Arteletra

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“¡Sometamos o matemos!” can be translated as “Let’s subdue or let’s kill!” (Karcino 79). This palindrome is as gruesome as it is succinct. By invoking this phrase, an individual can attempt to rally a unified, ordered group behind a violent mandate—the choice to either subjugate or exterminate an already excluded, yet unnamed other. However, the only decision allowed to the included individuals, this “we,” is one of means and degree, not substance; each person is required to decide only if the excluded individuals should be made impotent or should be killed. Cleverly, the speaker provides no alternatives here, in effect subjugating both those called “we” and those called “them” to his hegemonic will. The simplicity is bone-chilling. Three words spread over the entirety of the political landscape to chain all bodies into place. Employing a totalizing logic, all ambiguity is dispelled; no longer is there room for choice, movement, questions, or disagreement without risk of death. Everything is known. Everyone is visible. Nothing foreign remains.

Of course, I have been arguing that palindromes are not so simple, and in practice, even the most violent regimes can only project total clarity as their ideal horizon. Still, transparent, brief language maintains a hold over political discourse, claiming to cleanse the body politic of any disorder or ambiguity, while actually eradicating the potential for disagreement and democracy. In this context, I propose reading Armonía Somers’s fiction not as an antidote, but rather as a necessary complication of such discourse. Though her fiction does not readily appear to be invested in politics, at least not in the narrow sense of the committed writer, she provides another option to the totalizing impulse of this palindrome and the type of political discourse it implies.
I find Somers to be an enigmatic writer, that is, a writer who situates enigmas at the center of her narratives. In *Un retrato para Dickens* (1969) and *Sólo los elefantes encuentran mandrágora* (written between 1972 and 1975, but not published until 1986), Somers engages in dialogue with international narratives that preceded the historical avant-gardes, including British and Spanish family romance and an Argentine cookbook. Her novels slow the drive toward total visibility once they become infected with what I call, borrowing a phrase from *Sólo los elefantes,* “el Síndrome de la mandrágora” (324). Similar to the illness affecting the protagonist of *Sólo los elefantes,* in my analysis the Mandrake Syndrome disturbs and unsettles all-too-tidy transcendental fictions by moving down into the everyday where confusion and ambiguity cannot be overcome. What is at stake here is a conception of the body politic—to the extent that it can be metaphorized as a body—as one that must always remain infected with enigmas that are never to be prevented, sutured, treated, or cured from outside or above. By writing these enigmas in plain sight, while never revealing their solution, I argue that her fiction generates a movement toward a radical democratic politics. Whereas Filloy rewrites the national gaucho tradition at the origins of his family saga, in this chapter, I focus on how Somers engages with texts from England, Argentina, and Spain in her retrospective fictions. I begin with *Un retrato para Dickens* (always quoting from the 1969 edition), because this novel establishes the need to construct an enigmatic fiction whose political consequences will infect the entirety of *Sólo los elefantes.*

**The Unsolvable**

*Un retrato* breaks with the unity of the nineteenth-century realist family romance that Somers cites by rewriting Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (serialized 1837–39). Comparing the two novels, Dalmagro concludes that the legibility and verosimilitude of Dickens’s novel “se contaminan con un discurso ambiguo, en que las piezas están desarticuladas, fragmentadas” (“Revés” 176).¹ In Dickens’s novel, Oliver, an orphan boy, is ultimately reunited with his family and his inheritance; Mr. Brownlow “gratified the only remaining wish of Oliver’s warm and earnest heart, and thus linked together a little society, whose condition approached as nearly to one of perfect happiness as can ever be known in this

¹ For the Spanish text of *Sólo los elefantes,* see the original edition, *Obra completa de María Luisa Bombal* (Madrid: Alianza, 2002).
changing world” (Oliver Twist 413). In contrast, Somers’s anonymous orphan girl sits abandoned in a police station, grasping desperately for a sense of humanity. According to Víctor Escudero, what she learns at this early age is only “la incertidumbre de lo real” (“Sujetos descompuestos” 1–14). She tells her story in a series of flashbacks. Interpolated into the narrative structure are seemingly disparate texts: rewritings of biblical scenes from the Book of Job, selections of an Argentine cookbook, including recipes, and a retelling of the plot as seen from the perspective of Asmodeo, the family parrot, who is also the demon reincarnated from the biblical story. By the end, the girl and the parrot explain that she was raped and afterward threw herself into the sea before being rescued and brought into the police station. In Un retrato, there is no linear progression nor restoration to the family or the nation, only a broken girl exposed to a violent world.

In addition to fragmenting both the form and content of Dickens’s novel, Somers establishes a distinction between, on the one hand, the many strange and fantastic but ultimately deciphered mysteries and, on the other, the unsolvable enigmas that endure throughout the novel. Ana María Rodríguez Villamil attempts to overcome the criticism leveraged against Somers that her literature is dense and illegible. She purports to bring clarity to Somers’s narratives through a structuralist analysis of the fantastic elements—employing a primarily Todorovian framework—of La mujer desnuda and other short stories. In the conclusion, the critic briefly mentions the fantastic elements of Un retrato that she says contaminate the novel’s more realist moments:

La fusión de lo real y lo imaginario se da, entonces, al final de la novela. Si bien la contaminación se da también a lo largo de los capítulos supuestamente realistas, por la inclusión del loro Asmodeo. La ambigüedad creada por la contaminación de ambas esferas […] se produce aquí al final. (190)

In her analysis, the final chapter allows for a culmination, in which two of the seemingly unconnected narratives of the novel come together; in retrospect, Asmodeo the demon and parrot can be read as the thread that sutures these fragmented plots.

For Rodríguez Villamil, this contamination produces the ambiguity that allows her to classify the novel as fantastic, an ambiguity that brings clarity by restoring the fragmented narrative
arc. Indeed, she insists that Somers’s narratives employ different formulas that “buscan la vía iluminativa es decir, la de la revelación, ya sea por la belleza o la fuerza de una imagen, ya por un sentido oculto que finalmente salta a la vista, ya por la irrupción de lo insólito” (192). I agree that certain mysteries are resolved by the end of many of Somers’s narratives; they drive the plot by creating suspense and often confirm the presence of the fantastic. Yet, I still feel utterly confused every time I finish reading almost any of her texts, because a number of enigmas always remain unanswered. As in gothic fiction, Ana María López Abadía explains, *Un retrato* “acaba con la idea del ‘gran despertar,’” which is to say that no messianic figure will appear “solucionando milagrosamente la situación” (n.p.). Rather than seek a form of clarity for Somers’s aesthetics, I prefer to analyze the effects of these enigmas that permanently block introspection, impede access to knowledge, and contaminate political discourse with inscrutable elements that cannot and will not be solved.

In *Un retrato*, one of the intertexts introduced under the Documents section are copies from an Argentine recipe book, *El Pastelero y Confitero Nacional* (1914) by Francisco Figueroa, found by the orphan girl. She tries to decipher the strange world that surrounds her from her juvenile perspective, what she calls “mi limitado margen de conceptos” (*Retrato* 41). What perplexes her is that there are seventy-seven recipes for *bizcochuelo*, a type of sponge cake. She poses a riddle to Guillermo: “Lo que quisiera saber es qué gusto tiene una cosa, una cosa que se puede hacer de setenta y siete maneras, y que se llama siempre bizcochuelo” (43). The adult man laughs away her question and assumes she is simply hungry, but she yells at him for dismissing her. She thinks to herself: “Nos mirábamos alguna vez como extranjeros que se encuentran en un cruce de trenes y sus idiomas sin traducción los hacen partir con el alma cerrada” (43). Guillermo lets her ask another question that he attempts to answer, but this riddle about the *bizcochuelo* remains like those untranslated languages.

This missed encounter is framed beforehand with a prologue from Figueroa’s recipe book and afterward with three different *bizcochuelo* recipes. Reveling in self-worth, Figueroa titles the prologue “La verdad esclarece e ilumina” (*Un retrato* 30). The Argentine—not Uruguayan—author of these recipes proclaims the greatness and purity of “nuestra Cocina Nacional” with no
irony at all (30). His prologue—a text that has been copied and reprinted in Somers’s novel—explains how his recipes, these national treasures, had been stolen, copied, and reprinted without his permission in other volumes of Argentine recipe books.

Overall, Figueroa’s prologue is constructed as a monument that flaunts the unique face of his National Cuisine for public consumption; the food is to be digested, the book, bought and read, the monument, viewed and praised. However, the orphan girl is not so easily convinced of this unity, and not because she is Uruguayan or is so naïve that she thinks there is only one recipe for any given dish. She confronts the luminous political narrative masquerading as a simple recipe book by posing an enigma. In the case of the *Bizcochuelo*, which serves as a synecdoche of the Nation, she asks how there can be seventy-seven versions of a proper noun, how a heterogenous collection can ignore its own plurality and assume a unique, total, and singular identity. Only the orphan girl manages to attend to the uneven surface on which Figueroa constructs his universalizing vision. She calls attention to the visible but unnoticed fact that Figueroa’s perspective is as particular and limited as her own, the difference being that his is oriented by the same hegemonic impulse that governs Lugones’s elitist manipulation of the gaucho genre.

While reading the surface of this document, copious typos that do not exist in the rest of Somers’s novel become apparent: missing accents and punctuation marks, misspelled words, and excessive capitalization. A footnote certifies that this document is a “copia fiel” of the expanded second edition of the recipe book, a second edition that still has many mistakes despite being elevated as the National Recipe Book (33). In adopting the little girl’s limited perspective and paying attention to her naïve questions, the imperfect surface that supplements a previous edition that possibly had an even greater number of errors announces a fracture in the supposedly deeper message about the unity of the nation. The prologue’s author intends to erase this multiplicity and these fractures with his single text on National Cuisine—exemplified by the *bizcochuelo*—and with a single subject—us—but he makes too many mistakes in his foundational gesture that tries to speak for so many others. In the face of the orphan girl’s interrogation, his only hope might be to appeal to his fellow countrymen with the rallying cry, “¡Sometamos o matemos!”
Chapter Eight

Enigmas and the Mandrake Syndrome

Instead of either criticizing Somers as an illegible writer or attempting to bring greater clarity to her works, I propose another way to interpret the role of enigmas that remain unsolvable in plain sight on the surface of her narratives. In *Stanzas*, Agamben reflects on the classical figures of Oedipus and the Sphinx in order to distinguish two models for approaching an enigma. In mythology, those travelers who failed to answer the Sphinx’s enigma were killed, never to learn the answer; Oedipus was the first and only to correctly answer her riddle, after which she killed herself. Considering these myths as alternative theories of signification, Agamben argues:

> Every interpretation of signifying as the relation of manifestation or expression (or, inversely, of coding and eclipse) between a signifier and a signified (and both the psychoanalytic theory of the symbol and the semiotic theory of language belong to this type) places itself necessarily under the sign of Oedipus; under the sign of the Sphinx must be placed every theory of the symbol that, refusing the model of Oedipus, focuses its attention above all on the barrier between signifier and signified that constitutes the original problem of signification. (138–39)

The Oedipal interpretations are those that claim to find and reveal the meaning hidden within an enigma; they employ a hermeneutical strategy to reveal truth by the light of knowledge. In contrast, interpretations under the sign of the Sphinx, or surface readings, mark the opening within language, the gap that blocks the truth from the representation that is made of it. Furthermore, in his analysis of Aristotle and Heraclitus, Agamben explains that the enigmatic provides “a glimpse into the abyss opened between signifier and signified,” somewhere between “the *legein* (saying) and [...] the *kryptein* (hiding)” (139). Enigmas, under the sign of the Sphinx, do not shroud any meaning under their surface. Rather, they expose, in a brief glimpse, the infinite distance that only imperfect and improper discourse can attempt to traverse without ever reaching the truth itself. Somers’s orphan girl refers to many of her questions as “mensajes sin clave” (*Retrato* 28). There is discourse here, but no master key to decipher it. In this sense, Somers’s enigmas can be read like a palindrome or the Sator Square; they may appear to hide a specific truth, but there is not
necessarily a secret meaning tucked away in some fold that is awaiting the arrival of the most astute analyst, the cleverest hermeneutical exercise, or someone’s lucky guess in order to be revealed, illuminated, or otherwise brought into the light.

While the enigmas in *Un retrato* install a level of uncertainty in parts of the narrative, they spread across the entirety of Somers’s disorienting *Sólo los elefantes encuentran mandrágora*. For its autobiographical elements and extension across time and space, its attempt to narrate everything, Nicasio Perrera San Martín situates this novel as one of the many “grandes novelas totales,” and the first written by a woman in Latin America (“Armonía Somers” 27). However, in my analysis, I contend that this novel resists that totality and even challenges the possibility of forming such a totality. To the extent that there is a plot, it might be summarized as a series of journal entries written by Sembrando Flores while she is being treated for a mysterious disease in a hospital bed. Her thoughts range from more realistic memories to abstract concatenations of objects, animals, people, and colors. Flores is eventually cured only to be killed in a car accident. In a footnote, the fictional editor, Victoria von Scherrer, further notes that she organized these handwritten journals, deciphering poorly written words “de modo que no se notaran las carencias” (*Sólo* 254). In the epilogue, von Scherrer explains that the text is not comprised solely of Flores’s journals; in fact, it contains sections that von Scherrer wrote based on her own notes and memories of conversations she had with Flores (329–31). The fictional editor never reveals which parts of the final manuscript are hers and which are from Flores’s journals; she simply points to the fact that they exist somewhere on the surface of the text.

However, this type of plot summary feels disingenuous or, at least, incomplete. My experience reading the novel more closely resembles the sensation of being pulled by a strong current through a chaotic dreamscape with no place to plant my feet or rest my eyes. It is this overwhelming confusion that I want to foreground as I analyze the political intervention of the novel. In another context, Richard has advocated for this sort of oblique language:

> También creo necesario defender el secreto de estas opacidades y refracciones contra la tiranía lingüística de lo simple, de lo directo y de lo transparente, hoy ejercida por las comunicaciones
Somers’s fiction, in my analysis, works against this campaign of transparency. Without always clarifying the contexts in which the following quotes are enunciated or explaining the relationships between the different characters, I read a selection of disjointed ideas related to her enigmas from various points in the narrative. These enigmas contaminate and infect the totalizing discourse of transparency with the Mandrake Syndrome. This phrase appears in the novel as a way of naming the difficulty of knowing another person: “Fue la primera y la última vez que la vi, doctor Nessi, era tan bella y tan atroz que no puedo describirla si como amiga o enemiga. Llame a esto el Síndrome de la mandrágora en sus apuntes científicos, verá cómo se universaliza el término” (Sólo 324). This confusion between friends and enemies, between what is lovely and terrible, inside and outside, self and other, is what must contaminate otherwise transparent language if the potential for political dissensus is to be sustained. The Mandrake Syndrome is one way to name this confusion.

In Sólo los elefantes, Somers incorporates texts from a variety of genres and disciplines, including a nineteenth-century Spanish novel, El manuscrito de una madre (1872) by Enrique Pérez Escrich, and the medical-scientific discourse of Flores’s doctors. When they enter into contact with Flores’s journals, both of these become infected with the enigmas that they otherwise seek to cure, fraying their edges into loose threads and punching holes in key expository moments. Dianna C. Niebylski has studied how Somers’s novel flows as if composed of “random acts of ‘leakage’ from one discourse to another” (111). Drawing from the image of lymph that pours excessively from Flores’s body, she establishes this image of a narrative that flows across and drips through the holes of what she labelled the “disembodied epistemologies of the twentieth century (medicine, politics, existential philosophy, psychoanalysis)” (96). Building from Niebylski’s analysis, I contend that Somers’s enigmas are the empty holes that hide nothing, thus allowing such leakages to take place and undermining the
authority of these disembodied disciplines to make totalizing claims.

Throughout Sólo los elefantes, fragments of Pérez Escrich’s El manuscrito are incorporated into the narrative; sometimes they are copied directly and other times the characters modify them or mix in their reactions to the plot. In both novels, a dying woman writes a form of memoir in a journal, but these two manuscripts could not be more dissimilar. In El manuscrito, Ángela dies without revealing the identity of her son’s father to him; she proclaims shortly before she dies: “Ese secreto no asomará á mis lábios, conmigo bajará á la tumba” (Vol. 1, 16). While dramatic, she is not being truthful. She entrusts a small chest to her doctor that contains a manuscript in which she explains who is the father and why she has kept his identity a secret. Pérez Escrich’s novel is centered on this guarded manuscript and whether or not the truth it contains will be revealed to her son, Daniel, before he marries Clotilde, his half-sister. After countless plot twists, including duels, a recovery from being shot in the head, and kidnappings, in volume two Ángela’s doctor tries to convince the Marquesa, Clotilde’s mother, to reveal the truth in order to prevent her daughter from committing incest. The Marquesa is hesitant, but the doctor exclaims: “¡Qué importa querer ocultar lo que el tiempo tarde ó temprano ha de arrojarnos al rostro!” (Vol. 2, 350). Such certainty that eventually all will be revealed is the foundation on which Pérez Escrich’s violent novel is constructed.

Despite a very abrupt ending, Daniel and Clotilde read the mother’s manuscript only hours before they had planned to elope, and all outstanding plot lines are resolved. No cabos sueltos remain in the novel, because, as the narrator ensures the reader, “es preciso atarlos todos y hacer con ellos una madeja que lleve agradablemente entretenida la curiosidad hasta el final de la obra” (Vol. 2, 176). All secrets are revealed, all loose ends are tied up, and the tragedy of incest is prevented.

However, this transparent narrative also charts the itineraries of two violent, vengeful men who destroy the lives of all those around them. The General, Daniel’s father, focuses only on protecting his honor and tries to have the doctor killed various times rather than reveal his infidelities; the Count offers Daniel his protection and makes him his heir as a ruse to get Daniel to commit incest in order to get revenge on the General. Other stories of mistreated
and abused women, one of whom was decapitated after her
death and now her skull rests on the Count’s mantle, fill these one
thousand five hundred pages. The General and the Count attempt
to subdue and kill everyone who threatens their glorious triumph
over the other. Though everything comes to light in this novel
and prevents one final tragedy from taking place, this suppos-
edly happy ending pales in comparison to the greed, aggression,
misogyny, and petty violence that entertains the reader at every
point along the way.

Flores’s journals in Sólo los elefantes take a different approach to
loose threads and revelations of the past. Halfway through chapter
seventeen, the narrator—it is not always discernible whether
Flores, von Scherrer, or a third person narrator is speaking—
says: “Pero era necesario retomar los cabos sueltos antes de la
posible entrega de la memoria junto con lo que irían a leer en
sus vísceras, como otros lo hacen en las borras del café, el día del
descuartizamiento” (Sólo 217). Flores appears to have the same
desire as Ángela to reveal everything, but her memory and, more
importantly, her sick, medicated body prevent her from telling a
coherent, straightforward story. The medications cause dream-
like, hallucinatory states, and she drifts in and out of childhood
memories as doctors and nurses prick her body with needles.
Loose threads in her narrative constantly fray and split. Even right
after this quote, there is a section break that cuts the narrative
short. More loose threads are started in this novel than those that
will be neatly resolved by the end.

One example has to do with how Flores, as a little girl, learned
about mandrake. She begins reading about it in a book called
Ciencias Ocultas. In the novel, there is a block quote that begins
explaining what the mandrake is, but the quote is cut short by an
ellipsis. The narrator explains this abrupt ending: “Y es claro que
enseguida quitó la página que hablaba de eso, ya que si todo el
mundo se ponía a leer tales cosas éstas perdían misterio, y sin mis-
terio no quedaba nada, lo restante era un esqueleto al viento” (Sólo
125). Unlike Ángela who found a way to have her secrets revealed
posthumously, Flores destroyed the only page on which the man-
drake’s secrets were written. This missing page never returns, nor
does she rewrite it at any point in the novel. As Zanetti explains,
this lack of revelation becomes “uno de los modos de socavar un
mundo invadido por la torpe confianza en lo ya definido, por los
slógans y el lugar común” (*La dorada garra* 422–23). Somers’s enigmas constantly undermine this stubborn trust when the last pages on which everything would have been revealed are ripped out of her narratives, never to be recovered.

In addition to dabbling in the occult sciences, Flores’s journals also record the medical-scientific discourse used by her doctors as they probe her body to determine the cause of her illness and treat its symptoms. After an early round of unspecified tests, the doctor tells Flores that they came back negative; he only knows that the problem is not in her kidneys. Nevertheless, he names her illness “Quilotórax” with the qualification that this is based on what he knows so far (*Sólo* 35). This clarifies little for Flores: “La palabra quedó flotando en el aire de la habitación como un objeto volador no identificado” (35). The explanation of what is happening to her is encapsulated in an untranslatable alien language that she hears but cannot understand. Her confusion is amplified as the medical staff frequently speak among themselves in a technical language that only serves to mask their ignorance with the inaccessible discourse of scientific authority.

As two guards that “parecían dos esfinges” stand watch outside her hospital room, another doctor takes over the investigation (36). The journals record his analysis as follows: “Ya conozco la historia. Pero si según mi teoría esto pudiera ser consecuencia de (…), ya que han sido descartadas todas las posibilidades para conjeturar un (…)” (36). Somers sprinkles many of her narratives with ellipses, and in *Sólo los elefantes* they punch holes in medical discourse, erasing what might have been technical vocabulary Flores did not understand, words in the manuscript that the fictional editor could not decipher, or perhaps theories that were later proved incorrect. Of course, this is only speculation on my part. No footnotes or explanations in the epilogue exist, nor are these phrases reconstituted later. What has been lost in the abyss of those ellipses cannot be recovered from inside or outside of the text.

The gaps marked by ellipses could be dismissed as symbols of the questions that always exist at the early stages of any investigation, whether it be scientific, humanistic, or interdisciplinary. By the end, the doctors do cure Flores of her illness and send her home. Yet, an ellipsis blocks even one of the doctor’s explanations of an injection and a violet-colored pill that will cure her. He says
the pill is “cloruro de metil rosa anilina, o cristal, violeta, es igual a 
(…). Y dibujó en un papel los armónicos hexágonos con que habla 
la fabulosa química” (Sólo 306). Methyl chloride, aniline rose, and 
crystal violet are all actually existing organic compounds, but the 
rest of the doctor’s explanation is cut short. Instead, he is said to 
have drawn its molecular structure to show it to Flores, and on the 
following page, an image of a compound appears, presumably the 
same one. Curiously, it is not made clear which of the three com-
pounds this diagram supposedly represents, nor does this technical 
image clarify or reveal higher-order knowledge about the cause or 
cure of Flores’s illness. By the end of the novel, even the cure that 
takes place is left unexplained as ellipses and illustrations attempt 
to cover over the enigmas that plague the medical-scientific 
discourse in this novel.

**Immunity and Contamination**

What might seem strange is that the narrator in Sólo los elefantes 
does not engage in a more straightforward critique of political dis-
course similar to that undertaken by the orphan girl in Un retrato.
Rather, medicine and science become the fields most thoroughly 
infected with the Mandrake Syndrome. How, then, can Somers’s 
literature that critiques medicine be understood as a political 
intervention?

To answer this question, I will turn to the political logic of 
immunity that cuts across a number of seemingly disparate disci-
plines. For my purposes, literature, medicine, and politics intersect 
when the paradigm of immunity is applied to the metaphor of 
the body politic. As Roberto Esposito demonstrates, the logic 
of immunity that guides biopolitics has been at play throughout 
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the body politic. As Roberto Esposito demonstrates, the logic 
of immunity that guides biopolitics has been at play throughout 
the history of Western political thought.³ Tracing the etymology 
of “immunity” to the Latin *immunitas*, Esposito explains that 
*munus* refers to an obligation or duty, whereas someone said to be 
*immunis* is “disencumbered, exonerated, exempted” (*Immunitas* 
5). To be immune is a privileged state in which one does not 
owe anything to anyone, is not bound by the law, and therefore, 
immunity takes on an anti-social status that breaks with *commu-
nitas*, or “the social circuit of reciprocal gift-giving” (6; italics in 
original). In addition to this legal status, the biomedical signi-
ficance of immunity refers to a preventive method of fending off
future diseases by inoculating the body with nonlethal levels of a virus to create antibodies that can target that same virus; thus, “[immunization] reproduces in a controlled form exactly what it is meant to protect us from” (8). The logic of immunity does not map a distinction between inside and outside. Paradoxically, it incorporates the other—the virus—into the self—the body—in order to destroy the other; an internal extermination becomes the means of protecting life.

For biopolitics, the immune paradigm gains particular importance as the social community is represented through the metaphorical figure of the body politic. An analogy is established between the body that is prevented against illness and the community that must be protected against social ills, degeneracy, or abnormality. On the one hand, Esposito argues, “to be the object of political ‘care,’ life had to be separated off and closed up inside progressively desocialized spaces that were meant to immunize it against anything arising from community” (Immunitas 140). In this sense, the technologies of discipline remain intact, ordering every individual body into a visible, known place. On the other, by appealing to a desire to protect the overall species or political community, the technologies of biopower may be deployed to distinguish between those bare lives who will be made to live and those others on the inside who may be left to die, or more accurately, killed. What claims to be a concern for the health and longevity of human life also justifies its intention to exterminate given individuals or groups.

It is no coincidence that one of the quotes incorporated into Sólo los elefantes from Pérez Escrích’s El manuscrito involves the following decontextualized warning about taking action against the violent General: “Nos hallamos en un tiempo que el gobierno, para librarse de los que él cree enemigos del orden, emplea el sistema preventivo” (Sólo 146). While Somers’s novel may be referring indirectly to Bordaberry’s dictatorship that generalized state violence against Uruguayan citizens in the name of exterminating the Túpamaros, the lack of specificity allows me to read this critique as one that touches on while also exceeding the national context.

In this sense, the Mandrake Syndrome serves as an alternative to the immune paradigm as it exists within and beyond Uruguay. Neither the Mandrake Syndrome nor any other critique would
be effective as a purported negation of the immune paradigm, because immunization is already a negation of an internalized negative, the elimination of difference. As Esposito says, to further negate and destroy “would mean to repeat the same procedure” (Immunitas 16). Furthermore, immunization is not simply the evil opposed to a good community; immunity and community are bound together in contemporary biopolitics, and neither of these concepts will disappear anytime soon. Instead, Esposito attempts to rewrite those militarized metaphors that too easily justify the destruction of all foreign bodies. In fact, this destructive logic relies on a simplified notion of how the immune system works. As Donna J. Haraway explains, “The immune system is everywhere and nowhere. Its specificities are indefinite if not infinite, and they arise randomly; yet, these extraordinary variations are the critical means of maintaining individual bodily coherence” (218). The immune system does not preserve life by recognizing a difference between self and other. Turning to the example of pregnancy, Esposito demonstrates that the mother’s immune system aggressively attacks the fetus; the only way to avoid a miscarriage is for the father’s antibodies to be sufficiently foreign so that the mother’s immune system ignores the fetus and attacks the father’s antibodies. It is the incorporation of the difference of the father, and not the sameness of the fetus within the mother, that generates and protects the new life. “From this perspective,” argues Esposito, “nothing remains of the incompatibility between self and other. The other is the form the self takes where inside intersects with outside, the proper with the common, immunity with community” (Immunitas 171). This more complex representation in which each individual body cannot be simply disciplined, suppressed, or killed opens the logic of immunity toward a generative impetus, one that has the potential to create new life and to expand the community. Read in this context, the Mandrake Syndrome is not an illness to be prevented or cured, nor do Somers’s enigmas immunize against foreign bodies. In Somers’s fiction, enigmas continuously contaminate any and all discourse that seeks total clarity and purity, that attempts to eliminate difference and dispel ambiguity.

As the novel’s title has always announced, only elephants will ever find the mandrake, and moreover, as the narrator says, “los elefantes encuentran mandrágora en el camino del paraíso” (Sólo 310). Dalmagro offers a detailed analysis of the mandrake as a
symbol of desire, utopia, the fantastic, the uncanny, the esoteric, magic, and even the sacred in Catholicism. She asserts that “Encontrar la mandrágora es encontrar la posibilidad de contar una historia que permita reconstruir el sentido de la vida, aunque, como en el caso de Sólo los elefantes ... ese sentido sea inasible” (Desde los umbrales 332). This is to say that the mandrake, the possibility of a complete and transparent narrative, can only be found during the march toward the afterlife. If such a thing as the afterlife even exists, the narrator says, the problem will not be solved: “Tantas versiones, pues, y una sola cosa verdadera, aquel puente roto entre una y otra orilla. Y el río de la muerte demasiado ancho y oscuro para cruzarlo a nado y volverse luego con noticias” (Sólo 236–37). Even as Flores relates her own life in the form of a chaotic dreamscape while still alive, or as von Scherrer reconstructs her journals and their conversations, she does not find the mandrake. That broken bridge between life and death, between signifier and signified, is never mended. And Flores celebrates this imperfection and confusion: “vivan las misteriosas parejas de los signos que nadie descifrará, que mueran de una vez todos los topos del mundo tratando de descubrirles un sentido lógico” (311). Somers’s novel narrates the impossibility of fully illuminating the past and the present, of revealing all bodies under the lights of the public sphere, and it celebrates the effects of the Mandrake Syndrome as its enigmas spread across the entirety of such totalizing, political discourse.

At one point in the narrative, Flores listens to Erika as she criticizes another person: “Es completamente idónea, dijo la pelirroja Erika con una voz que creía secreta, no sabe nada de nada ... Idónea significa otra cosa, le susurró Flores al oído” (193). Flores thinks Erika meant to say “idiota, idiot” instead of “idónea, ideal,” but Erika is convinced that she used the correct word. I would like to end this section by taking Erika’s language at face value, to read it literally for what it says on the surface, wherein not knowing everything is ideal. This is the effect of the Mandrake Syndrome: to let a lack of total knowledge and clarity, a partial knowledge and vision full of enigmas that generate new ideas, new questions, and new life, to let all of this generative imperfection become an ideal state of existence at both the individual and communal levels. As a critic, I may not be able to follow the heroic model of Oedipus as he solved the enigmas of the Sphinx; Somers’s fiction,
especially Sólo los elefantes, still remains quite incomprehensible to me. But what do I know, as von Scherrer says at the very end is this: “No sé, no sé nada de nada, soy completamente ‘idónea,’ como decía Erika Fraudenberg” (331).