belonging advanced by the literary manifestations studied in this paper. For instance, the space of the Mexican nation cannot be erased and, although diminished, it reappears in many of the texts. Opposing authorial intention and the opinion of some critics (Beltrán; González Boixo), this ambivalence regarding national belonging questions whether an actual transcendence of the national category has been or could ever be achieved. Moreover, the processes by which artistic products become incorporated into national cultural narratives are beyond the control of authorship and respond to a very complex structure of cultural power, regardless of the critical distance that authors of this generation take towards nationalist discourses and definitions of cultural identity.

It is in this context of contradiction between the state, cultural institutions and individual drives that many authors are using literature to address the impact that Mexico's late modernity has had on the shape of the lives of individuals who understand themselves 'beyond the nation' (Appadurai, 158). Revisiting old forms such as the *Bildungsroman* and learning the lessons of their postmodern predecessors while challenging their assumptions regarding the 'dissolution of the subject', younger generations are revising widespread ideas about historical memory and national identity to craft a site from which to deploy their own premises of fiction. These writers recognize the absence of a literary language to convey their disjointed experience of the world which is streaked by disenchantment but also by a growing, undirected ethical awareness. Against triumphalist readings of individualism, these urban, mobile and educated intellectuals are reclaiming a literary voice; they are using literature's sense-making potential to voice the anxieties of their space and time.

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12 For an overview of this form of literature, see Guzmán and Rodríguez Lozano.

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