

Chapter 1

Posthuman *Porteños*: Cyborg Survivors in Argentine Narrative and Film

Manuel Puig's *Pubis angelical* creates a curious temporal frame around Argentina's Dirty War. The novel was published in 1976 as the Videla Junta took oppressive control of the chaos of Isabela de Perón's failed government, and Raúl Torres's film adaptation appeared in 1982 as the chaos of the junta's failed government drew the dictatorship to a close. The narrative centers on the body of a woman that is repeated through various points in time from 1970s Argentina backward through 1940s noir Hollywood and forward into a science fiction dystopic world. In all time periods and with each female character, the woman's body is presented as traumatized, ravaged by illness, by heartbreak, by surgery; all these traumas are represented symbolically in an artificial heart that ticks like a clock within her. The film draws especially upon science fiction tropes as it presents a series of scenes in which the mechanism of her heart is viewed in conjunction with larger machinery even as it rests on her incised flesh. What makes the appearance of the film in 1982 even more significant than its function as a bookend to the dictatorship is that it shares its debut with one of the most significant films in the history of science fiction cinema and a principal film in the corpus of posthuman studies, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, the adaptation of Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* The way in which Puig creates a cyborg woman who is a survivor of dictatorship as a person

and as a text—the filmic text “surviving” the censorship of the dictatorship—heralds a meditation on cyborg identity in Argentina that extends from Puig to Ricardo Piglia to Alicia Borinsky to Carlos Gamerro as well as suggests a new way to read yet another film from 1982, Adolfo Aristarain’s *Tiempo de revancha*.

Of all the literary and cinematic texts that have occupied the attention of theorists of cyborg and posthuman identity, *Blade Runner* is likely the most commented upon. It appears as an exemplary model in Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” and runs throughout the pages of N. Katherine Hayles’s *How We Became Posthuman*. The cover of the excellent collection of posthuman feminist essays, *The Gendered Cyborg*, displays a picture of the character Pris (Daryl Hannah), an android, playing with a dismembered Barbie and the film figures prominently in many of the essays that the collection includes.¹ The film’s representation of the android as menacing in its biological ambiguity and its centering of the ambiguity on female characters have provided excellent material for critical and theoretical attempts to plumb identity in the late twentieth century. Furthermore, the way in which cyborg identity challenges rigid patriarchal hierarchies, promising subversive hybridities and fusions where capitalism and sexism attempted separations and categorization, meant that the cyborg could become the champion of late feminism, especially in the theories of Donna Haraway. As she observed: “The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed. Far from signaling a walling off of people from other living beings, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleurably tight coupling” (1991: 152). In that critical context, Pris and the more principal character Rachel suggest that disturbing power. But, as noted before, the early 1980s was a time rife with female androids and cyborgs in general, appearing in such unexpected places as late dictatorship Argentina.

At this point we should turn briefly to an analysis of cyborg and posthuman theory as it currently stands, and especially to cyborg identity as Haraway has imagined it. Her “Cyborg Manifesto” has been particularly influential in the cultural theory of the past decade. The revolutionary possibilities of the boundary-crossing cybernetic life forms that fuse organic body

with mechanical prostheses, both real and metaphorical, have found an important place in much of postmodern thought where the rigid hierarchies of earlier systems of thinking have come under critique. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri hold up her ideas as visionary and influential in their description of Empire, noting as follows: “Donna Haraway’s cyborg fable, which resides at the ambiguous boundary between human, animal, and machine, introduces us today, much more effectively than deconstruction, to these new [revolutionary] terrains of possibility” (218). The hybridity she describes as central to cyborg identity has become emblematic of late twentieth-century postmodernity and her work has been extended and developed by many critics and theorists, especially by those who work on issues of posthuman identity. Hayles explains that this hybridity is essential to the conception of the posthuman: “[T]he posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals” (1999: 3).

It is important to note that posthuman identity includes both the physical reality of flesh fused to metal and the metaphorical combinations that occur with the daily interactions between organic body and technology. Posthumans can have artificial implants, but they can also have an identity based on the relationship between them and their machines. It is the seamlessness between organic and technological body—the absence of traditional boundaries that keep humans, machines, and animals in their previously assigned places—that identifies and empowers posthuman and cyborg identity.

Haraway specifically describes the cyborg as female, a machine-animal hybrid with important possibilities for the women’s movement, well suited to challenge the hierarchies she sees as inherent in patriarchal capitalism. Haraway defines cyborg identity in the following manner:

A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important

political construction, a world-changing fiction. . . . The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion. (1991: 149)

Haraway combines the hybridity, the seamlessness, of the post-human identity that Hayles would later describe with the revolutionary role of feminist theory. In that sense, the cyborg ideal suggests an alternate societal construction that would afford, according to Haraway, a way to escape the oppression perpetuated in noncyborg societies.

In Haraway's view one of the sources of the cyborg's power lies in its avoidance of Western notions of origin and unity and subverting traditions that maintain these boundaries, despite the presence of machines that hark to the military-industrial complexes that first generated them. Again, Haraway explains:

The cyborg skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense. This is its illegitimate promise that might lead to subversion of its teleology as star wars. . . . The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family, this time without the Oedipal project. The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust. The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential. (151)

Haraway's cyborg occupies, then, a central (if one can use such terminology while talking about cyborg theory) role in theories of gender and revolution against accepted power structures. Her cyborg views origin stories as immaterial to the struggle against "patriarchal capitalism" dismissing its provenance as inessential to the power of its myth. If cyborgs were first conceived within capitalism, their hybrid bodies erase the father as neatly as they avoid the familial structures that have provided

the meaning for terms such as “father” and “mother.” As theorists of the posthuman, Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston, have argued the posthuman body is also a “postfamilial” body (10). It is also for this reason that Haraway’s theories have been used persuasively in the analysis of texts that propose similar revolutions in the construction of gender.

The first scene of De la Torres’s adaptation of Puig’s novel displays an operation in which surgeons remove an artificial heart from a woman’s body. The camera pans to show a group of men observing the surgery, contemplating the female body with a mix of medical detachment and sexual desire. The camera then shifts to a series of close-ups that alternate between the scalpel cutting the woman’s skin, the sutures that circle the woman’s chest, and the masculine gazes emanating from both the male observers as well as the angelic statues that fill the room. The collection of shots emphasizes the technological nature of the woman’s body, not only in the clockwork heart that is removed from her chest but in the montage of scalpel, flesh, and statue. The scalpel, especially, functions as a phallic object, metallic and penetrating and in whose function we see the application of the mechanical to the organic as it acts as the prosthetic extension of the desiring male gaze. After the surgery the camera lingers on the sutures that help the body recover from the trauma of the surgery even as they act as markers of that invasion, announcing the presence of the artificial heart and archiving the physical pain and deformation that the surgery caused. The film then continues to recount the story of Ana, recuperating in a Mexican hospital while in exile from Argentina and the horrors that the nation experienced in the 1970s. Ana suffers from nightmares where she appears, alternately, as a 1940s Hollywood film star and a futuristic killer robot with both realities commenting on the themes of loss, deceit, trauma, and prosthesis.

The dreams in which Ana is a robot that can read men’s minds and is, therefore, dangerous, situate this cyborg figure in a well-known science fiction trope. Just as in *Blade Runner*, where the existence of inorganic replicants who are indistinguishable from humans challenges existing power structures, Ana-Robot is pursued as an inorganic threat to the power men

wield from their apparent ability to dissemble and conceal. The film follows Puig's novel in this representation, including various scenes in which she exercises her subversive power by killing her male antagonists before they are able to assassinate her. The fact that the film and the novel present Ana as robot and as 1940s film star creates a further connection with Ridley Scott's film. Mary Ann Doane argues as follows: "Yet, Rachel can be conceived only as a figure drawn from an earlier cinematic scene—1940s *film noir*—the dark and mysterious femme fatale with padded shoulders and 1940s hairdo" (119–20). This combination of female robot with female film archetype, both subversive figures, suggests that the protagonist of *Pubis angelical* participates in a cinematic tradition that not only includes the replicants of *Blade Runner* but the women of *film noir* as well as the classic Maria of Fritz Lang's 1927 *Metropolis*, yet another female robot that challenged male power hierarchies.²

At the same time, there is an important difference in the genesis of Puig's cyborg. If Rachel, and even Maria, appear as the results of economic forces and multinational corporations—Rachel and her fellow replicants are constructed by a corporation that then loses control of its products; Maria is the culmination of a desire to replace workers with machines in a Fordian vision of capitalism—Ana's cybernetic body is the result of the trauma caused by dictatorial oppression. Her body has no economic utility, it is not made for money, and consequently, she does not function as a cautionary tale of the dangers of capitalistic technophilia. Instead, the artificial heart that she bears functions as a necessary prosthetic for a woman who has, with the loss of her daughter, her country, and her health, developed the need for a new organ. In this way, the extraction of the future Ana's heart at the beginning of the film foreshadows the death of the 1970s Ana at the end.

In this sense we have in Ana a true cyborg body, a body whose continuing existence depends upon the fundamentally cybernetic relationship between organic flesh and technological prosthesis. Throughout the film, we see a strong semiotic connection between electronic apparatus and dictatorial trauma. By situating the plot on a series of flashbacks and dreams of the future that emanate from the hospital bed of a moribund

woman, the cybernetic body that begins the film functions as the oneiric memory of trauma that was suffered as a consequence of dictatorship. The painful experiences that produced the figurative loss of her heart occasion, then, the need for an artificial replacement. What this establishes is the idea of the cybernetic body as an emblem of trauma; the prosthesis that the cyborg carries bears testimony of the violence that caused the need for its presence. In this semiotic function, we see an important contribution to the cyborg theory that has sprung from *Blade Runner* and other U.S. and European science fiction. In fact, this articulation of the cybernetic body extends through several works of the postdictatorship, as we shall see, and suggests a reading of the decidedly nonscience fiction film, *Tiempo de revancha* by Adolfo Aristarain.

Upon first (and even subsequent) consideration, *Tiempo de revancha* does not present any kind of cyborg body—no science fiction robot as was so central to *Pubis angelical*. The film recounts the story of Federico Bengoa, an ex-montonero who has erased his past with his ties to leftist terrorism and now begins a new life as a demolitionist with Tulsaco—a multinational corporation that has hired him to oversee the explosives they use to mine copper in Patagonia. At the beginning of his employment he runs into an old friend from his leftist days who tells him of the safety violations at Tulsaco's mining operation and of his plan to take legal advantage of those abuses. The plan consists of provoking an avalanche in one of the explosions, hiding in a cave, and, when rescued, feigning muteness as a psychological reaction to the trauma of being buried alive. Bengoa decides to participate; but when they carry out the plan the friend is killed, and Bengoa is left to carry out the silent charade. The rest of the film follows Bengoa's legal battle against Tulsaco and ends with Bengoa having won a judgment but condemned to never speak again lest his deception be discovered. To assure his continued silence, he cuts out his tongue.

The image of prosthetic technology functions much more subtly in *Tiempo de revancha* than the artificial heart in *Pubis angelical*. At the same time, it fills a much more central role in the main themes of the film than did the clockwork heart that

mostly disappears after the opening sequence. From the beginning of the film, Aristarain creates the idea of an oppressive capitalistic apparatus whose nature is based upon the fusion of human body and mechanical prosthesis. One of the initial sequences shows Bengoa's arrival at the Tulsaco office building for the final interview pursuant to his receiving employment. Aristarain begins the sequence with an establishing shot that presents images of a modern city, Tulsaco appearing first in a metonymical identification between the corporation and the skyscraper that serves as Tulsaco's headquarters as well as the elevator that allows Bengoa's entrance. In the moment that Bengoa approaches the Tulsaco building Aristarain changes the shot from an establishing panoramic view to one that looks up at Bengoa from below, juxtaposing Bengoa and the building and associating their upright figures visually while emphasizing simultaneously Bengoa's smallness compared to the immensity of the corporation. In a literal sense, Tulsaco *is* the building and Bengoa is, then, swallowed by Tulsaco when he enters its body through the doors—an idea that Aristarain emphasizes with a series of shots that show Bengoa in the elevator and waiting in the corridors. Aristarain intercuts this series with close-ups of the gears, pulleys, and cables that drive the elevators as well as typewriters and other office equipment, all images that emphasize the mechanical and technological nature of the corporation within which Bengoa finds himself. This long sequence of shots, all situating Bengoa as one more cog in a series of Tulsaco components, further strengthens this swallowing idea; Tulsaco digests the human Bengoa and converts him figuratively into a part of its mechanical existence.

When the interview finally begins, the interviewer activates a large tape recorder that occupies an important place in the office as well as in the cinematic frame. The machine acts as the interviewer's superior, permitting the beginning of the interview only after it has been activated. The movement of the camera in this scene contributes to this idea as it moves from the interviewer to the machine and then to the photograph of the CEO of Tulsaco, creating visual relationships between the three as it simultaneously suggests a hierarchy of power. In this sense, the organic representation of the corporate power that is situated in

the interviewer's body is subjugated to the machine's ability to discipline the bodies of the people in the room. The recorder's ability to subject them to electronic surveillance controls the communicative options that the humans have. Here the organization of images is of particular importance as Aristarain places the recorder at the head of the table, establishing its presence as the head executive of the corporation while also functioning as the prosthetic ears of the photographic reproduction of the "human" CEO, Don Guido Ventura. The interaction between the interviewer and the recorder emphasizes this interpretation as it is only through the act of manually pressing a button that the human interviewer receives the permission he needs to begin the interview; physical contact with the machine serves as the conduit for the transfer of corporate authority. This recording is the first of a series of scenes in which Tulsaco maintains a prosthetic presence through a tape recorder that has, by now, become a fundamental extension of the biomechanical corporate body. This image is separate from one that is exclusively associated with a corrupt corporation, an image that merely attests to the dehumanizing effect of capitalism. While it certainly could include that view, it also determines the exercise of different kinds of power in the film. In the scenes that comprise the court case that Bengoa brings against Tulsaco after the accident and that he supposedly wins, we see a final image of a recorder—continuing to function in the presence of the different emblems of state power (the national seal and flag) while in the absence of the humans who have left the chambers. The fact that Tulsaco later produces these recordings apparently captured by the government merely underlines the connection between corporation and dictatorship that Aristarain suggests with the image of the tape recorder.

For this reason, when Tulsaco begins its persecution of Bengoa, it exercises its power through the recordings that the surveillance machine has produced. The tapes that the corporation sends him remind him of the ubiquitous presence of the tape recorders and, therefore, the ubiquitous presence of the corporation itself. Here we see the idea of a huge surveillance machine that functions because of its mix of organic body and technological apparatus; that is, its power stems from the direct

effect that the technology exercises on the body of those it surveys. The series of scenes in which Bengoa attempts to escape this surveillance, to make himself invisible to the sound-capturing devices that Tulsaco uses to construct its presence, emphasizes the creation of a kind of feedback loop between technological *recorder* and biological *recorded*. What I propose with this interpretation is the cybernetic body interpreted as the product of the process that Michel Foucault described in his analysis of the Panopticon. Foucault postulated the internationalization of surveillance, the idea that the presence of an agent of surveillance produces fundamental and internal changes in the body of the observed subject. He claims:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (201)

The language Foucault employs suggests the cyborg nature of surveillance; its agent is described as a machine that exists within the bodies of those subjected to surveillance. The explicit use of a machine as Panopticon in *Tiempo de revancha* suggests, then, that the body that is subjected to modern surveillance is necessarily a cyborg body; that is, a body whose behavior depends on the relationship between electronic prosthesis and organic flesh and whose genesis proceeds from the application of mechanical prosthesis to the victim's organic body.

Following this idea, the strategy of feigning dumbness as a way to attack the company has an important semiotic value. Deciding not to speak is the logical product of a body under surveillance attempting to resist the tape recorder that effects that supervision. It is for that reason that Bengoa's body converts itself into a subversive entity and escapes from mechanical control by refusing to produce the sounds that the recorder is

designed to control. In this way, his body becomes a paradox. It is simultaneously the silenced body of the victim of oppression; its trauma, supposedly organic, is the result of the abuses that have been visited upon that body. At the same time, it is a subversive body that resists further surveillance, a body made possible, ironically, by the very oppression that it now resists. It is, therefore, the absolute victim of surveillance and an emblem of resistance to that surveillance at the same time. It is in this paradox that Bengoa achieves his own personal power against Tulsaco. Being mute denies him the ability to tell his story, to vocalize the abuses that he suffered as a representative of the victims of the corporation. At the same time, being mute distinguishes him and, through this difference, converts him into evidence of those abuses—evidence that resists being silenced and forgotten.

Aristarain develops the paradox of the victim whose voice has been silenced and magnified simultaneously with a series of images that once again emphasize the cybernetic nature of the oppressed body. Upon losing his voice, Bengoa begins to acquire several prosthetic devices to resolve his newfound inability to communicate. He first uses a small chalkboard, employing the written word to replace the spoken. While we can interpret this image as a representation of the role of writing in resisting political and economic power, we can also see the chalkboard as a prosthetic extension of Bengoa's body—an artificial tongue that accomplishes what his organic tongue no longer can. Later, Bengoa's son-in-law gives him a "Speak and Spell" that he can use to speak and thus communicate orally with others. This machine extends the cybernetic nature of Bengoa's body much further than the chalkboard. The machine is not only a prosthetic tongue; it is his artificial voice, a voice that replaces the organic voice of the victim who has been traumatized by the violence that the victim has suffered. It is, at the same time, the hybrid production of written and pronounced word as the machine appears as a keyboard and only speaks the words that are typed into it—fusing, in a sense, the Derridean possibilities of the written word with those of the spoken word. Once again, the hybrid body of the cyborg becomes a particularly appropriate symbol of the hybrid body

of the victim of surveillance and dictatorial oppression. The “Speak and Spell” is the machine that fuses the cyborg body with Bengoa’s victimized body. Its machine state accompanies him; he wears it as a kind of necklace and, therefore, participates in the production of a body that is both organic and mechanic. The electronic voice that it emits is at once his voice, an aural representation of his intent, and a completely artificial voice of a machine, so computerized that it could never be mistaken as organic. In this contradiction we see once again the paradox to which I referred earlier. The machine restores the lost voice while it makes it impossible to cover up the trauma that caused the loss of speech in the first place. In that way, the electronic voice that the cyborg body uses with its mechanical tongue will always remind its hearers of the trauma that made its presence necessary.

The negotiation scene between Bengoa, his lawyer Dr. Larsen, and the CEO of Tulsaco Don Guido Ventura emphasizes this aspect of the Bengoa cyborg. Once again we see a sequence of shots that displays Bengoa’s entrance into a large building, but this time the machinery is explicitly associated with Bengoa’s body rather than with the building. Bengoa first appears in a long shot, his face set off by double necklace of chalkboard and “Speak and Spell”—two objects that have converted into extensions of his body, an image Aristarain perpetuates in a series of long and medium shots that always include Bengoa’s prosthetics. The moment when Bengoa rejects the offer is centered on the repeated electronic response, “no gracias” [no thank you], a response that marks a fundamental scene in the film. Aristarain accents this moment with a series of electronic beeps and chirps that accompany the computerized phrase, relating Bengoa’s resistance to his prosthetic tongue. The moment is climactic, then, on several levels. In terms of plot, it is the point at which Bengoa decides to eschew a monetary reward that a private settlement would bestow for the social justice that a public trial could achieve, a decision that affirms his father’s anarchist ideals. At the same time, this moment marks the revenge of the cyborg, a figure who is, after all, the product of the corrupt machinery of the corporation. If his association with Tulsaco provoked his literal transformation in cybernetic body, then the

power of this prosthetic body to speak without words of, and to testify to, the violence that brought it into being is the power that reveals Tulsaco's corruption.

The film ends with the unforgettable scene in which Bengoa shaves, puts on a shirt and tie, and then carefully cuts out his tongue. While this act can be interpreted persuasively as an extreme act of autocensorship, the reading that I have proposed of Bengoa and his cyborg body suggests an alternate understanding. In a literal way, Bengoa makes his conversion into a literal cyborg complete, his prosthetics are now a biological necessity rather than an aid to help him in his deception. That is, his mechanical tongues now testify to the true violence and the painful absence of flesh. In this sense, Bengoa accepts his new cybernetic status completely and violently, with all the possibilities and restrictions that this new identity offers just as we have seen throughout the film. Aristarain develops this version of Bengoa's identity, emphasizing the hybrid status of Bengoa's body with the cinematic cliché of the broken mirror that fractures Bengoa's reflection as he cuts out his tongue. In the case of Bengoa, the fissures in the mirror extend beyond the standard connection between a broken mirror and a schizophrenic subject that one generally sees in film. Here the cracks in the mirror foreshadow the cracks that will open in Bengoa's body, principally his mouth. At the same time they function as a cybernetic suture that opens and closes flesh simultaneously, multiplying images of Bengoa's face while they also fuse to create a reflection of an entire body that is made up of disparate pieces—both organic and mechanical. The victory of a cyborg Bengoa strengthens the persuasive interpretation that Juan Poblete has advanced in emphasizing Bengoa's subaltern situation.

La posición cabal del sujeto subalterno que se caracteriza por la resistencia (a menudo la burla) y la dislocación mimética que muchas veces el poder deja como único espacio de una respuesta posible, no se abre para Bengoa sino en el momento en que pierde el habla. La re-presentación del primer grado acaba cuando la segunda se instala. Desde el momento, Bengoa representa al subalterno y su cuerpo constituido y atravesado por el

poder, es a la vez el espacio en que la burla y la subversión se manifiestan. (117–18)

The consummate position of the subaltern subject that is characterized by resistance (and mockery) and the mimetic dislocation that power many times leaves as the only space for a possible answer is not opened for Bengoa except in the moment in which he loses his ability to speak. From that moment, Bengoa represents the subaltern figure and his body is constituted and crossed by power, it is at one the space in which mockery and subversion are manifested.³

The authentically cybernetic nature of Bengoa at the end of the film also suggests one of the possible sources of the subversive power accessible to the subaltern subject that ends up as the product of power as well as a threat to it.⁴

Bengoa's cyborged body with his prosthetic tongue acquires a subversive power that is based on the story that his silent body can tell because of the prostheses that he carries. The chalkboard and the "Speak and Spell" are scars that function to heal a mortal wound and testify to the trauma that opened that wound. *Tiempo de revancha* and *Pubis angelical* both present a species of wounded cyborg that has experienced the trauma of dictatorship and political violence, a species that is a cyborg because of that experience and that can then use its new identity to survive and resist the threatening political reality that has birthed it. If this new cyborg exercises a subversive power similar to that of *Blade Runner's* androids, its new power stems not from a "pleasurably tight coupling" of flesh and metal but from the horrible loss that necessitated that fusion. Bengoa and Ana also serve as a pattern for the Argentine cyborg that would find its most complete expression in Ricardo Piglia's narrative work.

Ricardo Piglia's *La ciudad ausente* (1992) has received a considerable amount of critical attention in the years following its publication, from journal articles to chapters and sections in many of the recent books on Latin American culture and narrative.⁵ This attention has confirmed Piglia's prominent position in Argentina's and Latin America's contemporary narrative landscape, first begun with his 1980 novel *Respiración artificial* [Artificial Respiration] and continuing with his most

recent novel *Plata quemada* [Burnt Money] (1997). *La ciudad ausente*'s combination of science fiction and exploration of the aftermath of dictatorship, along with its innovative use of a mechanical female narrator, has served as one of the principal focal points in Piglia criticism to date. Francine Masiello opens her analysis of intellectuals and cultural minorities in Argentina with Piglia's image, commenting that "Piglia, who otherwise has earned considerable respect as one of Argentina's main intellectual forces, obliges us in this recent novel to think of the ways in which women are transformed by a technological culture in order to serve the political and esthetic projects of men" (1997: 239). Masiello's characterization of the machine's technology as a masculine tool for the transformation of women is contested somewhat by Eva-Lynn Jagoe's article in which she reads the image in a much more positive light: "The gendered machine's role is powerful, a symbol of possibility, of resistance. Stories create identities. To speak the horror is to resist, to create languages that deconstruct ideas of individuality. . . . She is all the stories, and she is the teller of all the stories. Technology is the storyteller" (7).⁶ Other critics, while not focusing on the image of the female machine, always include reference to it as evidence of Piglia's ongoing interest in science fiction.⁷ The power of the image, especially when understood in the light of Donna Haraway's influential articulation of a feminist cyborg myth, would seem to extend Masiello's initial reaction along the lines Jagoe suggests. While such is indeed the case, I would argue that the presentation of Piglia's mechanical narrator simultaneously excludes and alters other essential aspects of current cyborg theory. That is, the focus on the machine narrator and its connections with Haraway's cyborg myth, while enlightening in many respects, is also somewhat problematic when one considers the other real and metaphorical cyborgs, male and female, that populate the novel as well as an accompanying meditation on the cybernetic nature of narrative. If Piglia's use of a female machine to narrate his novel activates both the gender-focused analysis Jagoe suggests as well as the criticism Masiello argues, the image of the cybernetic organism he develops is one that, following Puig and Aristarain, also explores the nature of the traumatized body within an oppressive

political state. When examined from this perspective, *Pubis angelical*, *Tiempo de revancha*, and *La ciudad ausente* suggest a reading of the possible cyborgs that populate Piglia's earlier work, principally his novel *Respiración artificial*. In all cases we see an articulation of cyborg and posthuman identity that, while participating in (and anticipating) much of the theoretical work undertaken by U.S. and European thinkers, proposes new and different directions in our understanding of the mechanized body especially in a Latin American context.

La ciudad ausente begins with Junior, an Argentine journalist of English descent, who is drawn into investigating a mysterious museum purported to hide an equally mysterious machine. As he does so, he encounters several characters that tell him stories that branch out from the narrative line of Junior's inquiry. When he arrives at the museum he continues in that mode, able now to combine his reading of the various stories with the exhibits that complement and expand the written texts that Junior discovers. As the investigation develops, he learns that the museum does indeed house a storytelling machine inhabited by the consciousness of one Elena, the deceased wife of the Argentine writer Macedonio Fernández. This Elena, now a machine, turns out to be the narrator of many of the stories that Junior has come across along the way as well as the novel itself. The novel concludes with a monologue explicitly evocative of Molly Bloom's meditations at the end of James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

One of the stories she tells, "Los nudos blancos" [The White Nodes] works in counterpoint to the main narrative. The story is that of a woman also named Elena interred in a mental institution who believes that she is a machine. She and the other patients in the clinic suffer interrogation and torture disguised as therapy at the hands of the doctors there in a thinly veiled allusion to the human rights violations of Argentina's most recent military dictatorship. Elena resists the torture but is forced to observe as friends and associates also undergo both the torture and the ubiquitous mechanical surveillance that defines the hospital where she is trapped. The story functions as both a microcosm for the rest of the novel as well as a possible alternate explanation for the Elena-machine that Junior finds in the

museum. If the machine Elena is not the narrator the patient Elena may well be, which is a possibility that is never ruled out.

In addition to the very central image of the Elena/Machine enclosed in the museum and who also exists either literally or figuratively in the clinic, the novel provides several examples of what cyborg theorists might term posthuman identity. Many of the characters in the intercalated stories appear as bodies not easily defined separately from the machines and technology that surround them. In one story, “La nena,” [The Girl], a girl who possibly suffers from autism perceives the world through her experience with the spinning fans in her room and is described as “una máquina lógica conectada a una interfase equivocada” (54) [She was a logic machine connected to the incorrect interface] (48). In the previously mentioned story “Los nudos blancos,” the women in the clinic describe themselves as indistinguishable from the tubes and medical machinery that substantially alter their sense of being. Nor are the cyborgs all women. A Russian friend of Macedonio Fernández who appears near the end of the novel is described as more metal than flesh as a result of his many battle wounds. He functions as a kind of walking robot whose prostheses keep his body functioning while they simultaneously serve as medals of honor commemorating his several battles. The novel itself appears as a kind of mechanism akin to the cyborgs that inhabit it; a network of stories, intertextual references, and mirrored events and images that exists not in a single textual “body” but in the relationships between the different narrative lines.

At first consideration, the machine Elena appears to fulfill Haraway’s characterization of cyborg identity—confirming Jagoe’s observation that “*La ciudad ausente*, is, in some senses, the postmodern text that Haraway invokes, and with that label comes the problematic of politics, of deciding the use-value of this text, whether it is liberating or repressive, both or neither” (8). Elena’s double existence, as either a woman interned in a mental clinic who believes that she is a machine or the actual machine in the heart of the “museo,” contributes to a sense of the cyborg that Haraway suggests. Her hybrid nature functions as a threat to the masculinized hierarchies suggested

by the doctors in the clinic and the officials of the state. The experience of the clinic in “Los nudos blancos” strongly reinforces on several levels the connection between the cyborgs proposed by Piglia and Haraway.

In the clinic, Elena not only constructs herself as a machine but is also presented as a kind of medicalized cyborg—the patient whose continued life depends upon the artificial support of various medical devices. In both cases, the machine woman is viewed as dangerous and is contained and questioned within a clinic that bears a close resemblance to the Argentine police state of the 1970s and early 1980s. On one occasion, Doctor Arana, the psychiatrist, interrogates Elena in such a way as to make the historical reference clear:

—Hay que operar—dijo—. Tenemos que desactivar neurológicamente.

—Arregla televisores—dijo Elena.

—Ya sé—dijo Arana—. Quiero nombres y direcciones.

Hubo una pausa, en el consultorio los vidrios blancos del armario reflejaban el vaivén del ventilador.

—Hay un telépata—dijo Elena—. Me sigue y me lee los pensamientos. Se llama Luca Lombardo, viene de Rosario, todos le dicen el Tano. Si digo lo que usted me pregunta, va a hacer estallar las microesferas que tengo implantadas en el corazón.

—No sea imbécil—dijo Arana—. Se ha vuelto psicótica y tiene un delirio paranoico. Estamos en una clínica de Belgrano, esto es una sesión prologada con drogas, usted es Elena Fernández.—Se detuvo y leyó la ficha:—Trabaja en el Archivo Nacional, tiene dos hijos.

—Estoy muerta, él me trasladó aquí, soy una máquina.

—Vamos a tener que aplicarle un electroshock—le dijo Arana al médico que tenía cara de bebé. (79)

“We have to operate,” he said. “We have to deactivate her neurologically.”

“He repairs television sets,” Elena said.

“I know,” Arana said. “I want names and addresses.”

There was a pause. The white glass of the cabinet in the consulting room reflected the spinning fan.

“There’s this telepath,” Elena said. “He follows me around and reads my thoughts. His name is Luca Lombardo, he’s from Rosario, everyone calls him the Tano. If I tell you what you are asking me for, he is going to blow up the microspheres implanted in my heart.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Arana said. “You have become psychotic and are in the middle of a paranoid delirium. We are in a Clinic in the neighborhood of Belgrano, this is an extended drug session, you are Elena Fernández.” He stopped and read her chart. “You work in the National Archives, you have two children.”

“I am dead, he moved me here, I am a machine.”

“We are going to have to use electric shock treatment on her,” Arana said to the doctor with the baby face. (69)⁸

Throughout the questioning the woman’s body is described as machine-like, not merely in her own protestations where she identifies herself as machine but in the reference to deactivating her brain as doublespeak for the questioning that would follow. The electroshock therapy is especially disturbing, a clear reference to the use of the *picana* as a central element in the Argentine military’s torture machine. Elena’s stay in the clinic, combined with her interrogation and the figurative (perhaps real) torture implied by the electric therapy, presents her as emblematic of the body of the *desaparecido/a* [disappeared] in Argentine history in addition to her cyborg characteristics.⁹ The combination of the cybernetic images that construct Elena’s identity with her role as symbol of the so-called subversive element in 1970s Argentina further strengthens the representation of Elena as an example of Haraway’s cyborg myth. She functions as the feminized hybrid figure whose existence contests the categories imposed by a masculine society. Furthermore, Elena’s continued existence suggests the kind of resistance that Haraway identifies as essential to the cyborg and that theorists such as Hardt and Negri have championed in their consideration of cyborg identity.

Piglia unites the physical imagery of the cyborg that characterizes Elena in both her guises as machine and patient with a consideration of the cybernetic language as used in the novel and even of the nature of narrative itself, a strategy that Nicolás

Bratosevich has called an “estética cibernética” (215) [cybernetic aesthetic]. *La ciudad ausente* contains at least seven different stories that Junior encounters, as well as several more told by Elena to herself that exist both as separate narratives and as thematically and situationally related stories. The web-like structure of the novel suggests an almost hypertextual experience of reading—an idea suggested by the image of Junior in the museum, seeing the paintings and exhibits that reproduce the images of the stories he reads. Note, for instance, Junior’s observations of the museum after emerging from “Una mujer” [A Woman]; a story that tells of a woman who abandons her family and commits suicide in a hotel:

En el Museo estaba la reproducción de la pieza del hotel donde se había matado la mujer. En la mesa de luz vio la foto del hijo apoyada contra el velador. No recordaba ese detalle en el relato. La serie de los cuartos de hotel aparecía reproducida en salas sucesivas. [...] Lo asombraba la fidelidad de la reconstrucción. Parecía un sueño. Pero los sueños eran relatos falsos. Y éstas eran historias verdaderas. Cada uno aislado en un rincón del Museo, construyendo la historia de su vida. (49)

The room in which the woman committed suicide was reproduced in the Museum. Junior saw the picture of the son against the lamp on the night table. He did not remember this detail from the story. The series of hotel rooms was reproduced in successive halls.... He was astonished by the precision of the reconstruction. It seemed like a dream. But dreams were false stories. And these were true stories. Each one isolated in a corner of the Museum, building the story of their lives. (43)

The series of exhibits that provide a visual confirmation of the story suggests a vision of writing where meaning appears at the juncture of image and text; Junior sees, for example, a photo in the exhibit that forces him to rethink his reading of the story. We see this character negotiate potential meanings between image and text, as provided by a device designed to deliver content in accordance with that reader’s decisions. Junior receives the narrations as related by a machine (museum) that encloses both the texts and the apparatus that permits their reading. Junior becomes a kind of hypertextual reader, to whom

the stories are told by a truly cyborg narrator, even as he participates as a kind of writer/reader (or “wreader” as some hypertext theorists would have it) as he moves from story to story and makes connections between his physical location (the museum) and the stories that he encounters.¹⁰ In that same sense, Elena as a biomechanical narrator also becomes the mechanical element of a kind of cyborg “wreader” that also incorporates an organic Junior and the mechanical museum/textual repository within her own biomechanical body. Mark Amerika has argued that hypertext opens a space for a “cyborg-narrator” whose creation of “discourse networks” serves as the basis for the new narrative form (qtd. in Ryan 2001: 9). Piglia not only describes a figurative hypertextual situation but he provides the literal cyborg-narrator.

In that sense, Junior’s experience as a reader becomes that of Jean Baudrillard’s museum visitor. This critic observes as follows:

For example some museums, following a sort of Disneyland processing, try to put people not so much in front of the painting—which is not interactive enough and even suspect as pure spectacular consumption—but into the painting. Insinuated audiovisually into the virtual reality of the *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, people will enjoy it in real time, feeling and tasting the whole Impressionist context, and eventually interacting with the picture. (22)

Junior’s insertion in the museum and the stories it exhibits produces a situation in which text is presented as a kind of virtual reality, a reality made all the more virtual by Junior’s own position as a character within the novel that Elena narrates. If Baudrillard saw such a virtual reality as negative, as a kind of device designed to imprison the masses, Junior’s experience as a reader is even more ambiguous, caught within the text, but not necessarily forced into submission by a controlling state.¹¹ In that sense, Junior appears to benefit from what hypertext theorists have identified as the narrative form’s liberating potential. George Landow has argued: “As long as any reader has the power to enter the system and leave his or her mark, neither the tyranny of the center nor that of the

majority can impose itself” (281).¹² Junior’s discovery of narratives that the state has attempted to suppress suggests that his hypertextual reading experience promises similar revolutionary possibilities.

While Junior’s position as reader within the museum suggests the hypertextual nature of his reading experience and the web-like structure of the novel, Piglia reinforces the image of mechanical language with many of the stories that Junior examines. The cyborg girl in “La nena” speaks like a machine, “canturreando y cloqueando, una máquina triste, musical” her limited linguistic abilities revealing the mechanical sounds at the foundation of language (58) [singing softly, clucking, a sad music machine] (51). The section called “La isla” [The Island] is especially indicative of this characteristic, a story about an island where languages change from day to day and the only reliably decipherable book is James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (since it is written in all languages at once). The inhabitants attempt to read the book biblically, using what they can glean from it to form belief systems and scientific approaches to language. In all their attempts, the idea of language appears as a fake, mechanical construct that is at once impossible to control and hopelessly artificial. The language of the island is described as follows:

El carácter inestable del lenguaje define la vida en la isla. Nunca se sabe con qué palabras serán nombrados en le futuro los estados presentes. A veces llegan cartas escritas con signos que ya no se comprenden. A veces un hombre y una mujer son amantes apasionados en una lengua y en otra son hostiles y casi desconocidos. Grandes poetas dejan de serlo y se convierten en nada....(121)

The unstable character of language defines life on the island. One never knows what words will be used in the future to name present states. Sometimes letters arrive addressed with symbols that are no longer understood. Sometimes a man and a woman are passionate lovers in one language, and in another they are hostile and barely know each other. Great poets cease being so....(102)

The unstable meanings of the constantly shifting languages accentuate the tenuous relationship between sign and meaning

and by so doing create a sense of artificiality, one that we see in the conceptualizations of narrative proposed by Junior the cyborg “wreader” and Elena his narrator. The island narrative serves, then, as a microcosm of the novel, contrasting the linguistic systems of the island-dwellers with the narratives produced by the cyborg narrator. This section of the novel also emphasizes once again the revolutionary potential of language when situated against the state. As Francine Masiello has observed in her more recent analysis of *La ciudad ausente*: “Insofar as the machines always translate from language to language, they facilitate a subversive communication that eludes the market-run state” (2001: 165).

With the novel’s attention to cybernetic themes and, more importantly, with its attention to the idea of language as cybernetically organized, *La ciudad ausente* functions as what David Porush calls “cybernetic fiction.” This critic explains:

Therefore, not only do these authors confront technology—and in particular cybernetics—thematically, they also focus on the *machinery or technology of their fiction*, remaining uniquely conscious that their texts are constructed of words, that words are part of the larger machinery of language, and that language is shaped by the still larger machinery of their own consciousness and experience. Yet paradoxically, each of these texts calls attention to itself not merely as a machine but as a fictional work. . . . Because both the theme and form of this sub-class derive from cybernetics, I call it *cybernetic fiction*. (19, italics in original)

In turn Hayles has examined the impact of cybernetic theory on literature to an even greater extent, arguing that the mechanical form of the text is inseparable from the meaning that a reader infers. In her book *Writing Machines*, this critic shows how the materiality of the text, be it a book, a hypertext, or something else entirely, combines with the text’s theme to challenge notions of human and textual identity. Essentially, the physical presence of the text recasts the work in terms of the reader’s relationships with the textual and technological machinery that delivers the language. With its combination of an apparently Haraway-inspired cyborg narrator and a hypertextual

“wreader,” *La ciudad ausente* would appear to propose just such a rethinking of narrative theory. In that sense, Piglia’s novel seems to present itself as a poster-child for contemporary cultural theory, at least if it were really that easy to fit literary texts within already established cultural theory.

However, cultural production precedes theory much more effectively than the production incorporates that theory. In fact, it is precisely at the point at which a machine literally narrates his novel that we begin to observe a marked tension between literary cyber-theorists and the Argentine novelist’s project. *La ciudad ausente* is still a traditional book; it does not allow the actual reader options like a hypertext narrative would, nor does it create for him or her a virtual reality. What Piglia’s novel does do is provide those tools for the reader trapped inside the novel. It is Junior who becomes a “virtual” reader that acts out the implications of hypertext; the “real” reader of *La ciudad ausente* cannot access these same opportunities or possibilities. The book is, then, a paradoxically virtual novel, one in which the technological experience described is “virtual” only because it is not. In a fashion Baudrillard would have enjoyed, virtuality, like everything else in the work, is a simulacrum and the novel remains a traditional, paperbound volume that only pretends to offer hypertextual possibilities.

This surprising ambiguity in the narrative’s own hypertextual possibilities suggests similar wrinkles in the novel’s exploration of cyborg identity through the bodies that populate the text. While Piglia develops an image of the cyborg consistent with many of Haraway’s ideas, a closer look at *La ciudad ausente* reveals an expression of cyborg identity that is peculiarly Argentine. Jagoe claims that “[i]n this novel, women are cyborgs: they are dolls, statues, figures in mirrors, machines. Their easily programmable identities invoke a postmodern ideal of heterogeneity and fluidity of identity, yet it is always up to the men whether this retelling of the woman will be an act of love or an act of torture” (8). While such a statement is generally accurate, it tends to exclude the implications of the male cyborgs that also populate the novel. If we include the male-gendered cyborgs in Piglia’s novel in our examination, we better perceive the theory of an Argentine cyborg that Piglia attempts

to present, not only in *La ciudad ausente*, but in his earlier *Respiración artificial*.

Near the end of the novel, Junior discovers the story of the conversion of Elena the human being into Elena-cyborg. Upon her death, Macedonio both relates and relates to the story of an anarchist who had sacrificed himself during a bombing in order to save an innocent family, an event his friend Rajzarov witnessed firsthand. The bomb had left the Russian alive, but horribly disfigured. Macedonio sees the pain of that series of events as akin to the suffering he felt at the death of his wife. The narrator notes: “El que ha perdido a la mujer amada queda como el hombre al que le estalla una bomba en el cuerpo y no muere” (152) [When a man loses the woman he loves he is like the man who has a bomb blow up on his body and does not die] (126). As he undergoes such trauma, Macedonio begins to experience a transformation in his identity, which the narrator describes immediately after relating the tale of the anarchist:

Macedonio se sentía un hermano del impetuoso Rajzarov, que estaba hecho de metal más que de vida. Su dentadura de acero centelleaba al hablar, bajo su peinado había una placa de plata, un enrejado de oro entretejía un tatuaje tridimensional en medio de los leves despojos de cartílago y hueso que le quedaban en la articulación de la rodilla derecha, un sello de dolor hecho a mano, cuya forma siempre sentiría como un recuerdo doloroso y a la vez el círculo de fuego libertario, una condecoración de combate que llevaba con el máximo orgullo por ser invisible y estar grabada en su cuerpo. . . . Macedonio había quedado así, metálico, maltrecho, sostenido con operaciones y prótesis, el mismo dolor, el mismo cuerpo rehecho artificialmente, porque Elena de golpe estaba ausente. Congelado, de aluminio, caminaba con los brazos y las piernas separados del cuerpo, como un muñeco de metal, no podía sonreír ni alzar la voz. (152–53)

Macedonio thought that the impetuous Rajzarov was like his brother, that Russian who was made more of metal than life. His steel teeth sparkled when he spoke, he had a silver plate in his head, a gold lattice interwoven like a three-dimensional tattoo held together the few strands of cartilage and bone that were left in his right knee—a man-made badge of pain that he would always recall simultaneously as a painful memory and as

a circle of liberating fire, a medal of honor that he carried about with the utmost pride. . . . That is how Macedonio had ended up, metallic, impaired, held together by operations and prostheses, the same pain and the same body artificially reconstructed, because Elena was suddenly absent. Frozen, made out of aluminum, walking as if his arms and legs did not belong to his body, like a metal doll, he was unable to smile, he could not raise his voice. (126)

Rajzarov becomes the visual manifestation of Macedonio's grief; the former man's scars, steel teeth, and silver plate in his head not only serve as reminders of the violence the Russian suffered, but also of the trauma that Elena's death caused Macedonio. Rajzarov's literal prostheses transform into Macedonio's figurative artificial body, a body made cyborg not by physical violence but by the emotional injury of grief. In both cases, the posthuman body comes into being because of trauma, be it physical or psychological or both. Pain becomes the defining characteristic of the birth of the cybernetic organism.

The presentation of Rajzarov as cyborg and as a model for the identity that Macedonio begins to construct in a post-Elena reality contributes to a vision of the cyborg that extends and transforms Haraway and Hayles's ideas in an Argentine context. Rajzarov functions as a cyborg whose amalgamated body works against its own hybrid nature. All of the metal prostheses, instead of fusing with his flesh to produce a new identity, merely testify to the violence of their origins. That is, the mechanical prosthetics act as grotesque replicas of the human body and constantly remind the human beings, in this case both Rajzarov and Macedonio, of the trauma that brought this hybrid body into existence. Cyborg identity for Piglia becomes the identity of the violated and injured body whose mechanical appendages merely signal the absence of living tissue rather than the presence of a new kind of cybernetic life. If Rajzarov views his injured body with pride, the artificial parts functioning as war medals, Macedonio's psychological conversion into a figurative cyborg suggests a negative interpretation of the prosthetics. Despite the difference in reaction, both see the metallic components as symbols of violence and suffering. Macedonio's sense

of self as artificial is grounded completely in the trauma of his being separated from his wife. His survival is compared with the prosthetic arm that always fails to replace the real one, whose mere presence constantly signifies the traumatic experience that caused the loss of the still-preferred living arm.

The cyborg bodies of Rajzarov and Macedonio are complemented and contrasted with the description of Doctor Arana, the psychiatrist in “Los nudos blancos” who is responsible for the care of Elena in the clinic. Elena describes him as he enters her room:

Sabía que la Clínica era siniestra, pero cuando vio aparecer al doctor Arana se le confirmaron las premoniciones; parecía estar ahí para hacer reales todos los delirios paranoicos. Cráneo de vidrio, las venas rojas al aire, los huesos blancos brillando bajo la luz interna. Elena pensó que el hombre era un imán donde se incrustaban las limaduras de hierro del alma. (66)

She knew the Clinic was a sinister place. When Doctor Arana came in, he confirmed her worst fears. He seemed to be there just to make every single paranoid delirium come true. A glass skull, the red windows facing out, white bones shining in the artificial light. Elena thought the man was a magnet that attracted and drew the iron shavings of the soul to itself. (58)

Arana appears as a kind of medical robot, his parts disassociated from any kind of living body and transformed into a monstrous magnetic machine. She later remarks on his aluminum teeth, a comment that further distances Arana from any kind of organicity (72). If Elena, Rajzarov, and Macedonio appear as truly cybernetic organisms, hybrids of human being and machine, Arana is a kind of pure robot that embodies only the mechanical side of their, and especially Elena’s, cyborg nature. He is, then, firmly associated with the exercise of political power in his interrogations of Elena; his complicity with state terror clearly linked with his mechanical nature. Furthermore, Arana highlights the connection Piglia forges between mechanical imagery and the police state.

The suggestion provided by these three male examples, Rajzarov, Macedonio, and Arana, is that the subversive power of cyborg identity does not necessarily lie in the boundary-challenging hybridity of its body, but in the fact that the cyborg

body inherently testifies of trauma. The cyborg becomes a re-membering figure that can never forget the dismembering reasons for its prosthetic grafts and metallic replacements. Indeed, it views those apparatuses as the by-products of torture. Haraway's characterization of the fusion of flesh and technology as "pleasurably tight coupling" seems wildly inappropriate here (152). The power of the cyborgs' hybridity that Piglia creates comes because their undead bodies cannot be buried and forgotten. Their artificial lives continuously reveal their violent origins and, for that reason, they continue to threaten the cultures and regimes of silence that have plagued Argentina. They also suggest a different way of reading Elena's cyborg body; one that engages Haraway's ideas and then extends them within a view of cybernetic identity that is specific to its Argentine context.

Understood in that sense, the electroshock therapy that Elena receives in the clinic and that represents the torture suffered by the victims of the dictatorship gains further significance. While "Los nudos blancos" makes reference to that therapy, the novel also refers to the actual acts of electroshock torture that had become commonplace in twentieth-century Argentina. Toward the end of the novel, Junior encounters a museum exhibit dedicated to the son of the poet Leopoldo Lugones. Named after his father, he achieved notoriety as a police chief who "pioneered" the use of the cattle prod in police questioning and torture. The narrator reports:

En el Museo Policial había una sala dedicada a la vida del comisario Lugones, llamado igual que su padre, Leopoldo Lugones (hijo) que fundó la Sección Especial e introdujo una mejora sustancial en las técnicas argentinas de tortura, usó la picana eléctrica, que tradicionalmente se había empleado con las vacas para embarcar el ganado en los trenes ingleses, meterlas en los bretes, la usó en el cuerpo desnudo de los anarquistas encadenados de los que quería obtener información. (160)

In the Police Museum there was a room dedicated to the life of Lugones, the chief of police, whose name was the same as his father's, Leopoldo Lugones. He founded the Special Division and introduced a substantial improvement to the torture

techniques utilized in Argentina: he took the electric prod, which was traditionally used with cows to direct the cattle up the short ramps and into the English trains, and used it on the naked bodies of the shackled anarchists from whom he wanted to get information. (131–32)

The exhibit recalls the electroshock therapy suffered by Elena and the other patients in “Los nudos blancos,” strengthening the already established connection between the psychiatric clinic and the Argentine police state. It simultaneously anticipates a remark made by Elena a few pages later in the Molly Bloomesque monologue that concludes the novel, where she has completely revealed her mechanical nature:

¿Y ahora quién está ahí? ¿Fuyita? ¿Russo? No, quién va a venir a esta hora, sos loca, por qué esperás, te morís de cáncer, sos otra loca más, una loca cualquiera al borde de la muerte y ahora siento como un golpe de corriente, el suave refucilo en las vértebras, el electroshock que hacía empalidecer de terror a mi hermana María. (167)

And now who’s there? Fuyita? The Russian? No, who would come around here at this time of day, you’re crazy, what are you waiting for, you’re dying of cancer, you’re just another crazy woman, a crazy nobody waiting at the edge of death. Now I feel like there’s a current blowing, the soft flash of lightning in my vertebrae, the electric shock that used to make my sister María turn white with fear. (137)

These apparent ramblings ambiguously position Elena’s voice both within the clinic of “Los nudos blancos” and near the point at which Elena, wife of Macedonio, would succumb to disease.

In the latter position we find Elena at the moment that would convert Macedonio into the sort of cyborg described earlier, with her death from cancer figuring as the traumatic experience that linked Macedonio’s robot feelings with Rajzarov’s metallic scars and gave birth to the novel’s specific brand of cyborg identity. Furthermore, the inclusion of the electric shocks in these ramblings associates the police torture with the moment of cyborg birth. That is, the traumatic events that caused

Macedonio to become posthuman and, in turn, to create a cyborg Elena are, through a kind of textual metonymic, made equal to the trauma of torture on the victim's body. The electricity that tortures and scars the flesh simultaneously converts that body into a cybernetic organism. The *picana* [electric cattle prod] serves, then, as the sexual prosthesis of the mechanized state, one that begets the cyborg body on the feminized (though not necessarily female) organic body of the victim. With that kind of horror present at the inception of the cybernetic body, the mechanical appendages and prosthetics, those elements that make Piglia's cyborg a cyborg, become the scars of torture and the testimonies of the violence that brought it into being.

It is because of the testimonial nature of Piglia's cyborg body that it is so subversive, a kind of Frankenstein's monster whose presence continually reminds the viewer of the artificial experiments performed on violated flesh that gave the creature its existence.¹³ The mechanized police state must attempt to contain the body, not because the cyborg challenges limits or boundaries of what is human and what is machine—the state already did that in the torture chamber; it must contain the cyborg body because it is a continual witness to the horrors of the past and the crimes of the mechanical father. It is in that representation of the subversive nature of the cyborg body that we see most clearly a theorization that extends beyond the ideas presented by Haraway and others. That is, the illegitimate cyborg is unfaithful to its militaristic father not because it makes the father unnecessary, but because it refuses to let that father disappear into postdictatorship oblivion. The cyborg is the traumatized storyteller, whose re-membered and re-membering body recalls the trauma and horror of dictatorship and state-sponsored terror in the face of national attempts to forget the past. At the same time, the machine half of the hybrid is constructed as the remnant of the mechanical father, a horrible grafted emblem of pain that the living body suffers as a continual reminder of the living tissue that was destroyed by that father. The posthuman body's hybridity is not embraced as inherently positive; it merely exists as the inevitable result of pain of state-induced trauma. In this light, the origin stories that Haraway rejects are, for Piglia, an essential element of

cyborg identity. It should not surprise us, then, that Piglia names Villiers de l'Isle Adam's *L'Ève future* as an important source for *La ciudad ausente*, a text whose use of a female robot reinscribes Western origins rather than erasing them.¹⁴

Additionally, this theorization of the Argentine cyborg invites a reevaluation of one of the characters of Piglia's earlier novel, *Respiración artificial*, as well as of the title of that novel. *Respiración artificial* has been regarded as one of the principal novels of the Dirty War period: its combination of investigation of fear and oppression with a decidedly postmodern textual aesthetic marks it as one of the principal novels of late twentieth-century Argentine narrative. Brett Levinson calls the book "one of the most profound literary meditations on nationalism and dictatorship in the Latin American Southern Cone" (91). The novel details, roughly, an investigation conducted by Piglia's alter ego Renzi, an intellectual character who appears throughout much of Piglia's narrative. Renzi's investigation into Argentina's past is accompanied by letters and diaries that include episodes from the nineteenth century, a strategy that emphasizes the hybrid nature of a text moving constantly between the 1830s and 1970s. The first page begins with the phrase, "¿Hay una historia?" and Renzi's subsequent search mirrors the search for those individuals and their histories that were made absent during the most recent military dictatorship in Argentina. The novel's publication at the lowest point of the dictatorship makes its critique of intellectual life and history during the Dirty War all the more powerful.

At one point in his investigation Renzi is hired by a man named "El Senador," a former politician who has played an active role in many of the Argentine governments of the twentieth century. The description of the Senator anticipates many of the details of the cyborg identity Piglia would describe more fully in *La ciudad ausente*.

Y uno de sus entretenimientos, dijo, «es pasear con mi carrito, mi carricoche, mi berlina, de un lado a otro, de una pared a otra, en mi silla de ruedas, por este cuarto vacío. Porque ¿en qué se ha convertido mi cuerpo sino en esta máquina de metal, ruedas, rajes, llantas, tubos niquelados, que me transporta de

un lado a otro por esta estancia vacía? A veces, aquí donde reina el silencio, no hay otra cosa que el suave ruido metálico que acompaña mis paseos, de un lado a otro, de un lado a otro. El vacío es total: he logrado ya despojarme de todo. Y sin embargo es preciso estar hecho a este aire, de lo contrario se corre el riesgo de congelarse en él. El hielo está cerca, la soledad es inmensa: sólo quien ha logrado, como yo, hacer de su cuerpo un objeto metálico puede arriesgarse a convivir a estas alturas. El frío, o mejor», dijo el senador, «la *frialdad* es, para mí, la condición del pensamiento. Una prolongada experiencia, la voluntad de deslizarme sobre los rayos niquelados de mi cuerpo, me ha permitido vislumbrar el orden que legisla la gran máquina poliédrica de la historia. (53–54)

And one of his diversions, he said, was “to wander around in my wheelchair, my rattletrap, my stagecoach, from one place to another, from one wall to the opposite one, in my wheelchair in this empty room. Because my body is now no more than a machine made of metal, wheels, spokes, tires, nickel-covered tubes, which transports me from one end of this empty room to the other. Sometimes here in this kingdom of silence there is no noise other than the smooth metallic hum that keeps me company on my excursions, back and forth. The emptiness is absolute: by now I have managed to give up everything. And yet one must be prepared for the thin air, otherwise one runs the risk of *freezing* in it. The ice is close by, the solitude is immense: only someone who has managed, as I have, to turn his body into a metallic object can risk living at these altitudes. The cold, or rather,” said the Senator, “*coldness* is for me propitious for thought. Prolonged experience and the desire to slip between the nickel spokes of my body have granted me the possibility of glimpsing the order that rules the polyhedral machine of history.” (51)

The Senator’s metallic body appears in conjunction with the emptiness to which this figure aspires, while the mechanical nature of his identity is inextricably linked with the solitary nature of power and the great machine of history that he claims to understand. The Senator has achieved a sense of identity not unlike that described by Hayles, where the body is considered as just another prosthetic device. At the same time, this process of cyborg conversion is one in which the flesh is slowly eliminated

and replaced by metal. In this case, the positive, or even neutral, fusion of elements Haraway and others ascribe to posthuman identity does not occur and the flesh/technology hybrid remains, rather, a failed, unreconciled dialectic. If we read *Respiración artificial* from the anachronistic vantage point of *La ciudad ausente*, we see a similar kind of cyborg in the identity of the Senator. In this case, the character's wheelchair continually reminds both the Senator and those who view him of the assassination attempt that put him there. The Senator appears as one whose mechanical parts signify his close association with the historical power structures that have dominated Argentine politics during the twentieth century. The clear and important difference between the Senator as cyborg and Elena as cyborg is that the mechanical testimony that the Senator's cybernetic body gives is of his own political crimes, while Elena's body testifies to the crimes committed by the state against the body of the oppressed. That said, the testifying function of the cyborg body is the same. In *Respiración artificial* we see the beginnings of a posthuman theory that adds an Argentine perspective to the work being conducted in the United States and Europe, while anticipating much of the writing on cyborg identity that would appear more than a decade later.¹⁵

Piglia's cyborg senator additionally suggests an alternate interpretation to the title of Piglia's first novel. Most critics have, justifiably, read the title as a reference to the state of Argentina under dictatorship, a nation in such bad shape that it needed artificial respiration in order to continue breathing. The cyborg theory that these two novels propose suggests a complementary reading of the title, one in which breathing persists in the presence of the artificial. In that sense, the cybernetic combination of breath and artificiality suggests a cyborg Argentina whose respiration tells the stories of hybrid life created by the aggression of the artificial state. Levinson notes that the Senator's voice "is his only movement, the very sign that he is alive" (111). The cyborg's continued breath manifests signs of life in the face of the violence that has given birth to its prosthetic existence.

This emphasis on the signs of life that emanate from the cyborg embodies the earlier paradox we noted in the

development of the virtual hypertext. The human figures that are at once caught within the hypertextual machine, yet are essential to its function, complement the living breath of the cyborgs that use their bodies to testify of the violence of their creation. Idelber Avelar has described convincingly the role of mourning in Latin American fiction and specifically in Piglia's first two novels. This critic notes: "Restitution depends on the survival of storytelling because that which is to be restituted belongs in the order of memory. Only in this terrain, *La ciudad ausente* claims, can the tasks of mourning work be posed to thought" (135). In the end, we see a conceptualization of post-human identity that both embraces its revolutionary potential while refusing to recognize any pleasure in the couplings that join their organic and mechanical bodies. Piglia's cyborgs are breathing, speaking machines that carry grafted onto them the commemorative prosthetic emblems of the horrors of Argentine history.

Furthermore, they echo the traumatized bodies of the earlier films as Elena reinscribes and reembodies Ana and Bengoa from the earlier films. What we see form in this constellation of films and novel is a class of cyborg that can be called peculiarly Argentine, one whose prosthetics respond specifically to its national context. As the clockwork hearts, the speak-and-spell tongues, the machines that preserve consciousness combine, they create a corporeal space in which national mourning and survivorship can be processed. This type of cybernetic body continues on—we see it in *La sonámbula*, the film Piglia cowrote in which survivors of an unknown trauma are identified by the scars and stains they bear. They will not be the only way that posthumans' bodies are used to explore new realities, but they exercise an important influence in those imaginaries that help a people re-member the dictatorship from the postdictatorship as they focus on the tortured couplings of prosthetics and scarred flesh.