

Research Article



“She Exists Me”: An Ontology of Embodiment in Tomás Eloy Martínez’s *Santa Evita*

“O Beni Var Eder”: Tomás Eloy Martínez’in *Santa Evita* Romanında Bedenselliğin Ontolojisi

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Abstract

I argue that Tomás Eloy Martínez’s *Santa Evita* develops an ontology of embodiment in which the gendered body is not a fixed biological entity awaiting representation but a generative force that produces the very relations, narratives, and language through which it persists. I trace this across encounters with Eva Perón’s corpse: the anatomist who embalms her; the military officers who seek to erase her; the girl who mistakes her body for a doll; the officer whose fixation on Eva leads him to kill his own wife; and the narrator himself. Each encounter transforms both the body’s meaning and the person who touches it. Embodiment persists not because the corpse resists biological decay but because it continues to generate encounters and meanings that exceed inherited categories of life, death, and language, culminating in a final narrative innovation that makes existence itself something enacted between beings rather than possessed individually. Drawing on Judith Butler, Karen Barad, Giorgio Agamben, Idelber Avelar, and recent studies of disappearance, I contend that writing is neither external to embodiment nor a substitute for it. Instead, it is one of the relations through which embodied existence continues to unfold beyond biological death.

Öz

Bu makalede, Tomás Eloy Martínez’in *Santa Evita* romanının, toplumsal cinsiyetle belirlenmiş bedeni temsil edilmeyi bekleyen sabit bir biyolojik varlık olarak değil, varlığını sürdürmesini sağlayan ilişkileri, anlatıları ve dili bizzat üreten bir güç olarak kavrayan bir bedensellik ontolojisi geliştirdiğini ileri sürüyorum. Bu yaklaşımı, Eva Perón’un naaşıyla gerçekleşen bir dizi karşılaşma üzerinden izliyorum: Naaşı mumyalayan anatomistin, onu ortadan kaldırmaya çalışan askerî görevlilerin, bedeni oyuncak bebek sanan küçük kızın, Eva’ya duyduğu saplantı nedeniyle kendi karısını öldüren subayın ve nihayet anlatıcının karşılaşmaları. Bu karşılaşmaların her biri hem bedenın anlamını hem de ona dokunan kişiyi dönüştürür. Bedensel varoluşun sürekliliği, naaşın biyolojik çürümeye direnmesinden değil, yaşam, ölüm ve dile ilişkin yerleşik kategorileri aşan karşılaşmalar ve anlamlar üretmeye devam etmesinden kaynaklanır. Bu süreç, varoluşun bireylerin kendi başlarına sahip oldukları bir şey olmaktan ziyade, varlıklar arasındaki ilişkilerde gerçekleşen bir olgu hâline geldiği son bir anlatısal yenilikle doruk noktasına ulaşır. Judith Butler, Karen Barad, Giorgio Agamben, Idelber Avelar ve kaybedilme olgusuna ilişkin güncel çalışmalardan hareketle, yazının bedenselliğe dışsal olmadığını ve onun yerine geçen bir unsur olarak da görülemeyeceğini savunuyorum. Aksine yazı, bedensel varoluşun biyolojik ölümün ötesinde sürüp gelişmesini sağlayan ilişkilerden biridir.

Keywords

Embodiment,
Santa Evita,
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biopolitics,
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Introduction

Tomás Eloy Martínez's *Santa Evita* is frequently read as a novel about the political afterlife of Eva Perón, the instability of historical truth, and the porous boundary between history and fiction. Studies have examined the novel's reconfiguration of national myth, its challenge to historiographical discourse, and its fictional reconstruction of Eva's body as the site where history, memory, and political violence converge.¹ While these dimensions are undoubtedly central to the novel, they also point toward a more fundamental concern: the relation between embodied existence and writing. Rather than presenting the body as a passive object upon which narratives are inscribed, Martínez imagines embodiment as a generative force that continually produces narratives, transforms those who encounter it, and ultimately reshapes the language through which its persistence is articulated.

Eva Perón has been written and rewritten in Argentine culture since her death in 1952. Borges, Walsh, Martínez Estrada, Copi, and Perlongher each gave her a body of their own. Recent work on her afterlife shows how commemoration, the press, and later cinema and theater built a hagiography around her figure.² *Santa Evita* enters this tradition at its most disturbing point, where the posthumous journey of her embalmed corpse begins. Martínez himself places that journey within a wider Argentine habit. In a 2006 interview he called necrophilia a typically Argentine illness and set the handling of a dead leader's remains beside the disappearance of a living witness.³

That journey also carries historical weight. After the 1955 coup the military seized Eva's corpse and hid it, burying it abroad under a false name. Critics have read this itinerary as a first act of disappearance, and contemporaries already used the word, for a march of homage in 1957 was

¹ Marcelo Coddou, "La novela de Perón y Santa Evita de Tomás Eloy Martínez como novelas históricas," *Crítica.cl*, October 17, 2013, <https://critica.cl/literatura/la-novela-de-peron-y-santa-evita-de-tomas-eloy-martinez-como-novelas-historicas>; Cecilia M. T. López Badano, "Eva Perón: del cuerpo político al cadáver exquisito literario," *Letras* 50, no. 77 (2008): 133–54, https://ve.scielo.org/scielo.php?pid=S0459-12832008000200005&script=sci_abstract; Alejandro González Urrego, "En busca de las pistas sicoanalíticas de los sueños de Evita en la novela *Santa Evita* de Tomás Eloy Martínez," *Revista Alere* 6, no. 2 (2012): 191–212, <https://periodicos.unemat.br/index.php/alere/article/view/513/443>.

² On the construction of Eva Perón's figure after her death, see Laura Ehrlich, "El ascenso de Eva Perón en la política peronista y la cultura argentina durante las décadas de 1950 y 1960," *Boletín del Instituto de Historia Argentina y Americana* "Dr. Emilio Ravignani" 58 (2023): 58–84, <https://doi.org/10.34096/bol.rav.n58.11810>; and Irene C. Marcos Arteaga, "¡Santa, oh Santa Evita! La mujer y el mito a través del audiovisual del siglo XXI," *Latente* 21 (2023): 145–57, <https://doi.org/10.25145/j.latente.2023.21.06>.

³ Tomás Eloy Martínez, "La necrofilia es una enfermedad típica de los argentinos," interview by Redacción Perfil, Perfil, October 16, 2006, <https://www.perfil.com/noticias/politica/la-necrofilia-es-una-enfermedad-tipica-de-los-argentinos-20061016-0016.phtml>. In the interview Martínez ties the repeated relocation of Juan Perón's remains to the disappearance of Julio López, a witness at the Etchecolatz trial who was still missing when the interview was given.

to take place “protestando por la desaparición de su cuerpo” [“protesting the disappearance of her body”].⁴ The corpse has since been read as the first of the thirty thousand disappeared,⁵ as the “narrative mode of disappearance,”⁶ and as one of Argentina’s first and most famous disappeared bodies, evoked as “a material presence with an affective impact.”⁷ These readings treat Eva’s corpse as an early case of disappearance, as a figure for it, or as an affective presence.

Santa Evita belongs among the postdictatorship fictions that return to state violence through missing bodies. Eva’s corpse, which also makes a brief appearance in Luisa Valenzuela’s *Cola de lagartija* (1983), lets such fictions explore what was done to the bodies of the thirty thousand disappeared, by drawing on both the likeness and the difference between a famous, well-preserved body and the thousands of anonymous dead.⁸ Within Martínez’s own work, Gerald Martin places *Santa Evita* and *La novela de Perón* between the Boom and the Post-Boom, as hybrids of journalism and fiction, and Karen Elizabeth Bishop calls the earlier book the later one’s twin.⁹ The first follows the living leader. The second turns to the preserved body of his wife.

Much of what these fictions explore gathers around the embalmed body as a place where myth and history meet. For this reason, the novel has been placed within the *nueva novela histórica*, as documented fiction, fictionalized biography, and metahistory at once, with myth permeating history.¹⁰ The embalming refuses Eva the equalizing death and makes her a conflictive corpse and a rebellious historical memory, a “cadáver” that keeps reorganizing the story a “cuerpo muerto” would have ended.¹¹ Followed through the delirium it provokes, the same body appears charged with power, possibly more than Eva had in life, and a greater problem dead than alive.¹²

That placement has not gone unquestioned, since the novel shares some of the genre’s strategies while proposing a different kind of writing of the past.¹³ The same body multiplies

⁴ J. Perón and J. Cooke, *Correspondencia*, vol. 1 (Parlamento, 1985), 196, quoted in Ehrlich, “El ascenso de Eva Perón,” 63n15.

⁵ Gerald Martin, “Tomás Eloy Martínez, Biography and the Boom: La novela de Perón (1985) and Santa Evita (1995),” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 31, no. 4 (2012): 470.

⁶ Karen Elizabeth Bishop, “Errant Metonymy: The Embodiment of Disappearance in Tomás Eloy Martínez’s *Santa Evita*,” in *The Space of Disappearance: A Narrative Commons in the Ruins of Argentine State Terror* (State University of New York Press, 2020), 160.

⁷ Laura Colaneri, “The Sinister Southern Cone: Mood, Affect, and Horror in the Cultural Imaginary of Argentine and Brazilian State Terror” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2023), 267.

⁸ Colaneri, “The Sinister Southern Cone,” 267–68; on Valenzuela’s novel, see her chap. 1 and 268n2.

⁹ Martin, “Biography and the Boom,” 460; Bishop, “Errant Metonymy,” 159.

¹⁰ Coddou, “*La novela de Perón y Santa Evita*.”

¹¹ López Badano, “Eva Perón: del cuerpo político al cadáver exquisito literario,” 139.

¹² González Urrego, “En busca de las pistas sicoanalíticas,” 205, 207.

¹³ Matías Beverinotti, “*Santa Evita* de Tomás Eloy Martínez: la excritura del pasado para otra comunidad,” *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 56, no. 3 (2022): 397, 403–9, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rvs.2022.0030>.

through dismemberment, and in its many copies the ambivalence of Peronism comes into view.¹⁴ In legend, in delirium, and in its many copies, the corpse keeps acting. The question that follows is what kind of existence allows it to, and through which relations that existence continues after death.

Embodiment is articulated across multiple dimensions of *Santa Evita*. Martínez builds this conception from shifting narrative perspectives and recurring images of preservation, decay, duplication, and disappearance. It also emerges from the unstable interplay between quasi-documentary discourse and fiction that characterizes the *nueva novela histórica*—a critical category distinct from conventional historical fiction, defined less by its setting in the past than by its skepticism toward official historiography and its deliberate blending of documented fact with invented material.¹⁵ Finally, it draws on intertextual engagements with writers such as Néstor Perlongher, Copi, and Ezequiel Martínez Estrada. These elements challenge any understanding of the body as a fixed biological entity or a passive object of representation. Instead, the body emerges as a dynamic, gendered presence whose meanings are continually produced and transformed through the relationships it establishes across history, politics, memory, and narrative. This conception resonates with Judith Butler’s argument that identity categories such as gender are never stable or coherent but remain contingent on the discourses that produce them, since gender, as she argues, “is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities.”¹⁶ *Santa Evita* extends this insight into an explicitly narrative and political register: what materializes Eva’s body is not discourse in the abstract but a series of concrete encounters—medical, military, affective, textual—with each of them leaving the body newly legible and newly capable of generating further encounters. Within this broader aesthetic project, moments of embodied encounter repeatedly place pressure on the novel’s poetics until existing forms become insufficient to describe what is taking place: familiar words acquire unexpected meanings, grammatical conventions become unstable, and new linguistic forms emerge where vocabulary alone can no longer account for embodied experience. These moments of linguistic innovation are not incidental. They are essential expressions of a broader repertoire of literary strategies—shifting perspective, the blending of genres, intertextuality, and recurring imagery—that shape the novel’s understanding of embodiment.

This article argues that *Santa Evita* develops an ontology of embodiment through these literary transformations. Martínez does not simply narrate the extraordinary fate of Eva Perón’s

¹⁴ Agnese Codebò, “Volveré y seré millones: Los cuerpos de Evita en Tomás Eloy Martínez y Néstor Perlongher,” *Latin American Literary Review* 45, no. 90 (2018): 82–85.

¹⁵ Magdalena Perkowska, *Historias híbridas: la nueva novela histórica latinoamericana (1985–2000) ante las teorías posmodernas de la historia* (Iberoamericana, 2008); Norberto Flores, “Desmitificación de la historia y recusación del poder en la nueva novela histórica hispanoamericana: el caso de la novela chilena,” *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 20, no. 39 (1994): 53–59. For a recent reading of the novel against this category, see Beverinotti, “*Santa Evita*,” 397, 403–9.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1999), 6.

corpse; he stages a series of encounters in which bodies continually generate new relations, and those relations, in turn, reshape narrative, language, and the subjects who participate in them. Writing is therefore neither external to embodiment nor a substitute for it. It becomes one of the relations through which embodied existence continues to unfold beyond the apparent finality of biological death.

Where earlier readings see a case, a figure, or an affective presence, this article sees a condition. Eva's corpse and the disappeared share it. Both are held between presence and absence, neither dead nor alive in any sense that existing categories can name. Studies of forced disappearance describe this condition as a new state of being between life and death and as an ontological ambivalence.¹⁷ The novel gives it a form and a grammar.

More precisely, Eva persists through relations that must be renewed, and this persistence is ontological because the novel has to change its language to express it. By ontology I mean an account of what it is for a body to exist. Eva's existence unfolds on three levels. The first is the material corpse, which the embalmer preserves and the military hides. The second is Eva as a political and cultural figure, whom the Peronist movement and its opponents make and unmake. The third is Eva as a textual presence, sustained by memory, rumor, and writing. Each level is a set of relations through which Eva exists. She does not merely undergo these relations. She helps to generate them. The novel shows even the material corpse acting on the people who handle it. It is Eva's body, and it stays hers, through the relations it forms with them.

This account of Eva's existence rests on two theoretical sources. Judith Butler's account of materialization as reiteration supplies the claim that existence is not given once but persists only as long as it is renewed. Karen Barad's "relational ontology," which refuses the representationalist picture of words standing in for things, supplies the extension to matter that a corpse requires.¹⁸ The stakes of this account reach beyond this novel. If a missing body can be read as one that exists

¹⁷ Gabriel Gatti, "Cartografía de las nuevas formas de desaparición (o de cómo se puede contar el abandono)," *Disparidades. Revista de Antropología* 77, no. 2 (2022): e021, 7, <https://doi.org/10.3989/dra.2022.021>; Dorothee Delacroix, "La presencia de la ausencia. Hacia una antropología de la vida póstuma de los desaparecidos en el Perú," *Íconos. Revista de Ciencias Sociales* 67 (2020): 61, 65, <https://doi.org/10.17141/iconos.67.2020.4141>.

¹⁸ On reiteration, see Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (Routledge, 1993), 12, discussed in the section on *existirme* below. On "relational ontology," see Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007), 139, where the phrase names the basis of her posthumanist performative account of material bodies, human and nonhuman. This account, she writes, "refuses the representationalist fixation on words and things." *Relata* do not preexist their relations but emerge through intra-action (139–40). Barad credits Butler with challenging representationalism but argues that her account reinscribes matter as a passive product of discursive practices and is limited to human bodies (150–51).

through relations, then postdictatorship fictions of missing bodies can be read as accounts of how such bodies persist, and not only of what they stand for.

Dr. Pedro Ara and the Erotics of Preservation

The first character to encounter this altered relation between embodiment and writing is Dr. Pedro Ara, the Spanish anatomist commissioned to embalm Eva Perón's body. At first glance, Ara appears to embody scientific rationality. His profession, technical expertise, and meticulous methods suggest a detached engagement with the corpse as an anatomical object. Yet Martínez, or rather Eva herself, progressively unsettles this expectation. As Ara devotes himself to Eva's preservation, his relationship to the body increasingly exceeds the boundaries of professional duty. Martínez intertwines the language of medical expertise with an affective, possessive, and deeply erotic attachment, creating a "dark story" of sorts surrounding Eva's corpse. Ara's care is therefore never purely scientific. It is inseparable from a desire that Argentine literary tradition has repeatedly associated with Eva's embalmed body, where preservation becomes entangled with necrophilic fascination.¹⁹

This transformation profoundly complicates Ara's authority. His medical knowledge does not disappear, but it gradually becomes the means through which he legitimizes an increasingly personal attachment to Eva. He repeatedly presents himself as the only person capable of protecting her body, insisting that without his intervention she would remain defenseless against those who would profane or misuse her. The rhetoric of protection allows Ara to justify an exclusive relationship with the corpse while masking the possessiveness that underlies his devotion. Ara's medical expertise does not remain external to his desire for Eva's body; it becomes the discursive apparatus through which that desire is rendered legible as protection rather than possession. Care and domination therefore become difficult to disentangle. What appears as preservation also reveals the gendered logic through which masculine authority claims privileged access to a female body in the name of safeguarding it.²⁰ Idelber Avelar traces a related logic to the social practices of ancient Greece, where, as he puts it, "both woman and slave are receptacles, containers of truth that do not themselves have access to it as subjects," their function being "to provide such access to the free man, the citizen."²¹ Ara's claimed authority over Eva's body follows the same structure: she is assumed to hold a truth about herself that she cannot fully possess or articulate, and it is this assumption, more than any specific medical necessity, that authorizes

¹⁹ Martínez, "La necrofilia." Martínez's remarks in this interview concern the repeated exhumation and relocation of Juan Perón's remains specifically, but his framing of necrophilia as a national pathology extends by implication to Eva's embalmed body, and he explicitly situates the practice alongside the embalming of Soviet leaders such as Lenin and Stalin.

²⁰ Colaneri, "The Sinister Southern Cone," 288–89, reads Ara's treatment of the body in similar terms, as a gendered aestheticization in which the woman becomes an object of the male gaze and Ara its maker.

²¹ Idelber Avelar, *The Letter of Violence: Essays on Narrative, Ethics, and Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 38.

his access to her. This logic surfaces explicitly when a colonel arrives to remove the body on the president's orders, and Ara refuses on the grounds that his work is not finished:

—¿Y le han pedido que me lo quite, Coronel? / —Así es. El presidente me lo ha ordenado. Acaba de nombrarme jefe del Servicio de Inteligencia con ese fin. El nombramiento salió en los diarios esta mañana. / Una sonrisa de desdén asomó en los labios del embalsamador. / —No es tiempo todavía, Coronel. Ella no está lista. Si usted se la lleva ahora, mañana no la va a encontrar.²²

[“And have they asked you to take it from me, Colonel?” / “That’s right. The president has ordered it. He has just named me head of the Intelligence Service for that purpose. The appointment was in the papers this morning.” / A disdainful smile appeared on the embalmer’s lips. / “It’s not time yet, Colonel. She isn’t ready. If you take her now, tomorrow you won’t find her.”]

Ara’s refusal is framed as a technical judgment—she “isn’t ready,” as though readiness were a fact of the embalming process rather than a claim he alone is positioned to make. The line quietly threatens the body’s disappearance as the price of premature removal, converting his continued custody into the condition of her safety. Authority over the body is thus secured not by force but by a claim to expertise that only he can verify or contest.

Martínez stages this self-authorization explicitly in the scene where Eva’s mother, Doña Juana Ibarguren, confronts Ara over his handling of the body: “—Yo le di un poder para que me la proteja, doctor. ¿Qué ha hecho con él? Nada de lo que me dice es cierto” [“I gave you power of attorney to protect her, doctor. What have you done with it? Nothing you tell me is true”].²³ In granting Ara legal and symbolic authority over her daughter’s remains, Doña Juana’s gesture recalls the logic of a marriage arrangement, transferring guardianship of Eva’s body from one authority to another rather than simply commissioning a service. The scene suggests a necrophilic union between the female body and the masculine gaze that claims to protect it, one that Martínez both raises and rhetorically deflects through a self-interrogating narratorial voice:

¿Alguien quizá supone que el doctor Ara trataba de ver los soles de lo absoluto, la lengua del paraíso terrenal, el orgasmo vía lácteo de la inmaculada concepción? Qué va. Todas las referencias sobre él confirman su sensatez, su falta de imaginación, su piedad religiosa. Era insospechable de inclinaciones ocultistas y parapsicológicas [...] Quien lea las memorias póstumas del doctor Pedro Ara (El caso Eva Perón, CVS Ediciones, Madrid, 1974), advertirá sin dificultad que le había echado el ojo a Evita mucho antes de que muriera. Una y otra vez se queja de los que piensan eso. Pero sólo un historiador convencional toma al pie de la letra lo que le dicen sus fuentes. [...] embalsamar a Evita era como saltar el firmamento. ¿Me han elegido a mí? ¿Por cuáles méritos? [...] Por el Destino con mayúsculas.²⁴

[Does anyone perhaps suppose that Doctor Ara was trying to glimpse the suns of the absolute, the tongue of earthly paradise, the milky-way orgasm of the immaculate conception? Hardly. Every

²² Tomás Eloy Martínez, *Santa Evita* (Planeta, 1995), 33. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Spanish are my own.

²³ Martínez, *Santa Evita*, 53.

²⁴ Martínez, *Santa Evita*, 28.

account of him confirms his good sense, his lack of imagination, his religious piety. He was above suspicion of occult or parapsychological leanings [...] Anyone who reads Doctor Pedro Ara's posthumous memoirs (*El caso Eva Perón*, CVS Ediciones, Madrid, 1974) will have no trouble noticing that he had his eye on Evita long before she died. Again and again he complains about those who think so. But only a conventional historian takes his sources at their word. [...] embalming Evita was like leaping across the firmament. Had I been chosen? For what merits? [...] By Destiny, with a capital D.]

The passage denies the suspicion of perversion even as it plants it, and it does so by citing Ara's own real-world memoir as though it were a neutral historical source—a small instance of the *nueva novela histórica*'s characteristic blending of documented fact with invented material. Ara's rhetorical self-election "by Destiny" performs the same move as his rhetoric of protection: both cast what is possessive as though it were merely given. Ara writes as he embalms, and what should be an impartial account of his anatomical work turns into a biography of its subject. Matías Beverinotti reads that writing as the final, scientific version of the myth, one that silences the others, in a critique aimed as much at Ara as at any nationalist or hagiographic account that claims to be the true narrative of the past.²⁵

This ambiguity is essential to Martínez's construction of embodiment. Ara is transformed by his encounter with Eva's body no less than the characters who later become obsessed with it, but his transformation takes the form of an increasingly intimate investment disguised as professional responsibility. Preservation no longer signifies the suspension of biological decay alone. It becomes the creation of conditions under which the body can continue entering into relationships with others. Every careful incision, every chemical treatment, every aesthetic decision simultaneously preserves matter and prepares future encounters. The body that Ara leaves behind is not simply preserved. It is capable of continuing to affect those who will later see it, hide it, fear it, love it, or narrate it. Material preservation therefore cannot be separated from narrative proliferation. The two become mutually dependent.

Ara's labor thus acquires a significance that extends beyond the preservation of Eva's remains. Bodies do not persist merely because they resist decomposition. They persist because they continue generating relations and, through those relations, new narratives. Ara cannot control the future meanings that will accrue to Eva's body, despite his desire to protect and possess it. What he ultimately preserves is not only a corpse but the possibility of further encounters, each of which will transform another subject and generate another story.

The Soul as Habit

The relational conception of embodiment that emerges through Ara's preservation of Eva's body receives one of its clearest formulations in the novel's reflection on the soul. At first glance, Martínez appears to invoke a familiar opposition between body and spirit. A closer reading,

²⁵ Beverinotti, "Santa Evita," 407–8. See also Colaneri, "The Sinister Southern Cone," 289–90, on Ara's signing of his name as an act of possession and on the embalmer and the biographer as both trying to fix a subject into a single meaning.

however, reveals the opposite movement. Rather than imagining the soul as something that transcends bodily existence, the novel repeatedly describes it through the ordinary rhythms of embodied life. This becomes evident in one of the narrator's most striking observations:

*Las almas tienen hábitos, apegos, antipatías, momentos de hambre y de hartura, deseos de irse a dormir, de estar solas. No quieren que se las saque de su rutina porque la eternidad es eso: rutinas, frases que se encadenan interminablemente, anclas que las amarran a cosas conocidas.*²⁶

[Souls have habits, attachments, aversions, moments of hunger and satiety, desires to sleep, to be alone. They do not want to be taken out of their routine, because eternity is that: routines, phrases that link together endlessly, anchors that tie them to familiar things.]

The passage does not abandon the body in favor of metaphysical speculation. Instead, it renders the soul intelligible through experiences that are inseparable from embodiment. Hunger, satiety, sleep, attachment, solitude, and routine do not ordinarily belong to an immaterial essence. They describe the repetitive ways in which bodies inhabit the world. Martínez therefore imagines the soul not as the negation of the body but as the continuation of embodied existence beyond biological death.

This understanding depends on a single lexical choice. Martínez does not describe souls through *recuerdos*, memories that belong primarily to consciousness and can be recalled, interpreted, or forgotten. He describes them through *hábitos*. Habits occupy a different register. They are the embodied routines through which existence is lived before it is consciously reflected upon: the repeated gestures, rhythms, and attachments that sediment over time until they become part of the body's way of being in the world. By grounding the soul in *hábitos* rather than *recuerdos*, Martínez relocates persistence away from abstract consciousness and toward embodied life itself.

Seen in this light, eternity no longer signifies liberation from the body but the persistence of its lived rhythms. Souls remain attached to routines, continue to experience hunger and satiety, and resist disruptions to the habits through which they inhabited the world. The traditional opposition between body and soul consequently begins to dissolve. What survives death is not a disembodied consciousness but the continuity of embodied existence as it extends into new relations. This seemingly modest lexical shift establishes a premise I will trace throughout: embodiment exceeds biological life because the habits through which bodies inhabit the world continue generating encounters, narratives, and forms of existence long after organic life has ended.

The Reduction That Fails

If Ara's preservation establishes the conditions under which Eva's body continues generating new relations, the military's response attempts to interrupt that process. Their treatment of the corpse rests on the assumption that embodiment can be contained by controlling the body's physical

²⁶ Martínez, *Santa Evita*, 62.

presence. The body is hidden, transported, buried under false names, removed from public view, and surrounded by elaborate systems of secrecy. Yet from the outset, Martínez reveals the inadequacy of this logic. When the officers discuss Eva's corpse, they recognize that death has not diminished its political force:

—*Muerta —dijo—, esa mujer es todavía más peligrosa que cuando estaba viva. El tirano lo sabía y por eso la dejó aquí, para que nos enferme a todos. [...] Ocúpese de esa mujer, coronel. [...] Desaparezcala. Acábela. Conviértala en una muerta como cualquier otra.*²⁷

["Dead," he said, "that woman is even more dangerous than when she was alive. The tyrant knew it, and that's why he left her here, to sicken all of us. [...] Deal with that woman, Colonel. [...] Disappear her. Finish her off. Turn her into a dead woman like any other."]

The passage reveals the paradox at the heart of the military's project and, by extension, of Martínez's novel. Eva is already dead, yet the officers speak as though death itself remains incomplete. What they seek is not biological death but a different kind of erasure: one that would sever the body from the network of meanings, memories, and relations it continues to generate. To "convert her into a dead woman like any other" is therefore an ontological rather than merely logistical task. The military does not simply wish to conceal a corpse; it seeks to normalize a body whose persistence resists ordinary categories of life and death.

Colonel Moori Koenig, one of the novel's narrating voices, meticulously gathers information concerning Eva's corporeality throughout the novel. When asked why the intimate, sometimes grotesque details of Eva and Perón's marital relationship should matter to the intelligence services, he answers without hesitation: "La máxima importancia. El mapa del erotismo es el mapa del poder" ["Of the utmost importance. The map of eroticism is the map of power"].²⁸ Michel Foucault's account of power supports Moori Koenig's intuition. Reflecting on legal and institutional models of power, Foucault argues that the definition of power must be broadened to include the ways it objectifies its subject—the speaking subject in linguistics, the laboring subject in economics, the living subject in biology.²⁹ This objectification presupposes a parametrization of the subject that in turn requires gathering a significant volume of information, including access to the subject's own interiority: "this form of power cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people's minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets. It implies a knowledge of the conscience and an ability to direct it."³⁰ Moori Koenig's obsessive cataloguing of Eva's body is precisely this operation in miniature: intelligence gathering as a form of power that requires, and produces, intimate knowledge of its object.

This operation can be understood through Giorgio Agamben's biopolitical concept of *nuda vida*, which he defines as "la vida a quien cualquiera puede dar muerte" ["life that anyone may put

²⁷ Martínez, *Santa Evita*, 24–25.

²⁸ Martínez, *Santa Evita*, 138–139.

²⁹ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777–78.

³⁰ Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 783.

to death”], “una oscura figura del derecho romano arcaico, en que la vida humana se incluye en el orden jurídico únicamente bajo la forma de su exclusión” [“an obscure figure of archaic Roman law, in which human life is included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion”]:³¹ bare life produced when sovereign power suspends the ordinary protections that qualify a life as politically and socially recognizable, including it in the juridical order only by excluding it from the protections that order would otherwise extend. This suspension, in Agamben’s account, depends on separating *zoé*, mere biological existence, from *bíos*, a life inscribed within a political community and its meanings. What the officers demand when they order Eva “converted into a dead woman like any other” is precisely this reduction: not her biological death, which has already occurred, but her forced passage from *bíos* into *zoé*, from a body entangled in political meaning into one stripped of it.

I extend this concept to Eva’s corpse because, as the officers’ own order shows, the corpse is dead only biologically. The novel shows it acting on those who handle it and holding the officers in a relation they cannot end. Laura Colaneri argues along similar lines that the body was host to “not just the spirit of Evita the individual, but also her myth and power,” and that Eva does not merely haunt Argentina spectrally.³² The novel’s legal vocabulary points the same way. Doña Juana gives Ara a power of attorney to protect her daughter’s body.³³ The president then names a new head of the Intelligence Service to take it from him. When the colonel arrives with that order, Ara refuses to give her up because she “isn’t ready,” and he warns that if she is taken now the colonel will not find her tomorrow.³⁴ Her transfer depends on a readiness that only Ara can judge, and the stated price of ignoring it is her disappearance. Custody over the body is therefore custody over whether and how she persists. Eva’s body is held, transferred, and contested between two authorities as a person under guardianship and not as an object. Political-theological readings of Peronism have likewise treated Eva as a sacralized sovereign body.³⁵

What defines bare life in Agamben’s account is not biological vitality alone but exposure to a sovereign power that suspends the protections that make a life politically recognizable. This is the passage from *bíos* into *zoé*, and Eva’s body is exposed in just this way. Two military regimes stand behind that exposure. The de facto government installed in 1955 orders Eva disappeared, and the dictatorship of 1976 to 1983 shapes the narrator’s fear, which I discuss below. Both claimed power over bodies in every condition, including the power to make them disappear. Admiral Massera told officers at the ESMA in 1976 that the regime would not allow death to roam

³¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: El poder soberano y la nuda vida*, trans. Antonio Gimeno Cuspinera (Pre-Textos, 1998), 18.

³² Colaneri, “The Sinister Southern Cone,” 267.

³³ Martínez, *Santa Evita*, 53.

³⁴ Martínez, *Santa Evita*, 33.

³⁵ Luis Alfredo Intersimone, *La medusa, el mono y la marioneta: Teología política y erótica en el peronismo* (University of North Carolina Press and A Contracorriente, 2021), chap. 3, esp. 104–5 and 107, which reads Eva as a “femina sacra” and speaks of a “soberanización” of Peronism in her body. Intersimone uses “homo sacer” more loosely than Agamben does.

unconstrained.³⁶ Studies of disappearance describe the bodies of the disappeared as subject to the arbitrariness of any sovereignty and the bodies of those a regime deems undesirable as existing in a “state of exception” that becomes the norm.³⁷

Throughout the novel, however, every attempt at erasure produces the opposite effect. Each displacement generates new narratives, each concealment creates new witnesses, and each transfer draws additional participants into Eva’s story. Rather than containing embodiment, authoritarian power inadvertently expands its field of relations. The corpse continues to circulate not only through physical movement but also through rumor, fear, devotion, and political imagination. In this sense, the military’s repeated failures do not arise from poor execution but from a mistaken understanding of embodiment itself. The body cannot be neutralized because what persists is no longer confined to its material location.

Martínez thus exposes a fundamental contradiction within authoritarian power. Dictatorships seek to reduce bodies to objects that can be classified, displaced, disappeared, and ultimately controlled. *Santa Evita*’s shifting narrators and contradictory testimonies are not merely postmodern stylistic moves in this light; they are a formal enactment of the argument the novel makes about bodies, since a narrative form that cannot be pinned down to a single authoritative account mirrors a body that cannot be contained by a single act of power. *Santa Evita* repeatedly demonstrates the limits of that ambition. Violence can move the body, hide it, and even desecrate it, but it cannot prevent the relations generated by that body from proliferating. Every act of disappearance paradoxically creates new stories, new affects, and new encounters. Archaeological work on disappearance reaches a parallel conclusion. The effort to make disappearance itself disappear, by erasing its traces, cannot succeed.³⁸ The institution remains powerful, yet its power is never sufficient to transform Eva into “una muerta como cualquier otra.”

Multiplying Eva

The military’s failure to reduce Eva’s body to an ordinary corpse becomes even more evident in the novel’s treatment of replicas and mistaken identities. Martínez develops this idea through a series of distinct episodes. In one, German police mistake Eva’s embalmed body for a wax doll, an error that carries unmistakably erotic overtones and reduces the corpse to a commodity even as it exposes the instability of its status. In another, a girl named Yolanda forms an affective attachment to what she thinks is a human-sized doll, but is, in reality, Eva’s embalmed body,

³⁶ Bishop, “Errant Metonymy,” 170–71, quoting Massera’s November 1976 speech at the Navy Mechanics School (ESMA).

³⁷ Gatti, “Cartografía de las nuevas formas de desaparición,” 19; Márcia Lika Hattori, “Undressing Corpses: An Archaeological Perspective on State Violence,” *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* 7, no. 2 (2020): 152, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jca.41494>.

³⁸ Alfredo González Ruibal, “Arqueología de la desaparición,” *Papeles del CEIC* 2020, no. 1 (2020): article 225, <https://doi.org/10.1387/pceic.20764>.

hidden in a movie theater where her father works as a projectionist.³⁹ These episodes operate differently, yet both unsettle any secure distinction between body, object, replica, and person. Rather than functioning as simple substitutes for an absent original, the replicas and misrecognitions surrounding Eva generate new attachments, meanings, and narratives through which embodiment continues to circulate.

Yolanda's relationship with the body offers the clearest example of this process. What she believes to be an unusually lifelike doll is, in fact, Eva's genuine embalmed body, hidden in the movie theater where her father works. Reflecting on it, she explains that she loved it "como sólo se puede querer a una persona." The formulation is striking precisely because her belief and her object diverge: she takes herself to be describing an object she has anthropomorphized, when in fact she has correctly loved a person she sincerely believes to be an object. The sentence preserves the category of *persona* not because a doll earns it through affection, but because her affection tracks a truth her belief conceals. The novel therefore does not simply erase the distinction between person and object. It shows that embodiment can survive misrecognition, generating an authentic relation even where categorization gets the facts wrong.

This grammatical instability is not confined to Yolanda's attachment; it recurs whenever the body's other custodians speak about it. When Colonel Moori Koenig recovers the corpse and its copies from the CGT garage, the narration notes only that "Le concedió una última mirada y la cubrió con un velo, como a las otras" ["He gave it one last look and covered it with a veil, like the others"]⁴⁰—the body stashed among a set of interchangeable things. Shortly after, his subordinates debate what they are actually looking at:

—Puede ser una copia —dijo Arancibia, el Loco—. ¿Usted qué cree? / —No sé qué es —contestó Armani. / —A lo mejor es Ella.⁴¹

["It could be a copy," said Arancibia, the Madman. "What do you think?" / "I don't know what it is," Armani answered. / "Maybe it's Her."]

The exchange wavers between *it* and *Her*, between an object that might be counterfeit and a singular person capitalized as though naming a divinity. This oscillation between animate and inanimate reference anticipates, in miniature, the more dramatic linguistic ruptures the novel later requires to describe Arancibia's *Evena* and the narrator's *existirme*: long before language breaks down explicitly, it is already unable to settle whether Eva's body belongs to the category of persons or of things.

This logic extends beyond Yolanda's attachment. Throughout *Santa Evita*, photographs, posters, rumors, replicas, and other cultural reproductions of Eva continue to generate encounters

³⁹ Codebò, "Volveré y seré millones," 81–82, reads the same scene as one of several appropriations of the body's parts, alongside Ara's wish to mark the body with his name and the soldiers' cutting of a finger, in which Eva becomes a relic.

⁴⁰ Martínez, *Santa Evita*, 161.

⁴¹ Martínez, *Santa Evita*, 171.

that cannot be explained solely by reference to the original body. The embalmed corpse remains materially singular, yet its singularity does not prevent embodiment from proliferating through representation. What persists is not merely an image but the capacity to affect others, reorganize desire, and generate new narratives, no matter how distorted or distant from the original. Translation itself becomes another mode of embodiment, as the narrator discovers driving alone through New Jersey:

A veces, para despejarme de la computadora, salgo a manejar sin rumbo por las rutas desiertas de New Jersey [...] con la radio prendida. Cuando menos lo espero, canta Evita. La oigo salir de la garganta raspada de la rapada Sinéad O'Connor. La muerta y la cantante tienen la misma voz ronca y triste, a punto de quebrarse en un sollozo. Cantan, las dos, «Don't cry for me Argentina», con erres arrastradas y ruminantes, pronuncian Aryentina como si la ye fuese una ene de mi provincia natal. ¿Yo busco a Evita o Evita me busca a mí?»⁴²

[Sometimes, to clear my head from the computer, I go driving aimlessly along the empty highways of New Jersey [...] with the radio on. When I least expect it, Evita sings. I hear her come out of the scraped, shaved throat of Sinéad O'Connor. The dead woman and the singer have the same hoarse, sad voice, on the verge of breaking into a sob. Both of them sing, "Don't cry for me Argentina," with rolled, ruminant r's, pronouncing Aryentina as if the y were an n from my home province. Do I search for Evita, or does Evita search for me?]

Representation here becomes another medium through which embodiment unfolds rather than evidence of its disappearance: Eva reaches the narrator not despite the distance of translation, adaptation, and a stranger's voice, but through it. The question that closes the passage—whether the narrator searches for Evita or Evita searches for him—already unsettles the direction in which agency is supposed to run: not simply from the narrator toward his subject, but doubling back from her toward him.

Not every representation proliferates Eva's body along the same axis, however. A distinct and more contested line of interpretation runs through the writers who have sexualized her, and Martínez's narrator addresses this tradition directly, naming Ezequiel Martínez Estrada among its most emphatic voices and gesturing toward the broader current of transgressive literary reimagining to which Copi's and Néstor Perlongher's own treatments of Eva belong:

La literatura ha visto a Evita de un modo precisamente opuesto a como Ella quería verse. Del sexo jamás habló en público y quizá tampoco en privado. Tal vez se habría librado del sexo si hubiera podido. Hizo algo mejor: lo aprendió y lo olvidó cuando le convino, como si fuera un personaje más de los radioteatros. Los que conocieron su intimidad pensaban que era la mujer menos sexual de la tierra. «No te calentabas con Ella ni en una isla desierta», dijo el galán de una de sus películas. Perón, entonces, ¿cómo hizo para calentarse? Imposible saber: Perón era un sol oscuro, un paisaje vacío, el páramo de los no sentimientos. Ella lo habría llenado con sus deseos. No sexo sino deseos. Eva nada tenía que ver con la hetaira desenfrenada de la que habla el enfático Martínez Estrada ni con la «puta de arrabal» a la que calumnió Borges. En las definiciones de Evita sobre la mujer, que ocupan toda

⁴² Martínez, *Santa Evita*, 203.

*la tercera parte de La razón de mi vida, la palabra sexo no aparece ni una sola vez. Ella no habla del placer ni del deseo; los refuta.*⁴³

[Literature has seen Evita in a way precisely opposite to how She wanted to be seen. She never spoke of sex in public, and perhaps not in private either. She might have freed herself from sex if she could have. She did something better: she learned it and forgot it whenever it suited her, as if it were just another character out of the radio dramas. Those who knew her intimately thought she was the least sexual woman on earth. “You wouldn’t get worked up over Her even on a desert island,” said the leading man of one of her films. Perón, then—how did he manage to get worked up? Impossible to know: Perón was a dark sun, an empty landscape, the wasteland of no feelings. She would have filled it with her desires. Not sex but desires. Eva had nothing to do with the unbridled hetaera the emphatic Martínez Estrada speaks of, nor with the “guttersnipe whore” Borges slandered her as. In Evita’s own definitions of woman, which occupy the entire third part of *La razón de mi vida*, the word sex never once appears. She does not speak of pleasure or desire; she refutes them.]

The passage does not simply correct these sexualized readings by restoring a truer, desexualized Eva beneath them. It stages one interpretation against others, refutation against invention, without ever stepping outside the process of interpretation itself. Copi’s theater and Perlongher’s poetry generate one Eva; Martínez Estrada’s prose generates another; the narrator’s apparent insistence on her desirelessness generates a third. Each is a further relation rather than a return to some prior, uninterpreted body. The sexualized Eva and the desexualized Eva materialize through the same mechanism I have traced throughout: bodies become legible only through the relations, however contradictory, that others bring to them.

The narrator goes further still, revealing that he is not the only author who seeks not merely to interpret Eva but to become her:

*Perlongher quiere desesperadamente ser Evita, la busca entre los pliegues del sexo y de la muerte y, cuando la encuentra, lo que ve en Ella es el cuerpo de un alma, o lo que llamaría Leibniz “el cuerpo de una mónada... Perlongher la entiende mejor que nadie. Habla el mismo lenguaje de la tolería, de la humillación y del abismo. No se atreve a tocar su vida y, por eso, toca su muerte: manosea el cadáver, lo enjoya, lo maquilla, le depila el bozo, le deshace el rodete. Contemplándola desde abajo, la endiosa. Y como toda Diosa es libre, la desenfrena.” [...] No repetía Evita c’est moi, como había hecho Copi. Se preguntaba más bien: ¿Y si Dios fuera una mujer? ¿Si yo fuera la Diosa y al tercer día mi cuerpo regresara?*⁴⁴

[Perlongher desperately wants to be Evita, seeks her among the folds of sex and death, and when he finds her, what he sees in Her is the body of a soul, or what Leibniz would call “the body of a monad.” [...] Perlongher understands her better than anyone. He speaks the same language of the shantytown, of humiliation and the abyss. He does not dare touch her life, and so he touches her death instead: he fondles the corpse, adorns it with jewels, applies makeup to it, plucks its down, undoes its bun. Contemplating her from below, he deifies her. And since every Goddess is free, he unleashes her. [...]

⁴³ Martínez, *Santa Evita*, 202.

⁴⁴ Martínez, *Santa Evita*, 200–202.

He did not repeat *Evita c'est moi*, as Copi had done. He wondered instead: What if God were a woman? If I were the Goddess and on the third day my body returned?]

The escalation is precise. Perlongher does not merely write about Eva; he seeks to inhabit her, touching her death because he cannot touch her life. Copi goes further still, collapsing the distance between author and subject entirely: *Evita c'est moi*, Eva is me. And the narrator, having just distanced himself from Copi's formula, immediately produces his own version of the same fantasy—not identity but incarnation, not “I am her” but “what if I were the Goddess and my body returned.” The very gesture of refusing Copi's line repeats its logic. No author who approaches Eva's body, this passage suggests, remains fully autonomous from it.

Seen in this light, replication does not diminish the body's force. It multiplies the conditions under which that force can be experienced. The military assumes that replacing, concealing, or confusing the corpse will weaken Eva's presence. Martínez demonstrates the opposite. Every copy, error, and substitution expands the network of relations surrounding the body, making embodiment increasingly independent of any single material manifestation. What sustains her presence is not the fidelity of any single copy to an original but the uncertainty each one reopens: every doll, rumor, or substitute forces the same unresolved question—*could this be Her?*—and it is the questioning, repeated across bodies that are not hers, that keeps Eva in circulation.

My reading of the copies departs from two recent accounts of Eva's proliferation. Agnese Codebò explains it as dismemberment. The body is torn apart and scattered across the country, and its many versions expose the ambivalence of Peronism.⁴⁵ Bishop reads the copies as simulacra of an original that is itself a void, and as a structure of excess that houses what history has left out.⁴⁶ Both accounts take the multiplication of Eva as a sign of something else: the contradictions of a movement or the absences of a history. I take it as the way her existence is sustained. A copy matters less for what it stands for than for the relation it opens. The question *could this be Her?* belongs to the kind of relation that, in the anthropological literature on disappearance, keeps the missing present among the living. Dorothée Delacroix finds that the living make the disappeared exist in ever-changing forms.⁴⁷ Gabriel Gatti and Jaume Peris Blanes describe communities that give nameless bodies names that are not their own and enter reciprocal relations with them.⁴⁸

Evena: The Collapse of Distinction

The military's attempts to control Eva's body culminate in Major Arancibia, whose encounter with the corpse shifts the novel from institutional violence to personal transformation. While the officers around him approach Eva's remains as an object to be concealed and transferred, Arancibia, who

⁴⁵ Codebò, “Volveré y seré millones,” 82–85.

⁴⁶ Bishop, “Errant Metonymy,” 171–73, 177.

⁴⁷ Delacroix, “La presencia de la ausencia,” 72.

⁴⁸ Gabriel Gatti and Jaume Peris Blanes, “The Deviated Mourning of the Disappeared: Reimagining Disappearance and Transcending Its Tropes,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 40, no. 1 (2021): 59–61.

is assigned to guard the corpse, gradually loses the distance that his duty requires. What begins as surveillance becomes proximity; proximity gives way to fascination; and fascination slowly changes the way he perceives the world. Martínez does not present this transformation as a sudden descent into madness but as the gradual erosion of boundaries.

This change in perception precedes any disruption of language. Before Arancibia speaks differently, he sees differently. The boundaries separating Eva from his pregnant wife Elena, and the past from the present, become increasingly unstable until ordinary language can no longer sustain the distinctions that his experience has already dissolved. As Eva comes to occupy every corner of his imagination, the boundaries separating her from Elena begin to loosen. Reality itself is reorganized according to his fixation until Eva and Elena cease to exist as distinct figures. They become *Evena*. This name references the relational reality that existing vocabulary cannot accommodate. However, language itself does not produce the collapse of identities. It registers a transformation that has already taken place at the level of embodied experience. Arancibia can no longer encounter either woman independently of the other. The consequences become tragically concrete when Arancibia mistakes Elena for Eva and shoots her. What began as a transformation of perception culminates in the multiplication of death: Eva's preserved corpse is now joined by Elena and the unborn child she carries. The murder becomes a desperate attempt to destroy the source of the obsession that has consumed Arancibia, to recover the reality that his encounter with Eva's body has irreversibly shattered. Instead, it extends those effects into new lives, new deaths, and new relations.

Writing from Within

Arancibia is not the last character transformed by Eva's body. The narrator ultimately undergoes a comparable process, although through writing rather than direct contact with the corpse. At first, he presents himself as an investigator assembling archives, testimonies, interviews, and documents into a coherent historical account, remaining recognizably distinct from the characters he studies. Yet Martínez gradually shows how the narrator, too, is drawn into Eva's orbit. What begins as the project of writing Eva becomes not only an artistic undertaking but also a personal imperative: "Hubo un momento en que me dije: Si no la escribo, voy a asfixiarme. Si no trato de conocerla escribiéndola, jamás voy a conocerme yo" ["There was a moment when I told myself: If I don't write her, I'll suffocate. If I don't try to know her by writing her, I'll never know myself"].⁴⁹ The narrator, perhaps even more than Ara, Yolanda, or Arancibia, discovers that he cannot stand outside the relations generated by Eva's body. Unlike the military officers, he does not seek to possess Eva's body. Unlike Ara, he does not preserve it. Unlike Arancibia, he does not succumb to obsession. He writes, and as he does so, *Evita* progressively dismantles his position of apparent exteriority, extending embodiment beyond the characters who physically encounter Eva's remains to include the act of writing itself, where the attempt to narrate the body becomes inseparable from the transformation of the one who narrates it. Beverinotti reads the narrator, Ara, and Moori Koenig

⁴⁹ Martínez, *Santa Evita*, 390.

as three writings for one body, each answering in its own way a body that unsettles the national narrative.⁵⁰

This transformation becomes visible not through an encounter with Eva's corpse but through the narrator's own corporeality. Recalling the telephone call from Colonel Corominas inviting him to meet with officers from Army Intelligence, he describes the immediate return of a past that had never entirely disappeared. Merely hearing the colonel's name reactivates the bodily memory of state terror. The dictatorship is no longer remembered as historical information but experienced as something that attacks him personally, once again. The past returns physically, as though fear itself had remained latent within the body, waiting for the smallest stimulus to recover its force.

What resurfaces in this episode is not simply memory but vulnerability. After agreeing to the meeting, the narrator immediately regrets his decision: "Me sentí desnudo, inerme, vulnerable, como la noche antes de mi exilio" ["I felt naked, defenseless, vulnerable, like the night before my exile"]. The sequence is remarkable for the way each adjective strips away another layer of protection. Nakedness is immediately followed by defenselessness, and defenselessness by vulnerability. The progression does not describe a physical condition alone but an existential one. To become naked is to lose the social, political, and symbolic protections that ordinarily sustain the subject. What remains is the exposed body confronting violence without mediation. This is Agamben's *nuda vida* returned to the register of lived experience rather than corpse or theory: the same reduction the military attempted upon Eva now falls upon a living subject, from within.⁵¹ The narrator's vulnerability, in other words, is not a private or merely psychological reaction. It is sovereign power's operation turned inward.

The scene records exposure, the body's knowledge that its protection depends on the sovereign's will. The narrator is not killed and loses no legal status, yet he lives what Agamben calls bare life as an effect on the body. Nothing separates his case from Eva's except the biological status I contest. Hers is registered in a body declared dead that refuses the declaration; his in a living body that remembers when any officer's call could reach it. This is also why the persistence I trace is not only the persistence of the dead. The logic that targets Eva's body reaches the one who writes about her.

This vocabulary of nakedness, defenselessness, and vulnerability acquires particular significance within the larger economy of the novel. Until this point, bodily vulnerability has been associated primarily with Eva. Her corpse has been transported, hidden, violated, duplicated, and manipulated by institutions that seek absolute control over it. The narrator's recollection reveals that this vulnerability is not unique to Eva but constitutes a more general condition of embodied existence under political violence. Fear does not simply affect consciousness. It reorganizes the body's relation to the world. Long after exile and the restoration of democracy, the body continues to remember what consciousness would prefer to consign to the past.

⁵⁰ Beverinotti, "Santa Evita," 406–7.

⁵¹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 18.

The narrator's recollection of his meeting with Colonel Corominas therefore complicates the apparent distinction between observer and observed. The narrator is not merely documenting embodied violence. He carries its traces within himself. His investigation cannot proceed from a position of exteriority because his own body has already been marked by the same historical forces that shaped Eva's fate. The history he writes is simultaneously a history that inhabits him. Writing becomes possible not because the narrator stands outside the events he recounts but because he remains implicated within them.

This implication subtly transforms the role of testimony throughout the novel. The narrator frequently assembles voices that contradict one another, exposing the instability of historical reconstruction. Yet beneath these epistemological uncertainties lies another form of continuity. Every witness bears the marks of an encounter with Eva's body. Some respond with devotion, others with terror, others with fascination or desire. The narrator himself joins this series. His testimony differs from theirs not because he escapes transformation but because he gradually becomes aware that writing itself is one of the forms that transformation assumes.

The novel's self-reflexive dimension consequently acquires an ontological rather than merely metafictional significance. By inserting the narrator into his own investigation, *Santa Evita* extends the network of relations generated by Eva's body to include the act of writing itself. The importance of this gesture extends beyond questions of narrative authority. By making the investigator another body affected by Eva's persistence, Martínez demonstrates that no position exists outside the network of relations generated by embodiment. The narrator cannot write about Eva from a place of neutrality because the act of writing has already become one of the encounters through which her existence continues. Beverinotti makes a related point from the side of the myth: if writing stays active, the myth stays in motion and cannot settle into a final version.⁵²

This implication carries its own risk of violence. The text can become a substitute for its subject—an intermediary, a fetish, a voodoo doll into which pins are stuck to wound the real person it represents—so that a violence originally directed at the body is displaced onto the text. The extraordinary power an author exercises over characters, their bodies, and their minds, makes the author-narrator a figure not unlike a dictator. As Jennifer Harford Vargas observes of the genre more broadly, “the author-narrator dictates the terms of representation, disclosing characters’ personal shame and wounded feelings, their migrant melancholia and heartbreak, and the details of their love lives,” revelations that read “as personal violations, taking the characters’ private lives into the public sphere.”⁵³ Martínez's narrator is not exempt from this structure simply because he writes about a body rather than inventing one: the same disclosure of intimate, shameful, and painful detail that constitutes Eva throughout the novel is, from this angle, difficult to distinguish from a violation.

⁵² Beverinotti, “Santa Evita,” 406.

⁵³ Jennifer Harford Vargas, *Forms of Dictatorship: Power, Narrative, and Authoritarianism in the Latina/o Novel* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 80.

Seen from this perspective, the narrator's vulnerability prepares the novel's final linguistic transformation. His body has already recovered the fear of exile. His certainty as an investigator has dissolved into participation. His writing no longer records an external object but emerges from within a relation that continually exceeds his capacity to contain it. The author-constructed grammar that closes my analysis is therefore not merely decorative. It is the only language capable of expressing a transformation that ordinary syntax can no longer contain.

Existirme

Reflecting upon Eva's persistence, the narrator observes: "Ella no cesa de existir, de existirme: hace de su existencia una exageración" ["She does not cease to exist, to exist me: she makes an exaggeration of her existence"]. The force of the sentence resides in the made-up verb *existirme*. Spanish ordinarily understands *existir* as an intransitive verb. One either exists or does not exist. Existence belongs to the subject alone. Martínez violates that grammatical expectation by making existence transitive. Eva does not merely continue existing after death. She exists me. Existence ceases to describe an autonomous condition and instead becomes something enacted between beings.

This is more than linguistic experimentation. Throughout the novel, Martínez has repeatedly demonstrated that ordinary language becomes insufficient whenever embodiment exceeds inherited conceptual distinctions. The soul could no longer be described through transcendence and therefore became a creature of habits. Elena and Eva could no longer remain separate within Arancibia's experience and therefore became *Evena*. Now existence itself refuses to remain confined within the boundaries established by grammar and biology. The language changes because the ontology has already changed. María Griselda Zuffi describes Martínez's exilic writing, shaped by his own condition and by the exilic tradition of the continent, as a "lugar donde el lenguaje se convierte en 'existencia'" ["a place where language becomes 'existence'"].⁵⁴ *Santa Evita* shows how that change occurs when the language in question has to describe a body.

To say that Eva "exists me" is not simply to claim that she influences or haunts the narrator. Those verbs would preserve the autonomy of both subjects, allowing one to act upon the other while leaving their existence fundamentally separate. "Exists me" proposes something different. Eva's existence unfolds within the narrator's own being, just as his own writing unfolds through the encounter with hers. Neither existence remains entirely self-contained. Each becomes relational.

This relational structure is not a single, isolated event but a sustained process. As Judith Butler argues, drawing on Derrida, "performativity is not a singular 'act,' for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms," one that "conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition."⁵⁵ A body or a subject, in other words, is never constituted once and for all, but

⁵⁴ María Griselda Zuffi, *Demasiado real: Los excesos de la historia en la escritura de Tomás Eloy Martínez* (1973–1995) (Corregidor, 2007), 129.

⁵⁵ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 12.

only through repeated, citational acts that must be renewed again and again to remain in force. Every encounter I have examined—Ara’s preservation, the military’s attempts at erasure, Yolanda’s love, Arancibia’s collapse into *Evena*, the narrator’s own implication—has performed a local iteration of this same materializing repetition. *Existirme* names not one further iteration among others but the principle that governs all of them: Eva’s existence is enacted in these repeated relations, and she takes part in them as an agent and not merely as their object. Each relation must be renewed by a new encounter, a new reader, or a new act of writing, or it would simply lapse. Her body is not the sum of these relations. It is what keeps generating them, and it exceeds each one. The ungrammatical verb therefore does not describe a single, isolated act of transitivity so much as it condenses, into one grammatical event, the iterative logic the novel has already been enacting scene by scene.

The sentence that immediately follows reinforces this understanding: Eva “hace de su existencia una exageración.” Read superficially, *exageración* appears to name rhetorical excess, an existence magnified beyond proportion. Within the logic of the novel, however, exaggeration acquires a more precise ontological meaning. Eva exceeds every limit imposed upon her. She exceeds biological death, political erasure, historical explanation, material singularity, and grammatical convention. Her existence becomes excessive because it refuses every attempt to contain it within a single category. Corpse, relic, replica, rumor, saint, memory, narrative—none of these identities is false, yet none exhausts what she has become. Susana Rosano asks what excess of meaning the successive renarrativizations of Eva’s figure prevent from crystallizing.⁵⁶ The novel’s *exageración* relocates that excess. What exceeds every meaning imposed on Eva is not a surplus of significance awaiting a better interpretation but her existence, which is why interpretation, however often renewed, does not exhaust her.

The trajectory traced throughout *Santa Evita* therefore culminates not in the affirmation of immortality but in a redefinition of embodiment itself. Ara’s careful preservation, the soul constituted through habits, the military’s failed attempts at possession, the doll loved as a person, Arancibia’s *Evena*, the narrator’s rediscovered vulnerability, and finally *existirme* all describe different moments of the same process. Embodiment persists because it continually generates relations that transform those who encounter it. Writing is neither the final representation of that persistence nor its explanation. It is one of the relations through which the body continues to exist.

If the novel ultimately asks what survives death, its answer is neither the soul understood as pure transcendence nor the body understood as biological matter. What survives is the capacity to enter new relationships, to reorganize perception, language, memory, and desire, and to proliferate discourses long after organic life has ended. Writing occupies a privileged place within that process, not because it preserves the body as an object of memory, but because it becomes another

⁵⁶ Susana Rosano, *Rostros y máscaras de Eva Perón: Imaginario populista y representación* (Beatriz Viterbo, 2006), 10.

body's way of receiving its continued existence. In *Santa Evita*, the body does not simply become text. It makes texts possible. It continues to exist by continually existing others.

Conclusion: The Body That Makes Texts Possible

The consequences of this relational ontology do not end with Eva Perón. By the close of *Santa Evita*, Martínez has done considerably more than narrate the extraordinary afterlife of a political icon. He has proposed a different understanding of embodiment itself. The body is never exhausted by its biological condition because it cannot be separated from the relations through which it acquires meaning. Neither preservation nor destruction, neither political appropriation nor historical reconstruction, succeeds in isolating the body from those relations. Every attempt to reduce it to an object paradoxically expands its capacity to generate new encounters.

These consequences reach past the novel's particular scenes. The condition that the novel's grammar registers is a body held between presence and absence and sustained by those who relate to it. Studies of forced disappearance describe the same condition, in which the living make and remake the existence of the disappeared in changing forms.⁵⁷ *Santa Evita* offers a literary case in which the missing body is real and multiplies. It also places my argument within the wider effort to say what kind of existence the disappeared have.

This understanding also reshapes the relationship between being and writing. Throughout the novel, writing repeatedly appears to follow the body. Characters write reports, testimonies, military memoranda, letters, and histories because Eva's body demands explanation. Yet the novel gradually reverses this sequence. Writing is not merely a response to an already completed body; it becomes one of the forms through which embodiment itself persists. Every narrative generated by Eva extends the network of relations through which her existence continues to unfold. To write about the body is therefore already to participate in its ongoing life.

This reversal distinguishes Martínez from conceptions of writing in which the text replaces an absent body. In *Santa Evita*, the text never substitutes for corporeality. Nor does it compensate for an irrevocable loss. The narrator's own writing enacts this incompleteness rather than resolving it; his return to Eva's body through narration does not lay her to rest but extends her persistence, just as his recovered fear of exile shows that the past he narrates has never fully passed. Instead, writing becomes another mode of embodied relation. The novel repeatedly demonstrates that language cannot contain the body because language itself is transformed by the body's persistence. The appearance of *Evena* and *existirme* signals precisely this transformation. These neologisms do not celebrate linguistic experimentation for its own sake. They testify to the inability of ordinary language to accommodate forms of existence that exceed the conceptual distinctions upon which grammar depends.

⁵⁷ Delacroix, "La presencia de la ausencia," 72; Gatti, "Cartografía de las nuevas formas de desaparición," 7.

Seen from this perspective, the novel's constant oscillation between history and fiction acquires a different significance. The uncertainty surrounding facts ultimately serves a more fundamental purpose. It reveals that embodiment cannot be stabilized by any single discourse. Historical documents, political myths, personal memories, journalistic investigations, and fictional inventions all become partial attempts to articulate a body whose persistence exceeds each individual mode of representation.

This helps explain why the novel repeatedly privileges encounters over explanations. Characters rarely emerge from their contact with Eva possessing greater certainty about her. Instead, they discover themselves altered by the encounter itself. Ara's encounter with Eva's body transforms preservation from a technical procedure into a relational practice. The military's confidence in institutional control collapses into increasingly elaborate rituals of concealment. Yolanda's affection transforms an object into a person. Arancibia's perception reorganizes itself until language must invent a new proper name. The narrator ultimately discovers that writing itself implicates him in the relations generated by Eva's body. In every case, knowledge proves secondary to transformation. The encounter does not produce possession but another subject capable of sustaining Eva's persistence.

The body, then, functions less as an object of interpretation than as a generative principle. It continually exceeds the meanings imposed upon it because those meanings become part of the relational field through which embodiment survives. Every attempt to preserve, possess, narrate, explain, or destroy the body generates new relations that further extend its persistence. Eva is not simply remembered; she reshapes memory itself. She is not simply narrated; she redirects narration. She is not simply named; she unsettles language. The novel's central question therefore shifts from *What does Eva's body mean?* to *What does Eva's body make possible?* The answer is neither political myth nor historical uncertainty alone, but an ever-expanding network of relations in which bodies, narratives, and subjects continually produce one another.

The trajectory traced throughout *Santa Evita* therefore culminates in a redefinition of embodiment. From Ara's preservation of Eva's corpse to the military's failed attempts to control it, from Yolanda's recognition of the doll as a person to Arancibia's transformation through *Evena*, from the narrator's implication in Eva's relational field to the emergence of *existirme*, each episode reveals that embodiment persists through the relations it generates rather than through biological continuity alone. Writing is not the culmination of that persistence but one of the relations through which it continues to unfold.

The relation between being and writing is therefore constitutive rather than representational. Writing neither replaces the body nor merely preserves its memory. Instead, it becomes one of the relations through which embodied existence continues beyond biological life. Throughout *Santa Evita*, Martínez shows that embodiment is sustained not by organic continuity but by the capacity to generate new relations that transform those who encounter the body. The novel's reflections on preservation, memory, desire, language, and narration all converge on this point: the body persists

because it continues to act upon others, and writing is one of the forms that action takes. In the end, the body does not become text. It continually makes texts possible.

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