

Bella's Non-Traditional Approach to Performing Resistance in Luisa
Valenzuela's "Cuarta versión" *Cambio de armas* (1982)

Shelli Rottschäfer

Aquinas College

Luisa Valenzuela's novella "Cuarta versión," included in her collection *Cambio de armas* (1982), is one example of literature born from a reaction against Argentina's oppressive governments. Although *Cambio de armas* was written earlier during the second administration of Perón, its publication date in 1982, in the midst of *la guerra sucia* has made it internationally accepted as a narrative that denounces the Argentine regime during that time. As such, the text does not specifically name the military junta but refers to a repressive Argentine regime.

Consequently, this novella is categorized as *literatura de denuncia* because it encompasses Valenzuela's personal reaction against all repressive regimes. She reiterates this idea for she believes, "the one thing we [writers] must do is speak about what is going on" (qtd in Shaw 96). According to her, "Literature is the site of the cross waters – the murky and the clear waters – where nothing is exactly in its place... it is precisely at these cross waters where it becomes necessary to have a lucid ideology as a base from which problems may be focused" (96-97). Valenzuela's literature is based within a specific political ideology in which she feels compelled to write; her words change into "figurative weapons" - *un cambio de armas*.¹

Luisa Valenzuela's "Cuarta versión" is a politicized text that challenges the regime's system of power and questions traditional gender roles. The protagonist is Bella *la bella*; a graceful, honey-brown eyed, thirty-something actress who, at first, acts the role of a frivolous Buenos Aires socialite. However, as the repression intensifies and many intellectuals and artists are trying to leave Argentina, Bella begins to notice what is really happening in her own country.

Critical readings of "Cuarta versión" have focused on two main aspects: the issue of desire, as well as Valenzuela's manipulation of the Spanish language within her text as a means to break with dominant patriarchal discourses. "Cuarta versión" represents Bella's transformation, which intermeshes sexuality with political discourse. It portrays how, "lo político se entrelaza con un discurso de género," for Valenzuela questions both traditional gender roles and political manifestations under the junta (Trevizan 93).

According to Geisdorfer Feal, Bella incarnates the struggle, "between individual agency and collective action, between sexual desire and social order, between economic privilege and political power" (176-77). By writing in this way, Valenzuela's narrative versions, or *perversions* of sexuality masked in politics, and *subversions* of women characters like Bella who seek change, demonstrate the potential to contest traditional ideologies in order to create room for other representations and possibilities (182-83).

Debra Castillo's chapter "Appropriating the Master's Weapons: Luisa Valenzuela" found in her text *Talking Back* exposes how the author masterfully plays with language in order to create an engendered space of resistance.² Castillo explains, for women authors "to write in Latin America is... more than a verb, transitive or intransitive – it is a revolutionary

act” (Castillo 20). They are revolutionary because the literary act creates an engendered space for their female protagonists. This space enables women to resist silence and confront traditional gender roles. Luisa Valenzuela does this as she uses her literary voice in order to disrupt the repressive system.

“Cuarta versión” demonstrates how language and writing intersect to construct a story situated around “una mujer politizada, mujer amante y mujer escritora” (Santos Febres 315). Valenzuela develops this through her complex language semantics exemplified in her use of alliteration and sexualized double meanings. As Shaw asserts, Valenzuela questions language through her “play” and explores “the possibility of multiple significations for the signifier” (Shaw 97). Valenzuela turns standardized Spanish upon itself as she breaks with the language system and symbolically with the regime (Castillo 135-36).

Scholars whose investigations have focused on the issues of desire or the complex linguistics used in “Cuarta versión” are significant. However, my emphasis is different. It focuses on the idea of performance and how it “plays” out in “Cuarta versión.” As discussed previously, the Argentine regime “performs” its authority and creates a culture of fear, even among those in high society who supposedly have immunity. At first Bella enacts her role as a “good Argentine,” but then she begins to notice the effects of oppression upon her nation and fellow citizens. As a result, she no longer is willing to perform her ignorance regarding what is happening around her and begins her political transformation. Bella does this, literally, through her performance of *El todo por el todo*, her one-person play in which she incorporates a torture scene.

Bella’s theatrical performances demonstrate resistance to the regime because she uses them to voice her political convictions. Thus, “as a woman with desires of her own and with individual agency...[she] is doomed to extinction under this regime” (Geisdorfer Feal 175). Bella is targeted by the junta since she calls into question societal norms put in place by the repressive system. Her actions test the power of the patriarchal order manifested in the dictatorship.

The fact that Bella’s “performance” inspires her audience and Valenzuela’s readers to examine life and personal or societal motivations references Bertolt Brecht’s theory on theater. According to theater scholar Juan Villegas, Brechtian theater is written to inspire and instigate the reader or theater-goer to question what is happening in the drama, in their own community, in their country, and in the world at large. Thus, the author of the play hopes to communicate a message, which makes the audience analyze reality (Villegas 132). Valenzuela employs a similar tactic to demonstrate that both theater and narrative can act as resistance, for she hopes her reader will question what is happening in her story (Trevizan 98).

The way Bella transforms into a political activist, and how the novella is constructed is through “performance.”³ The novella is framed as if it were a play. Traditionally, theater performances begin with an announcement from the director addressing the audience and calling everyone’s attention to the start of the play. This is the same way the reader is initially introduced to Bella:

Señoras y señores, he aquí una historia que no llega a hacer historia, es pelea por los cuatro costados y se derrama con uñas y con dientes. Yo soy Bella, soy ella, alguien que ni cara tiene porque ¿qué puede saber una del propio rostro? Un vistazo fugaz

ante el espejo, un mirarse y des-reconocerse... El preguntarse a cada pasito la estúpida pregunta de siempre ¿Dónde estamos? donde mejor dicho estaremos consolidando nuestra humilde intersección de tiempo y espacio que en definitiva es lo poco o lo mucho que tenemos, lo que constituye nuestra presencia en ésta. Esta vida, se entiende, este transcurrir que nos conmueve y moviliza. (Valenzuela, “Cuarta versión” 4)

Bella’s grand opening to the “performance” of the last year of her life makes her reader wonder what is happening. Her act inspires the reader/audience to question what moves and motivates an individual to resist.

Another aspect of the narrative’s performative nature is the fact that the whole novella is a reconstruction. It is a new version, a *re-presentation* of Bella’s life by a nameless female narrator. The novella we are reading is Bella’s, “*pretendida autobiografía indirecta, su novela testimonial*” (Valenzuela, “Cuarta versión” 24). Her *versión* is commented upon by an omniscient, and unnamed female narrator. Every time the narrator “speaks,” the words are italicized. “*Leo y releo estas páginas sueltas y a veces el azar reconstruye el orden*” (3). These loose pages are the supposed newspaper clippings, playbills, and other paper trails that the reader does not see but the narrator does. They describe Bella as a theater star and help reconstruct the images of her life. This also lends to the performative quality of the narrative because scripts include character actions, off-stage directions, lighting, and prop placement written in italics. Thus, the nameless female narrator embellishes Bella’s story as if it were a script through her italicized commentary included in the epigraphs, scene explanations, and concluding chapter remarks. These stage notes enable the narrator to interpret her own version of Bella’s life.

The narrator’s remarks concerning the evidence that re-creates Bella’s life, suggest that the novella is only one version of a series of versions reconstructing a more comprehensive tale. The first version Bella writes in her diary. The second “corrected” version is the dictatorship’s official version, *la historia oficial*. This version could be rewritten by Bella’s own hand to auto-censor or it could be reconstructed by an undisclosed editor. In it there are: “*Páginas y páginas re-copiadas anteriormente, rearmadas, descartadas, primera, segunda, tercera, cuarta versión de hechos en un desesperado intento de aclarar la situación*” (Valenzuela, “Cuarta versión” 21). The third version is compiled by the nameless female narrator who uses Bella’s diary, compares it with the edited version, and then verifies facts through the paper trail documenting Bella’s career in order to “*rearmar el rompecabezas*” (3) into a tangible narrative.

The fourth version is the novella itself, and hence the title “Cuarta versión.” This version includes all of the aforementioned versions and the love story between Bella and her most recent conquest, Pedro, who is a married ambassador to Argentina from another Spanish-speaking country. However, the most important story line within the *cuarta versión* is what is left unsaid “*lo que no logra ser narrado.... Porque ésta parece ser la historia de lo que no se dice*” (Valenzuela, “Cuarta versión” 21-22). This alludes to the story between the lines – that of the unspeakable acts committed by the regime against its citizenry.

Another performative aspect of this novella is the “performance” of the regime and how it socializes its citizenry into the repressive system through public spectacle (Taylor, *Disappearing Acts* xi and Franco, “Gender, Death, and Resistance” 104-105). The most obvious demonstration of the regime’s wide reaching power is performed by the embassy

guards. The guards' constant vigil is to supposedly protect Pedro at his ambassador's residence. However, Valenzuela through Bella's thoughts question the guards' doubtful mission as protectors. Bella wonders if, "la barricada de guardianes armados... rodeaba y protegía (?) la residencia del embajador" (Valenzuela, "Cuarta versión" 8). In actuality, the guards are there to spy on Pedro and inform the authorities about the fact that he continues accepting asylum seekers into his embassy. "Esos guardianes oficiales que se supone protegen la residencia, que se supone son custodios, actúan en realidad de cancerberos para impedir el paso" (23). Thus, the guards represent the regime's omnipresence and are a constant reminder that the junta is aware that Pedro is not behaving how the dictatorship expects.

Other examples of the regime's performance are the ever-present reminders of the dictatorship's omniscient powers symbolized in, "el ulular de sirenas de los patrulleros policiales" and the fact that exploding bombs had become, "algo tan habitual en estos tiempos" that people continued on as if nothing happened (Valenzuela, "Cuarta versión" 9, 15, 17). These acts help construct the culture of fear pervasive at this time in Argentina in which people modified their own behavior out of fear of what the regime would do to them if it found them suspect.

In addition, the dictatorship's presence and the culture of fear it perpetuates is acknowledged through the fact that Pedro and Bella's phone conversations are being taped and their dialogue is censored when the telephone line abruptly disconnects (Valenzuela, "Cuarta versión" 43, 56). Valenzuela writes their dialogue as if it were a child's story told by an "Uncle Amos" character known as Tío Ramón. The glowing firefly represents Bella and the love-struck poem-reciting toad is Pedro. However the conversation contains an ominous meaning:

Claro, como el sapo aquél que cruzó mi tío Ramón cierto atardecer, en el bosque. Cuenta mi tío Ramón que el sapo estaba mirando con fascinación a una luciérnaga que se encendía y se apagaba, se encendía y se apagaba. Largo rato la anduvo mirando y mirando como enternecido, poeta el sapo, no más, hasta que de golpe le saltó encima a la pobre luciérnaga y la pisó. ¿Por qué me pisas? oyó mi tío Ramón que le preguntaba la luciérnaga al sapo, en un hilito de voz. Y tú, le preguntó a su vez el sapo ¿por qué reluces?

Crac.No fue croac, el canto del sapo, ni el reventar de la luciérnaga ni nada referente a la fábula. Fue la muy vil y material comunicación telefónica que acababa de cortarse. (Valenzuela, "Cuarta versión" 43)

Bella and Pedro's dialogue is disguised as a child's fable told to create some levity, an escape from the Argentine repressive culture of fear. However, the "Crac" at the end of the fable could be interpreted several ways. Perhaps it is the croaking of the toad or maybe it is the foreboding presence of the regime reminding them that the phone is tapped. Either way, it is a foreshadowing analogy of what is to happen to Bella since the "Crac" ends their conversation and Bella, in the end, is smothered like the brilliant firefly (Geisdorfer Feal 174-75). As a consequence of this censored phone conversation, Bella and Pedro realize they are now being followed by the paramilitaries. Therefore, their lovers' flirtations have been changed to mean something entirely different as a result of the regime's spying.

The above evidence proves how the regime has infiltrated into every aspect of Argentine life. This presence causes Argentine citizens to learn how to perform within the

culture of fear. As Taylor asserts in her theory on “percepticide,” Argentines living under the military regime learned to survive through coping mechanisms like auto-censorship, ignoring the situation, or through self-denial of the country’s repressive actions (Taylor 95).

Carina Perelli also comments on this behavioral phenomenon. Her term is “inxile” where people turn inward into an internal exile so that their actions do not cause public attention (“Youth, Politics, Dictatorship” 213). “Percepticide” and “inxile” are apparent in “Cuarta versión,” since all of the characters know when to be silent. They know when to edit themselves rather than discussing the nation’s problems. Bella mentions this self-editing when she states:

He dicho.

Ha dicho, dijo y dirá, pero tuvo que contradecirse y negarse a sí misma muchas veces y volverse a aceptar y negarse de nuevo y de nuevo contradecirse, desdecirse, hasta poder recuperar el tiempo lineal en el cual los recuerdos y las interferencias no se circunvalan, no se espiralan alrededor de una hasta hacer del tiempo solo un gran ahogo (Valenzuela, “Cuarta versión” 6).

Bella has edited her thoughts and words so many times that she no longer knows what to believe, what she stands for, or who she really is. Bella enacts “inxile” and practices “percepticide,” for she opts to keep her mouth shut and performs the mundane and quotidian in order to survive in this system. Bella realizes that her silence and inaction do not alleviate her tension but only internalize it. In spite of this raised consciousness she is not ready to become politicized.

This tension-filled atmosphere where individuals are practicing “percepticide” and living within “inxile” is apparent at Pedro’s first embassy party. As the new ambassador to Argentina from an unnamed Spanish-speaking nation, Pedro must attempt to maintain diplomatic relations between his country and the Argentine regime. All of Pedro’s guests know of his foreign policy problems, yet they do not mention them because they want to be polite. The guests don’t want to cause him more tension, and are silent for fear of reprisal from the regime if they comment upon politics contrary to the dictatorship’s “behaviorist ideology.”

One of the reasons why the military dictatorship frowns upon Pedro’s position as ambassador is that his country is known to grant asylum for Argentines who seek exile. On one occasion, Bella’s friend Mara who attends a party at the embassy asks Pedro about his country’s involvement. In response, he avoids discussing the topic altogether:

Mara quiso inquirir sobre los asilados en la embajada de Pedro, el embajador diplomáticamente intentó desviar la conversación de tan espinoso tema, otros insistieron, reclamando detalles, pero mucho no duró la pretendida toma de conciencia colectiva. Presintiendo la tensión de Pedro, Mara los volvió a llamar la irrealidad... *Todo por evitar mencionar lo inmenconable.* (Valenzuela, “Cuarta versión” 16)

Mara crosses the line between the mentionable and those topics that need to be auto-censored. By voicing her questions, Mara expresses her concern for the exiles. Her inquiries demonstrate her politically left sympathies and disdain for the Argentine regime.

However, as a diplomat living within Argentina, Pedro is supposed to remain neutral. Rather than admit facts about his connections with those seeking exile, Pedro attempts to maintain his neutral façade for the regime. Mara briefly presents herself as the voice of those who want to inquire about the exiles living in Pedro's residence. Noticing Pedro's uneasiness, she switches the conversation back to their own "inxile" in order to avoid speaking about what the regime insists should not be discussed.

Although the guests remain cautious about what they are willing to say in public about the regime, as the party continues, their complacency and willingness to practice "percepticide" changes. In Pedro's residence the guests feel relatively safe and therefore confide their concerns about their country's situation. As the group talks, they begin to worry about why Bella has not yet arrived. Apparently, Bella feels she needs to make a grand entrance by being fashionably late and does not realize her tardiness will cause concern. Upon her arrival, Bella's entourage greets her, "Hola, se dijeron alegrándose de verse. Volver a verse era un alivio, en esas circunstancias" (8). These circumstances concern the repressive situation in which they live because they begin to wonder if a tardy partygoer has now become the latest victim among their friends to be disappeared.

This worry is valid because Bella's friends explain, "La situación está peor que nunca, aparecieron otros 15 cadáveres flotando en el río, redoblaron las persecuciones. Y alguien le sopló al oído: Navoni pasó a la clandestinidad. Olvídate de su nombre, bórralo de tu libreta de direcciones" (Valenzuela, "Cuarta versión" 8).⁴ The threat of being "disappeared" by the regime is very real.

Celia, another party-goer who is an Argentine political journalist, has an inside track on what is really happening throughout the country. Celia has connections with the subversive movement and secretly works toward helping others seek exile. She does all of this with a façade of complacency so that the paramilitaries do not suspect her and "disappear" her as well. Celia advises Bella to be careful. Although Bella is not yet taking explicit action against the regime, she is associated with subversives and could potentially be suspected as anti-government.

In reaction, Bella retorts, "qué tengo que ver yo con la política", thereby denying any political involvement. Nonetheless, Bella's political affiliation is indirectly affirmed because she frequents parties at an embassy known to harbor political asylum seekers (Valenzuela, "Cuarta versión" 8-9). In addition, Bella can be held suspect because she does not leave the party once she hears of Navoni's hiding. Instead, the omniscient female narrator comments upon her behavior: "*debió haberse ido para no entorpecer su preclara carrera*" (Valenzuela, "Cuarta versión" 9). However, Bella chooses to stay for several reasons. First, she demonstrates her loyalties by acknowledging her association with a friend who now is in hiding. Secondly, she stays because she is flirting with Pedro and plans to make him her next sexual conquest. A final demonstration of Bella's leftist sympathies is the fact that she also remains at the party to support and listen to "El Escritor," who some literary critics claim symbolizes either Pablo Neruda, Julio Cortázar, or Gabriel García Márquez.⁵

This famous unnamed artist, "la figura preclara de las letras locales" who was a surprise guest at the party, would read "su épica obra cumbre" (Valenzuela, "Cuarta versión" 9). Accompanying "El Escritor" are guitarists, "que cada tanto enloquecían por cuenta propia" who are conducted by "El Maestro" (9). Like "El Escritor," "El Maestro" could be a code name to represent Víctor Jara or another *nueva canción* artist, who produces music with

revolutionary lyrics.⁶ This is significant because as “el escritor ya abre la boca, comienza la balada” (9). The reader can assume that the recital of *la balada* is from the writer’s latest work, which most likely supports the political left and condemns the regime. One can assume that those who stay to listen to the performance, such as Bella, agree with the political message encoded in the ballad.

The guests’ commitment to stay at the party and listen to “El Escritor” and “El Maestro” is significant since the *apagón cultural*, which attacked artistic forms and freedom of expression, was in full force at this time. Despite the threat of not only a cultural purging but death, artists still continued to create and perform. Often artists would use their craft as a means to transmit messages of social critique and denouncement of atrocities committed by the regimes (Boyle 51). This is demonstrated by both “El Escritor” and “El Maestro” who are still willing to present their collaborative works despite repercussions from the junta such as censorship, black listings, forced exile, disappearance, and death.

As the story progresses, Bella’s consciousness is raised. Bella refuses to continue to modify her behavior because she can no longer pretend to ignore what is happening in her country. Bella’s political activism begins slowly but accelerates to complete participation in collective resistance as she helps others seek exile at Pedro’s residence, her “embajada favorita” (Valenzuela, “Cuarta versión” 5). Bella explains:

Tengo una pareja de amigos, abogados ambos, defensores de presos políticos. Fueron los últimos que se animaron a presentar un habeas corpus en nombre de cinco de sus clientes desaparecidos. Ahora los buscan, les pusieron una bomba en la casa; están desesperados y ya no tienen dónde esconderse. Piden asilo. (Valenzuela, “Cuarta versión” 22)

Bella’s request for her friends’ asylum demonstrates that she is much more politically involved than she admits. Bella has become “*una pieza más, un peón en el juego*” (Valenzuela, “Cuarta versión” 23). Her solidarity marks Bella’s political transformation because her efforts are not for herself but for others.

Bella’s evolution along the political activism spectrum intensifies once she begins to creatively conduct resistance. Bella has moved from what Perelli would call a “back stage” performance to the “front stage” (219-21). Bella no longer confines her personal beliefs to the “back stage” of her private life but now is willing to voice her concerns on the “front stage” in public. Bella daringly conveys a political message as she *represents* her own critical theatrical interpretations, which she uses to denounce what is happening upon Argentina’s national “stage.” Bella’s “performance” solidifies her transformation into a political activist and demonstrates her acquisition of “presence” (Kaminsky 25).

At first Bella’s transformation begins subtly as she expresses her political activism masked under a guise of *femme fatale* sexuality. Her performative role is much more provocative than the traditional role for female actors/characters. Bella challenges traditional gender roles by demanding “presence” and becomes the regime’s demonized “engendered enemy” because of her sexualized performance as a *femme fatale*. This role is intentional for she uses her sexuality to gain attention. Once noticed, Bella uses her stage presence to convey her personal message of denouncement.

Initially Bella is able to critique the government without reprisal because she is a famous actress and her lover, Pedro, is a diplomat. Bella's political stance becomes even more public once she writes and performs in a play that denounces the regime's censorship of artistic production. Here, Bella's play becomes a "vehicle of disruption." The performance creates a "revolt from below" as she voices her *versión* in comparison to the regime's *historia oficial* (Masiello 11-12). Bella stages her oppositional performance as:

una representación unipersonal en dos actos y montones de actitudes, con todas las máscaras izadas como velas. Espectáculo concebido para invitar al público a jugarse tratando de burlar las barreras de censura mientras la posibilidad todavía existiera, apurándose antes de que la represión – esa mancha de aceite – completara su eficaz marcha de mancha y lo contaminara todo. Creación y censura, lo hecho y lo deshecho, decía Bella, lo desechado. Un dechado de creación, ella, una castración sin tacha, la censura. (Valenzuela, "Cuarta versión" 32)

In this quote the reader witnesses Bella's play-on-words, "lo hecho y lo deshecho... lo desechado" (32). Bella manipulates her lines << the made, the unmade, and the discarded ones >> in order to critique the regime's system that enforces citizens to remake themselves through self-censorship and forced "in exile." Argentines had to conform otherwise they would be unmade through torture, and discarded as if they were trash.

Bella encodes her play's message in order to outwit the censors. By presenting her message in code, Bella edits herself so that she can continue performing. If she were to criticize the government more directly, Bella would "disappear" like many of her fellow artists and friends. Despite these precautions and as a result of performing this controversial piece with loosely disguised semantics, Bella puts herself in danger and her life is threatened. In order to avoid reprisal and at Pedro's invitation, she chooses to accompany him back to his native country during a diplomatic tour.

While in Pedro's unnamed Spanish-speaking homeland, Bella no longer has to hide her radicalized affiliations and can openly comment upon her politics. Bella's theatrical voice becomes an oppositional force creating "a revolt from below" as she is invited to present her opinions at La Universidad Nacional. Those students who attend her workshops encourage her to, "continuar nuestro diálogo, hay tantos aspectos de tus propuestas teatrales que nos interesan. Vayamos a la cafetería a platicar a gusto" (Valenzuela, "Cuarta versión" 42). In this intellectual atmosphere Bella also chooses to perform her theater piece *El todo por el todo* which includes a torture scene, and to explain her perspective on what is happening back home in Argentina.

Precisely for becoming more open about her anti-regime politics and using her art on the "front stage" to publicly critique the government, paramilitaries break into Bella's Argentine home while she is abroad: "*hombres de civil allanaron el departamento de Bella, interrogando a los vecinos, revolviendo todas sus pertenencias en busca de no se sabe bien qué*" (Valenzuela, "Cuarta versión" 34). As a result, it is clear that Bella is on the government's subversive list. She no longer has clemency; not even Pedro's diplomatic immunity can save her.

By involving herself more deeply in the political unrest, Bella has left behind her old identity in exchange for a more politically active role. She chooses to use her new political voice in reaction to feeling violated by the paramilitaries who broke into her apartment. Bella

is able to vocalize her frustrations through her performance, and as a result reaffirms her sense of “presence” as she gains personal significance through her theatrical presentation (Kaminsky 25).

With her newfound strength and sense of self, Bella no longer desires to stay abroad. She feels she has to confront the atrocities in her country. Bella decides to return to Argentina to act out against the regime. However, Bella’s choice to return is a controversial one. She could remain in exile in Pedro’s native country. From there she could start her acting career anew. She could internationally disseminate the facts concerning the regime. Bella could do all of this from exile, but instead she returns to her homeland.

Bella’s decision to put herself into potential harm’s way is frustrating for the reader who witnesses these decisions. She is not interested in creating a new life abroad, nor is she willing to wait until the situation in Argentina calms down. Despite warnings from her loved ones, and in spite of knowing what could happen to her if she returns, Bella chooses to overlook the regime’s threats (Valenzuela, “Cuarta versión” 38). Instead voices her intentions:

Si vuelvo a mi país y me golpean, me va a doler. Si me duele sabré que éste es mi cuerpo (en escena me sacudo, me retuerzo bajo los supuestos golpes que casi casi me hacen doler ¿es mi cuerpo?). Mi cuerpo será, si vuelvo. Este que aquí toco, tan al alcance de mi mano. Cuando le arranquen un pedazo será entero mi cuerpo. En cada mutilado pedacito de mí misma seré yo. Y así lo represento y representando, soy. La tortura en escena, la misma que tantos están sufriendo, la que quizá me espere en casa cuando vuelva. (Valenzuela, “Cuarta versión” 41)

Bella’s choice to return is based upon the fact that if she stayed in exile it would seem as if she were turning her back on part of herself. Bella’s decision solidifies her sense of identity as an Argentine.⁷ Bella admits her renewed connection with Argentina when she states: “No puedo permitir que me asusten de esta manera y me corten de mi vida. Creo que están tratando de ahuyentar a toda la gente que piensa, por poco que piensen. No les voy a dar el gusto, voy a volver (Valenzuela, “Cuarta versión” 46). At this moment, the reader realizes Bella’s plans to act upon her political beliefs.

Once Bella returns accompanied by Pedro to Argentina, she is blacklisted because she is marked as an anti-government sympathizer: “Bella no podía en aquel entonces actuar en público... [Así que], para no exponerse demasiado, se exponía en estas fiestas diplomáticas [donde] Bella podía representar a gusto sus papeles” (Valenzuela, “Cuarta versión” 50). Although Bella’s only audience consists of those individuals who attend Pedro’s private diplomatic parties, good comes out of these more intimate settings. Bella expresses herself freely before her diplomatic audience. They in turn could spread her message abroad and create international pressures upon the regime.

As the novella continues, Bella’s assertion of political and personal “presence” grows. Her transformation becomes complete when Pedro is recalled by his government. Instead of maintaining Pedro as the ambassador to Argentina, his country feels that the position would be better suited to a military ambassador who could attempt to re-establish diplomatic ties, because as it stands, there is no communication between the two governments. In reaction to being recalled to his native country, Pedro asks Bella to return with him. Instead of

accepting, she immediately rejects his offer, saying, “Vos sabés que no me puedo ir, y menos así... Además siento que acá puedo ser mínimamente útil” (Valenzuela, “Cuarta versión” 57). Rather than return with Pedro to his country where she could live without fear but would feel useless, Bella decides to stay and act.

Bella’s “final performance” is to organize Pedro’s farewell party. Unbeknownst to Pedro, Bella invites their circle of friends, as well as individuals seeking political exile. Bella’s intention is to transform the party into a political act. This she admits as she whispers to herself, “*si algo es todavía mío, le estamparé mi sello. Y con treinta invitaciones en la mano, equivalentes casi a treinta pasaportes, decidió por fin asumir el papel protagónico*” (Valenzuela, “Cuarta versión” 58). In order to successfully override political protocol and defy the presence of the regime symbolized in the embassy guards, Bella must “perform” as if nothing is out of the ordinary. Instead of being nervous, it seems as if Bella was made for this role because she acts so sure of herself, the surest she has been in all of her life (59). Through her defiance, Bella embarks on the most important role of her life, to help secure exile for thirty families.

During the goodbye party Bella once again claims “presence” through her performance in which she defies the regime’s imposed social norms. Bella becomes the “engendered enemy” as she takes a stance as a woman with power (Taylor, *Disappearing Acts* 79-80 and Franco, “Gender, Death, and Resistance” 108). At the party, she takes on a public role as an actress who uses her art to denounce injustices rather than follow the regime’s “performance model” where a woman should be at home in the private as a wife and mother. Also, Bella dares to contest traditional ideologies and breaks with the regime’s “behaviorist ideology” because this goodbye party publicly acknowledges Bella as Pedro’s mistress. Lastly, Bella is labeled a feminized enemy because she uses the “presence” she gains through her last “performance” to openly denounce the regime.

Bella’s goodbye party also breaks with the regime’s “performance model” as she steps out of bounds regarding her social class. Bella does this by inviting guests that are not of the same socio-economic status as her circle of friends but rather are there shouldering their children, wearing bedraggled clothing, and carrying their few possessions as they seek asylum within the embassy’s protective walls. Although Pedro initially does not know of Bella’s politicizing of the party in this way, many of those friends she does invite decline attending:

Mara se disculpó, qué lástima, se siente muy mal la pobre, no va a poder venir, está con gripe bárbara”... – Aldo tampoco va a poder venir. No dijo por qué... Los Barembilit están de viaje... [y] – Llamó Celia para disculparse porque no puede venir. Tuvo un compromiso urgente. (Valenzuela, “Cuarta versión” 59-60)

Bella’s true intentions are made known to the reader and her goodbye party takes on a political meaning.

Bella decides to politicize Pedro’s farewell since she had been immobilized by the dictatorship. Bella no longer could perform *El todo por el todo* publicly since she was blacklisted as an actress. Also, she could no longer help others seek asylum through official channels with Pedro’s connections because he was rendered diplomatically ineffective by his government. Essentially, both Bella and Pedro’s hands are tied because of their past subversive involvement. However, because of this inability to do anything publicly, Pedro’s

private goodbye party becomes especially significant, for there they could act openly on a political level.

Bella's signature act and the climax of the novella unfold as the embassy guards try to enter Pedro's home to evacuate the residence because an informant has discovered Bella's intentions to help her "party guests" seek exile. At this moment Pedro realizes Bella's plan. "Pedro se adelantó unos pasos porque por fin sabía...sólo Bella se mantuvo a su lado, decidida, y avanzó con él hacia el jefe de la guardia y quizá fue la única que lo oyó a Pedro decir- De aquí no sale nadie" (Valenzuela, "Cuarta versión" 63). Bella asserts her "presence" and becomes a "potent political subject" as she accompanies Pedro to the door to prevent the guards from entering the house (Kaminsky 25). Unfortunately, as Bella reasserts her "presence," she is killed:

En ese preciso instante sonó el silbato y los guardias armados que seguramente estaban agazapados tras las puertas irrumpieron en la sala desde distintos ángulos, en tropel, y en la confusión las inmunidades diplomáticas fueron desatendidas y se oyó un único disparo. Bella comenzó su lentísima caída y Pedro no encontró fuerzas para sostenerla, sólo pudo abrazarla e irla acompañando hacia abajo (63).

Although "Cuarta versión" closes with Bella's demise, this is not the definitive ending. Critic Liliana Trevizan points out that through Bella's passing, "su personaje adquiere una dimensión trágica que supera la discusión acerca de las motivaciones. El personaje se engrandece en su muerte por los demás, su historia se instala en otro nivel narrativo" (101). Bella reaches a new level in death because her sacrifice is not in vain.

Although it is not fully clear in the novella because the guards demand that everyone leave, it is my contention that the guests have successfully gained asylum, for Pedro exclaims, "de aquí no sale nadie," before anyone steps forward to exit (Valenzuela, "Cuarta versión" 63). I suggest that although Bella loses her life, her guests survive. Her *grand finale* is a sacrifice so that others may seek exile, and they may write their own *versión* of what happened. Thus, Valenzuela closes "Cuarta versión" on a positive note because the open ending provides an opportunity to inspire new *versiones*.

Notes

¹ Luisa Valenzuela's literature has the specific goal, "of questioning, of disturbing the reader, of pointing out what would be more comfortable to forget" (Shaw 97). In her opinion, "language is always political... [and] the political topic per se as a subject of my writing is there all the time. [Therefore], if we forget to be rebels we are no longer writing" (qtd. Shaw 97).

² Here Castillo is alluding to Audre Lorde's 1979 essay titled "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House."

³ This reflects Valenzuela's knowledge of how Argentine theater was being affected by the *apagón cultural*'s purging the art scene of anything it considered anti-regime. Theater during this historical time began taking an active role in creative resistance, for it could transmit a critical message to a wider audience than what would be accessible to a reading audience. In the case of the Southern Cone during the repressive dictatorships, theater was seen as an outlet for middle class and politically left intellectuals "in search of politically dissident views" (Boyle 61), who would gather together with like-minded people so that they could create dialogue voicing their disdain for the system of power controlling them. This Bella does as she performs for her friends at Pedro's private embassy parties for she knows her audience is filled with people with similar views.

Resistance theater also was used to inform a public which was not aware of all of the atrocities going on in the Southern Cone. Its stage offered a public forum where political content could be presented and debated. In this way, the audience members are pushed to form opinions upon the information they glean from their own lives in comparison with what was performed on stage. This is exemplified by Bella's theatrical

workshops, in which she informs university students in Pedro's country of what is happening back in Argentina.

In addition to the above tactics, theater groups intent on performing plays with critical messages needed to learn new ways to defy censorship otherwise the participants in the drama could be punished. An example of how drama groups were able to continue production was through "countercensorship". According to Graham-Jones, countercensorship is not like the regimes' demands of self-censorship in which unacceptable social criticism of the regime is omitted from scripts, instead countercensorship "is active and resisting" (21). "Countercensorship" generates discourse through the use of parody, encoded messages within metaphors, allegories, analogies, and double meanings to make the audience reflect upon "la cuestión social" (Boyle 55). Thus, these methods of "countercensorship" transmitted a secret politicized message that was performed out in the open, hidden in direct view (Graham-Jones 20). Valenzuela's character, Bella, employs "countercensorship" throughout the novella as she incorporates double meanings and wordplay into her performances.

⁴ The mention of Navoni is very interesting because this character cross-references with two other novels written by Valenzuela. The first time we are introduced to Navoni is in *Como en la guerra* (1977). Navoni is the character "Ella's" lover and he is the leader of an Argentine subversive group. Because of her involvement with Navoni and the group's unsuccessful guerrilla activity in Buenos Aires, "Ella" sought exile in Barcelona. Navoni also appears in *Cola de lagartija* (1983). In this novel, Navoni incites the narrator to kill off "El brujo" who is the *santería* advisor to those in control of the dictatorship. Thus, the regime would crumble without "El brujo's" counsel.

⁵ Shaw explains this allusion to "El Escritor" for the opening of the story, "begins with a superb Post-Boom image: that of the "Great Writer" (= representative of the Boom) at an embassy party reading from his latest masterpiece to the accompaniment of police sirens. The message is explicit: it is no longer the "angustia metafísica" of the older generation of writers that is relevant now. It is oppression, symbolized by the people who have sought refuge in the embassy. But this is not expressed directly. As always in Valenzuela, ambiguities prevail (Shaw 105).

⁶ Argentine and Chilean music called *la nueva canción* or Uruguay's *el canto popular* are musical forms of creative resistance. This kind of music vocally establishes a revolutionary space that champions sociopolitical and economic issues (Perelli "Youth, Politics, and Dictatorship" 225). *Nueva canción* originated in Argentina to protest Perón's repressive measures. In later years, this art form was also used to support Salvador Allende's election as Chilean President, to denounce the Pinochet dictatorship, and to oppose imperialism and Americanization within Latin America. Two of the most famous singers, songwriters, and performers of *la nueva canción* are Violeta Parra and Víctor Jara. Parra helped introduce *la nueva canción* in Chile and Jara politicized it to the point that he was murdered in 1973, by the Pinochet-supporting paramilitaries for challenging their system of power.

⁷ Bella's rediscovery of her "Argentineness" is a significant realization regarding issues of identity within the boundaries of exile. Tununa Mercado in her essay, "In a State of Memory," found in *The Argentine Reader* writes that life in exile was predominated by a sense of melancholy and nostalgia for the terrain that exiles lost or left behind. Instead of turning their back on their homeland, exile often made these individuals act or perform more Argentine than if they were in Argentina. In Mercado's experience, exiles "never stopped talking [about Argentina]... filling the cracks and hollows... with Argentine substance, plugging all possible perforations with Argentine putty" (451). Hence, while in their adoptive land, exiles performed *lo argentino* such as drinking *maté* from a gourd with a silver *bombillo*, using *porteño* accents and the colloquial use of *che*, glorifying the national flag to demonstrate patriotism during the Malvinas War, and being soccer fanatics during the 1978 World Cup. Argentine exiles performed *lo argentino* to demonstrate their identity, so as to not lose or forget their "Argentineness" (455). In Bella's case, she is not willing to separate herself from her origins; and thus, decides to return to Argentina despite the fact that she would most definitely be putting herself in danger.

Works Cited

- Boling, Becky. "Cuarta Versión": Implicit Subjects/Complicit Readings." *Hispanic Journal* 14.2 (1993): 105-16. Print.
- Boyle, Catherine M. *Chilean Theater, 1973-1985: Marginality, Power, Selfhood*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1992. Print.
- Castillo, Debra. "Appropriating the Master's Weapons: Luisa Valenzuela." *Talking Back*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992. 96-136. Print.
- Colleran, Jeanne, and Jenny S. Spencer, eds. *Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theatre*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1998. Print.
- Corradi, Juan E., Patricia Weiss Fagen, and Manuel Antonio Garretón, eds. *Fear at the Edge: State Terror and Resistance in Latin America*. Berkeley: U California P, 1992. Print.
- Franco, Jean. "Gender, Death, and Resistance: Facing the Ethical Vacuum." *Fear at the Edge: State Terror and Resistance in Latin America*. Ed. Juan E. Corradi, Patricia Weiss Fagen, and Manuel Antonio Garretón. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992. 104-20. Print.
- Geisdorfer Feal, Rosemary. "The Politics of 'Wargasm': Sexuality, Domination and Female Subversion in Luisa Valenzuela's *Cambio de armas*." *Structures of Power: Essays on Twentieth-Century Spanish-American Fiction*. Ed. Terry J. Peavler and Peter Standish. Albany: State U of New York P, 1996. 159-88. Print.
- Gómez, Jaime. "La representación de la dictadura en la narrativa de Marta Traba, Isabel Allende, Diamela Eltit y Luisa Valenzuela." *Confluencia* 12.2 (1997): 89-99. Print.
- Graham-Jones, Jean. "Introduction: Theater and the State: Buenos Aires, 1976". *Exorcising History: Argentine Theater under Dictatorship*. Lewisberg: Bucknell UP, 2000. 13-21. Print.
- Harlow, Barbara. *Resistance Literature*. NY: Methuen, 1987. Print.
- Huggins, Martha K. *Political Policing: The United States and Latin America*. Durham: Duke P, 1998. Print.
- Jones, Anny Brooksbank. "Latin American Feminist Criticism Revisited." *Latin American Women's Writing: Feminist Readings in Theory and Crisis*. Ed. Anny Brooksbank Jones and Catherine Davies. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996. 215-25. Print.
- Kaminsky, Amy K. *Reading the Body Politic: Feminist Criticism and Latin American Women Writers*. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1993. Print.
- Masiello, Francine. *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis*. Durham: Duke UP, 2001. Print.
- Mercado, Tununa. "In a State of Memory." *The Argentina Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. Eds. Gabriela Nouzeilles and Graciela Montaldo. Durham: Duke UP, 2002. 450-57. Print.
- Metzger, Mary Janell. "Oedipal with a Vengeance: Narrative, Desire, and Violence in Luisa Valenzuela's 'Fourth Version.'" *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 14. 2 (1995): 295-307. Print.
- Perelli, Carina. "Youth, Politics, and Dictatorship in Uruguay". *Fear at the Edge: State Terror and Resistance in Latin America*. Ed. Juan E. Corradi, Patricia Weiss Fagen, and Manuel Antonio Garretón. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992. 212-35. Print.
- . "The Uses of Conservatism: Women's Democratic Politics in Uruguay." *The Women's Movement in Latin America: Participation and Democracy*. Ed. Jane Jacquette. Boulder: Westview, 1994, 131-49. Print.

- Santos Febres, Mayra. "Los juegos del yo: antídotos contra la censura en 'Cuarta Versión' de Luisa Valenzuela." *Revista Anual del Seminario de Estudios Hispánicos 'Federico de Onís'* 20 (1993): 311-22. Print.
- Shaw, Donald L. *The Post-Boom in Spanish American Fiction*. Albany: State University of New York P, 1998. Print.
- Taylor, Diana. *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's 'Dirty War.'* Durham: Duke UP, 1997. Print.
- . *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. Print.
- Tierney-Tello, Mary Beth. *Allegories of Transgression and Transformation: Experimental Fiction by Women Writing Under Dictatorship*. Albany: State University of New York P, 1996. Print.
- Tomlinson, Emily. "Rewriting Fictions of Power: The Texts of Luisa Valenzuela and Marta Traba." *The Modern Language Review* 93.3 (1998): 695-709. Print.
- Trevizan, Liliana. "Luisa Valenzuela: Los riesgos de una versión plural y democrática." *Confluencia* 12. 1 (Fall 1996): 93-105. Print.
- Valenzuela, Luisa. *Cambio de armas*. Hanover: Ediciones del Norte, 1982. Print.
- . "Writing with the Body." *Hungry Mind Review* (Fall 1991): 22, 32. Print.
- Villegas, Juan. *Para la interpretación del teatro como construcción visual*. Irvine: Gestos, 2000. Print.