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# Reimagining Argentina: Identity, Memory, and Healing Collective Trauma

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**REIMAGINING ARGENTINA:  
IDENTITY, MEMORY, AND HEALING COLLECTIVE TRAUMA**

**A thesis submitted to  
Regis College  
The Honors Program  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for Graduation with Honors**

**by**

Abigail M. King

**May 2016**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. BEARING WITNESS: THE EXPERIENCE OF COLLECTIVE TRAUMA	14
III. STOLEN LIVES: RECOVERING THE IDENTITY OF THE CHILDREN OF THE DISAPPEARED	22
IV. COMMEMORATING LA DICTADURA: RECONSTRUCTING THE BUILT LANDSCAPE	35
V. REIMAGINING ARGENTINA: A SPACE FOR REMEMBRANCE AND HEALING	47
BIBLIOGRAPHY	55

*FOR SOFÍ*

## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

On January 21, 2014, after twenty hours of travel, I had arrived. It was the heat of summer in Córdoba, and everything was green, beaming in the intense Argentine sun. I fell in love instantly. I loved the sounds the birds made, the way the bus drivers didn't ever come to a complete stop, the straws that came with your bottled beverage at the grocery store, and the crumbled sidewalks. I loved the generosity of every person I encountered, I loved the culture of drinking *mate* and preparing an *asado*, and I loved the way that time seemed to stop when you were spending time with the people you cared about. Then, after a few months of delving into my Argentine life, I began to see the things that aren't so lovely about Argentina. The inflation, the corruption, the inefficiency and the dark history of the disappeared. And yet, I watched with amazement as the Argentines all around me spent their days enjoying whatever was right in front of them.

This project was born out of my own wonderings about how a place that holds so much darkness could be so full of life. Specifically in regards to the legacy of the dictatorship and the disappeared, I wanted to know how a people who had endured such horror came to live with such grace. How does a nation even begin to recover from such an intimate, devastating attack on her own people, by her own people? There is of course no cure-all when it comes to healing this kind of deep, insidious wound, but I've come to realize that it starts with remembering. Remembering the pain, remembering the loss, but also remembering that we are resilient beings, each of us has within us an immense power to overcome, to find joy.

\* \* \*

This project would not have been possible without the love and support of so many people around the world, to all of whom I am so incredibly grateful. I would first like to thank my advisor, Dr. Geoffrey Bateman, and my reader, Dr. Nicki Gonzales, for their continued support and encouragement throughout this process. I am eternally grateful for your advice, knowledge, and friendship. Thanks also to Dr. Dan Clayton who was instrumental in shaping the theoretical framework of this work, having introduced me to the field of nationalism studies, and then directing me toward identity and memory from there. I must also thank Dr. J. Thomas Howe and Dr. Catherine Kleier, Director and Assistant Director of the Regis College Honors Program respectively, and Dr. Thomas Bowie, Dean of Regis College, for creating the enriching, transformative experience that is Honors at Regis. To my fellow Capstone Historians and Honors Thesis Writers, thank you for your continued willingness to engage in intellectually stimulating conversation and for sharing your passions with me. I cease to be amazed by you. And of course, for closing down the library with me night after night, much thanks is owed to Jason Huggins, cin cin.

I am blessed to be part of a number of families throughout the world, to all of whom I owe great thanks. First to my own family, Mom, Dad, Anne, Jill, and the rest of you, thank you for all of your love and laughter over the years. My Service Learning family, especially Melissa and Pablo, I am so thankful for your aliveness, your groundedness, and your reminders to slow down. And to the Italian *mamas* who are the

most beautiful, brilliant, and empowered women I know, Daniela, Carmela, Francesca, and Alia, thank you for all that you do and all that you are.

Lastly, I must thank the people without whom there would be no Argentina in my story. Thank you to my CASA Chicas, Savannah, Michelle, Coco, Krista, Adriana, Molly, Michelle, and Bianca, for all of the silliness, the long, hot bus rides, and the dances in the quincho. I am perpetually sending you besos and chocolinas. To the Argentines who were so gracious in sharing their country, culture, and language with me, especially Martín, Diego, Ariel, Marta, Julio and all of the *canillitas* at La Luciernaga, *gracias*. And to Doug and Jen, I haven't the words to express how much you and your family mean to me, I am so grateful to have you in my life. Thank you for everything.

## I. INTRODUCTION

On March 23, 1976, a military coup led by General Jorge Videla toppled the elected government of Isabel Perón and established the right-wing totalitarian state that ruled Argentina until 1983. *El Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*, the National Reorganization Process, as this period was officially called, attempted to remove subversive left-wing elements from all aspects of Argentine society through a policy of forced disappearance.<sup>1</sup> Presently in Argentina, the years from 1976 to 1983 are simply referred to as *la dictadura*, meaning the dictatorship. The singularity implied by “*la*,” meaning “the,” is somewhat misleading, for although *El Proceso* was the most violent and destructive dictatorship to take hold of Argentina since it became a nation in 1810, it is not the only dictatorship that had governed the country. Rather, *El Proceso* was the culmination of a series of conflicts between the military, the democratic state, and various radical groups that sought to control the country’s thrust into modernity throughout the twentieth century. In the aftermath of the first series of military governments in the 1930s and the rise of Juan Perón, the seeds of subversion that would eventually give rise to Videla’s program for an all-powerful, purified Argentina thirty years later were planted.

This thesis examines how Argentina has responded to and recovered from the trauma that occurred during *la dictadura* in the years since the return to democracy. Particular attention is paid to the country’s engagement in identity recovery and memory work and the effects of this work on the formation of a public, collective memory that works toward healing and liberation. In Argentina, this memory work occurs on two

levels: the official and the vernacular. Official memory, narrative, and discourse stem from political and cultural leaders, as well as societal authorities, such as government agencies, official reports and data, and even public school textbooks. To form the vernacular narrative, ordinary people use commemorative events, the social structure, open media, art and literature, protest, and other forms of public expression available to them in order to record their experiences into the national memory. The public, collective memory then “emerges from the intersection of official and vernacular cultural expressions.”<sup>2</sup> However, the joining of the two does not always result in a cohesive alignment that works to move the country forward as a united community with an agreed upon shared past. Often the vernacular and the official narratives are at odds with one another, a collision that works to stall the nation’s memory and healing work. Thus, this thesis analyzes the *nature* of these intersections between the official and the vernacular in order to determine whether or not a particular version of a public memory will lead a country toward healing and liberation.

To understand General Videla and his program of fear, violence, and depravity, we must first situate ourselves the historic context that allowed such a wicked group of men to gain control over the national government. What follows is a history of the transitions between military and civilian governments that occurred in Argentina from 1916 to 1983. This history illuminates the pattern of extreme polarity that took hold of Argentine politics and government for over fifty years, culminating in the end of *El Proceso* and the democratic election of President Raúl Alfonsín in 1983. President Alfonsín’s election signaled a return to democracy, which, at the time of this writing, has

not faced any significant challenges to its legitimacy by the military or any other group. Yet, the restoration of democracy in Argentina did not immediately bring this period of repressive military rule to a definitive close. Argentines have continued to struggle to incorporate the legacy of this utterly devastating period of state-sponsored terror into their national memory, identity, and history.

\* \* \*

In 1930, Argentina's first military coup d'état removed President Hipólito Yrigoyen from office and sixteen years of military rule ensued. Elected in 1916 in the country's first democratic elections with universal male suffrage, Yrigoyen represented the Radical party, but ultimately his administration sat just left of center.<sup>3</sup> His social reforms were not far-reaching enough to please radical elements of the left, which resulted in a series of bombings and shootings instigated by local anarchist groups.<sup>4</sup> In addition to a seriously failing economy, this violence isolated both Argentina's moderates and the conservative right, leading to an increase in public support for military intervention. Then, on September 6, 1930, General José Félix Uriburu ousted Yrigoyen and what became known as the "Infamous Decade" began.<sup>5</sup>

The *Década Infame*, or Infamous Decade, is not formally considered a period of military dictatorship because on paper, democratic institutions, such as free and fair elections, had been reestablished. Yet, under the guise of democracy, four successive presidents, both military and civilian, relied on military force to retain control over the country. Beginning with the authoritarian Uriburu and ending with civilian leader Ramón S. Castillo, for thirteen years the Argentine government sustained its power through

electoral fraud, rampant government corruption, exclusion of the lower class from politics, and oppression of political opposition groups, until a nationalist faction of the military forced Castillo out of office in 1943.<sup>6</sup> This faction, *El Grupo de Oficiales Unidos (GOU)*, the United Officers Group, was a secret alliance of pro-fascist, nationalist military leaders who opposed the domestic corruption of Castillo's presidency and the administration's close relationship with the Allied powers. The GOU feared that aligning with the Allies, even if Argentina officially remained neutral in World War II, might provoke a spread of communism within the country.<sup>7</sup> The GOU's ouster of Castillo brought an end to the Infamous Decade, restoring direct military rule in Argentina until the election of Juan Perón in 1946. The Infamous Decade, and the military governments of the early 1940s that followed, mark the beginning of a fifty-year period of military influence, infiltration and periodically, direct rule, of the Argentine government, setting the stage for the most violent and repressive state in Argentina's history to come to power under the rule of General Videla in 1976.

Colonel Juan Domingo Perón was a member of the GOU and after helping to overthrow Castillo, he served as an assistant to the Secretary of War, General Edelmiro Farrell. He was soon appointed head of the Department of Labor, a position from which Perón gained considerable influence within the government and recognition among the people, particularly the working class. In unprecedented labor reforms, Perón fought for better working conditions, set limits on work hours, and instituted paid vacation days. He organized government-affiliated labor unions and often intervened on the side of the union when disputes with employers arose. The working class's support for Perón

continued to grow, and his personal political success became a priority for union leadership who relied on his influence.<sup>8</sup> Yet, rivals within the military government's leadership were threatened by Perón's popularity and fearful of his pro-fascist rhetoric, causing them to force his resignation and then arrest him on October 13, 1945. Perón was released days later after immense pressure was put on the government by a mass demonstration at the Plaza de Mayo led by Eva Duarte, a young actress who married Perón less than a week later.<sup>9</sup>

Together, Perón and his new wife, who came to be known as Evita, became wildly popular, advocating for labor reform, women's rights, and the political power of the working class. Perón's victorious campaign for the presidency in February 1946 ended a three-year period of military rule, replacing it with his own fascist-leaning, authoritarian brand of populism. Over two terms, from 1946 to 1955, Perón worked simultaneously to increase the rights of workers and women, and to tie these groups' newfound political agency to his personal political success.<sup>10</sup> Although many of the progressive social reforms Perón established tangibly benefited the Argentine working class, his ultimate aim was to bolster his own power by creating a foundational relationship between the working class and the Peronist state-party apparatus. As historian Daniel James argues, "Its [the working class's] self-identification as a social and political force within national society was, in part at least, constructed by Peronist political discourse which offered workers viable solutions for their problems and a credible vision of Argentine society and their role within it."<sup>11</sup> This fundamental link between widespread public support for Peronism and the social inclusion of the working

class, in which both owed part of its inception to the other, allowed Perón to retain a semblance of public support after he was forced into exile in 1955, eventually allowing him to reemerge in the Argentine political sphere in the early 1970s.

On July 26, 1952, shortly after Perón began his second term, Eva Duarte Perón died, a loss from which the party would never recover.<sup>12</sup> Evita's death saw a rise in the activity of opposition groups and fracturing within the party. Many prominent Argentine feminists, most notably Victoria Ocampo, began to voice criticism of Evita's brand of feminism, claiming that it was reliant on the patriarchal system endorsed by her husband, whom they viewed as a supporter of women only insofar as he could capture their vote.<sup>13</sup> The working class had also grown less supportive of Perón, as inflation had reached fifty percent by 1951.<sup>14</sup> By the end of 1954, when Perón introduced a widely controversial proposal to legalize divorce and prostitution, even the Catholic Church, who had been a long time supporter of the welfare state implemented through the Eva Perón Foundation, openly spoke out against "the tyrant."<sup>15</sup> Further, Perón's use of democratic language to support his anti-democratic, authoritarian state continued to anger many educated elites, particularly those in the higher ranks of the military. As a result, after nearly a decade in power, a nationalist, Catholic military junta, called *la Revolucion Libertadora*, deposed Perón on September 16, 1955.<sup>16</sup> After being removed from power, Perón was exiled, but his supporters remained active, continuing to garner public support for his populist policies. The more radical faction of these supporters eventually formed a revolutionary guerilla group, the Monteneros, who became the primary subversive enemies of General Videla's junta throughout the 1970s.

Within a matter of months, the *Revolucion* coup replaced its first appointed president, General Eduardo Lonardi, with General Pedro Aramburu. President Aramburu forced Perón into exile in Spain and outlawed the Peronist party, persecuting and imprisoning known Peronists and making illegal even the mention of Juan or Eva Perón.<sup>17</sup> In 1958, Aramburu allowed elections to be held, bringing an end to military rule and initiating a series of fragile civilian governments that would last only until 1966, when another military coup, the self-designated *Revolucion Argentina*, took over and appointed General Juan Carlos Onganía president. Onganía was not interested in heading a transitional junta, and instead sought a new social order that permanently established the leading role of the military in politics and the economic sector.<sup>18</sup> General Videla would take this same approach in attempting to establish the permanency of his military government ten years later. By 1969, the neoliberal, repressive policies of the military government, including the suspension of the right to strike and the end of university autonomy, gave way to increasing protest and violence among opposition groups, ultimately leading to the creation of several revolutionary guerilla militias.<sup>19</sup>

The Peronist *Monteneros* and the Marxist *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP) unleashed unprecedented guerilla violence all throughout Argentina, escalating through mass mobilization campaigns from 1969 to 1975. The Monteneros, true to their Peronist orientation, saw themselves as fighting the “people’s war,” and in spite of their militancy, they gained considerable support among the working class and rural populations in preparation for Perón’s eventual return.<sup>20</sup> Perón had maintained a near mythic presence in Argentina since his exile, and though he was still banned from

running for office, a Peronist candidate was allowed on the ticket in 1973, the country's first democratically held elections in ten years. Perón's stand in, Dr. Hector Campora, was inaugurated on May 25, 1973, and immediately began implementing right-wing Peronist economic and social reforms, despite backing the continued violence of the Monteneros on behalf of the party.<sup>21</sup> Perón returned to Argentina less than a month later, and Campora resigned shortly thereafter. Emergency elections were held in September; Perón and his third wife Isabel Perón, who ran as his vice-president, won with over sixty percent of the vote. Unfortunately, the victory was short lived for Perón, who died on July 2, 1974. Isabel became Argentina's first female president, but ultimately, she proved a weak leader who did not have the control and charisma or political sense of her late husband. In addition to other more powerful forces diminishing her rule, under Isabel's rule, guerilla violence reached an all time high, with more than 4,324 armed attacks recorded between May 1975 and March 1976, leaving her extremely vulnerable to General Videla's coup.<sup>22</sup>

The ouster of Isabel Perón occurred on March 24, 1976. The following day, General Jorge Videla was declared the President of Argentina and *El Proceso* officially began. Repression, state-sponsored terror, and an atmosphere of fear invaded all aspects of Argentine life over the next eight years. Videla believed that a "return to the Catholic, Roman and Hispanic principles on which the nation was founded" would allow Argentina to achieve ideological unity.<sup>23</sup> In order to remove both left and right wing elements considered to be "subversive," the government began kidnapping in broad daylight anyone connected to the Monteneros or the Peronist party, teachers, Jews, Marxists,

Freudians and anyone who spoke out against the military or the government.<sup>24</sup> Once kidnapped, *los desaparecidos*, or the disappeared, were taken to clandestine detention centers, tortured relentlessly, and ultimately, killed. Over 30,000 people disappeared, never to be seen or heard from again. Most were killed in the so-called “death-flights,” pushed off of a plane into the river, Rio de la Plata, which feeds into the Atlantic Ocean just south of Buenos Aires, their remains never to be recovered.

The junta’s policy of forced disappearance attacked Argentine society on every level. The systematic denial of the existence of over 30,000 people, the atmosphere of terror enforced by the constant threat of physical violence, and the repression of knowledge and information about the dictatorship’s actions deeply traumatized the nation, stripping it of its sense of identity, its ability to remember, and its right to live with dignity in a just society. The removal of the dictatorship from power did not result in an automatic restoration of these fundamental aspects of the nation; instead, Argentines remained trapped by the oppression that lingered in the still-broken families of the disappeared, the national discourse, and the built landscape. The continued efforts to heal this trauma and reconstruct a society in which people have the right to know who they are, the responsibility to remember the darkest moments of their shared history, and the political freedom to express disagreement or discontent with the government guide Argentina toward liberation from this dark moment in their national past. For the people of Argentina, liberation is achieved through the struggle for a just society in which individuals can live dignified lives and control their own destiny.<sup>25</sup> To engage in this

process, Argentina had to begin by repairing the very fabric of the society that had been destroyed by *la dictadura*.

Videla and his successors finally fell from power in 1983, after suffering a humiliating loss against the United Kingdom in the Malvinas/Falklands War. The election of Raul Alfonsín the following year restored democratic rule, bringing an end to the state-sponsored program of repression and terror. However, an election alone was not enough to dissipate the fear that had pervaded all aspects of daily life in Argentina for eight years. The residual elements of fear in post-dictatorial Argentina have impacted the reconstruction of Argentina national identity to this day, a process largely driven by the government. Economic and social policies throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, including a presidential pardon of the military junta in 1991, created an atmosphere of continued repression and silence as the truth of the atrocities committed by the junta leaders were excluded from the national discourse. Then, after a devastating socioeconomic crisis in 2001 and the subsequent election of Nestor Kirchner in 2003, a shift occurred, bringing the dictatorship and its crimes to the forefront of public discourse, the courts, and the national memory.

This thesis explores the practices of identity recovery, commemoration, and trauma healing that have occurred in Argentina over the past forty years and their effects on the formation of public, collective memory that works toward healing the trauma and liberating the nation from the lingering social, political, and cultural wounds inflicted by the dictatorship. To begin, Chapter 2, “Bearing Witness: The Experience of Collective Trauma,” provides an overview of the brutal, violent torture the dictatorship inflicted on

prisoners in clandestine detention centers and juxtaposes these horrors with the relative calm that existed outside the world of the detention centers. In addition to the physical violence the dictatorship inflicted upon the prisoners, this chapter examines other aspects of the terror-state, particularly the repression of knowledge and control of information, both of which fundamentally affected memory work later on, as much of what was trying to be recovered had never officially existed in the public realm.

Chapter 3, “Stolen Lives: Recovering the Identity of the Children of the Disappeared,” then examines the identity politics surrounding the disappeared and their stolen babies, many of whom grew up in the homes of the perpetrators, never knowing their true origins. This chapter highlights the work of the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, the Mother of the Plaza de Mayo, and the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*, the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, in reclaiming the identities of their children and grandchildren over the past forty years.

Chapter 4, “Commemorating *la dictadura*: Reconstructing the Built Landscape,” explores the development of commemorative practices in Argentina since the return to democracy in 1983, particularly as they relate to the restoration of the built landscape. Formerly the *Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada*, or School of Navy Mechanics, and a detention center under the dictatorship, The EX-ESMA, in Buenos Aires, is the primary example of such work, demonstrating how these torture spaces have been reintegrated into the public sphere as sites for public healing and memory.

Finally, Chapter 5, “Reimagining Argentina: A Space for Remembrance and Healing,” highlights the differences between vernacular and official memory, ultimately

arguing that in the last ten years in Argentina, official memory has begun to align itself with the vernacular memory, which has had a powerful healing effect on the lingering aspects of trauma inflicted by the dictatorship. This healing has allowed for the reclamation of a national identity that is no longer divided between victims and murderers. The work being done to remove these remaining aspects of state terror and repression has had a liberating effect, helping to free Argentines from the fear, distrust, and grief they have been imprisoned by for the past forty years.

In the wake of experiencing widespread, state-sponsored trauma, the people of Argentina have driven the process of shaping and reshaping their national identity through their desire to collectively and publically engage in memory work. In response to shifts in the official discourse from one administration to the next, this memory work has taken extremely different forms over the past forty years, ranging from demanding retribution for crimes against humanity to calling for forgiveness, from official pardoning of the perpetrators to seeking justice for a victimized nation. In situations of trauma recovery occurring at the national level, memory has the potential to reiterate trauma or open the door to healing and liberation from the lingering socio-cultural effects of the trauma. If, after the initial traumatic event, the state legitimizes the lived experience of the victims in the official narrative, memory work can begin healing the trauma. Conversely, a state that ignores or marginalizes the victims' perspective furthers the oppression and inflicts additional harm, even without the immediate threat of physical violence. In Argentina, specifically since the election of Nestor Kirchner in 2003, official memory has become increasingly aligned with the vernacular memory. Through the integration of the victims'

experience in the official history, and the continued efforts toward healing the residual trauma, Argentina moves toward liberation from its oppressive past.

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<sup>1</sup> David Rock, *Authoritarian Argentina: The Nationalist Movement, Its History Its Impact* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 224.

<sup>2</sup> John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Felipe Pigna, *Los Mitos de la Historia Argentina 3* (Planeta, 2011), 38.

<sup>4</sup> Osvaldo Bayer, "Simón Radowitzky," in *The Argentina Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Gabriela Nouzeilles and Graciela Montaldo (London: Duke University Press, 2002), 219.

<sup>5</sup> Jorge Nállim, "Between the Local and the Transnational: New Historiographical Approaches on Argentine Political History, 1930 to 1943," *Estudios Interdisciplinarios De America Latina Y El Caribe* 25, no. 1 (June 2014): 104.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>7</sup> Rock, *Authoritarian Argentina*, 133-135.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 140, 142, 144.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>10</sup> Katherine J. Wolfenden, "Perón and the People: Democracy and Authoritarianism in Juan Perón's Argentina," *Student Pulse* 5 (02), 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946-1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 14-16.

<sup>12</sup> Tomás Eloy Martínez, "Santa Evita," in *The Argentina Reader*, ed. Gabriela Nouzeilles and Graciela Montaldo (London: Duke University Press, 2002), 298.

<sup>13</sup> Victoria Ocampo, "Victorian Fathers," in *The Argentina Reader*, ed. Gabriela Nouzeilles and Graciela Montaldo (London: Duke University Press, 2002), 313-318.

<sup>14</sup> "Serie histórica del Índice de Precios al Consumidor (IPC) en el Gran Buenos Aires," National Institute of Statistics and Census, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Rock, *Authoritarian Argentina*, 176.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Guillermo O'Donnell, *El Estado Burocrático Autoritario*, (Buenos Aires: Editorial de Belgrano, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Jill Stockwell, *Reframing the Transitional Justice Paradigm: Women's Affective Memories in Post-Dictatorial Argentina*, (Springer International Publishing, 2014), 18.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Juan Domingo Perón, "Antirevolutionary Peronism," in *The Argentina Reader*, ed. Gabriela Nouzeilles and Graciela Montaldo (London: Duke University Press, 2002), 386.

<sup>22</sup> Stockwell, *Reframing the Transitional Justice Paradigm*, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Rock, *Authoritarian Argentina*, 224.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>25</sup> See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), xiv. The definition of liberation used here comes from Gustavo Gutierrez's 1971 publication, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Liberation theology was developed in response to recent political developments in many Latin American countries that, in an effort to modernize, adopted policies that disenfranchised and oppressed the people who already found themselves on the periphery.

## II. BEARING WITNESS: THE EXPERIENCE OF COLLECTIVE TRAUMA

*“Nobody knew she was disappeared, the single most important detail of her life, which meant that she didn’t exist to them.”<sup>1</sup>*

As intended, the junta’s policies of political, social, and cultural repression permeated all aspects of Argentine life. An atmosphere of fear enveloped the entire country, leaving no community untouched by its resultant paralysis. Nearly everyone was aware of the disappearances, yet there was no public recognition of what was happening. Even relatives and close friends of those who suddenly went missing denied the reality of government kidnappings, torture, and killings, fearing for their own safety. When someone noticed that a neighbor never came home, they muttered, *por algo sera*, meaning there has to be a reason, and *algo habrán hecho*, which means they must have done something, invocations that allowed a brief moment of acknowledgement while removing the danger from themselves.<sup>2</sup> The repressed society became a paradox, characterized by the clandestine but visible nature of state terror. In response, people attempted to maintain a sense of normalcy, which necessitated the denial of the terror happening right before their eyes.<sup>3</sup> To even admit that these were not normal times was to involuntarily condemn oneself. Thus, the elimination of subversive elements went far beyond political repression, as the junta succeeded in repressing even the knowledge, and later, the memory, of the violence and terror for which they were responsible.

In 1983, new democratically elected president Raúl Alfonsín established the *Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas* (CONADEP), or the National

Commission on the Disappearance of Persons. This government agency worked to uncover the truth of what happened under the dictatorship and illuminate the repressed memories of disappearance, torture, and fear in the national discourse. The commission gathered testimony primarily from the disappeared who had survived and published the famous report “*Nunca Más*” meaning “Never Again” in 1984, which served as an official record of the atrocities committed by the dictatorship. The report shed light on how it was possible that 30,000 people were taken from their homes, schools, or businesses, without a trace, never to be seen or heard from again. This method of total disappearance was inspired by the Nazi’s ‘Night and Fog’ directive.<sup>4</sup> From the moment someone was captured, systematic denial that they ever existed began. The state and all legal bodies claimed to have absolutely no knowledge or records of the disappeared person.

Despite this total renunciation on behalf of the junta, approximately thirty-eight percent of the kidnappings took place in broad daylight, often by uniformed army officials driving Ford Falcons, the vehicle that would later become a symbol of the dictatorship.<sup>5</sup> In her memoir, which is written in third person, Alicia Partnoy, a former disappeared person and now a prominent Argentine writer and scholar, describes her day time kidnapping,

That day [January 12, 1977], at noon, she was wearing her husband's slippers; it was hot and she had not felt like turning the closet upside down to find her own. There were enough chores to be done in the house. When they knocked at the door, she walked down the ninety-foot corridor, flip-flop, flip-flop. For a second she thought that perhaps she should not open the door; they were

knocking with unusual violence...but it was noontime. She had always waited for them to come at night. It felt nice to be wearing a loose housedress and his slippers after having slept so many nights with her shoes on, waiting for them. She realized who was at the door and ran towards the backyard. She lost the first slipper in the corridor, before reaching the place where Ruth, her little girl, was standing. She lost the second slipper while leaping over the brick wall. By then the shouts and kicks at the door were brutal. Ruth burst into tears in the doorway. While squatting in the bushes, she heard the shot. She looked up and saw soldiers on every roof. She ran to the street through weeds as tall as she. Suddenly the sun stripped away her clothing; it caught her breath. When the soldiers grabbed her, forcing her into the truck, she glanced down at her feet in the dry street dust; afterward she looked up: the sky was so blue that it hurt. The neighbors heard her screams.<sup>6</sup>

Though the neighbors heard her screaming, it is unlikely that they reported Partnoy's kidnapping to anyone or even recounted to their friends what they had seen. The official policy of denial trickled down into each Argentine neighborhood and home. To save oneself, one denied even the most apparent evidence that something was awry and went about her routine with as much normalcy as she could muster.

While life as usual went on for Partnoy's neighbors, she entered into the bizarre, terrifying world of the secret detention center (SDC). The first human attribute removed from the detainee was identity. Upon arrival, a number was assigned to all detainees, to become their identifier for the duration of their captivity. In an effort to rid them of their

subversive nature, as opposed to simply physically eliminating them, torture, starvation, nakedness, and degrading conditions inside the SDC sought to fully dehumanize the disappeared.<sup>7</sup> One survivor recounts, “Everyone got shocked, usually in the first hour of captivity, not as a punishment but as a sadistic welcome. Men took the cattle prod in the anus. Women took it in the vagina. On at least one occasion, a baby was shocked to pressure the parents into talking.”<sup>8</sup> Partnoy adds, “The atmosphere of violence was constant. The guards put guns to our heads or mouths and pretended to pull the trigger.”<sup>9</sup> The detainees were kept blindfolded at all times, with bound wrists. They were constantly hungry, eating small portions of bread and watery soup only twice a day, at 1:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. The torture was relentless, even “when we were thirsty, we asked for water, receiving only threats or blows in response.”<sup>10</sup> Every day, the guards forced the prisoners to remain silent and prone, immobile and facedown for many hours at a time, “for talking, we were punished with blows from a billy jack, punches, or removal of our mattresses.”<sup>11</sup>

Comprised of over 50,000 pages of these kinds of testimony, “*Nunca Mas*” provides a haunting, graphic depiction of what life was like inside the clandestine detention centers. Beyond the general depravity and cruelty that is typical of concentration camps of this sort, the Argentine officers who maintained these camps and guarded the prisoners had a particular fascination with the physical body, inflicting a kind of torture that went far beyond physical pain. The guards in the SDCs sought total destruction of the person, from the outside in, depriving detainees of their senses and repeatedly testing their threshold for pain in order to breakdown their mental and

emotional sensibilities. They did not reserve extreme violence for punishment or to gather information, instead it was a condition of life required by the subversive nature of the detainee. The following testimony of Antonio Horacio Miño Retamozo reveals the sadistic, senseless nature of the torture program in the Argentine SCDs,

They took us to what I imagine was a large room; they surrounded us and began to hit us all over, but especially on the elbows and knees; we would crash into each other, blows were coming at us from all sides. We would trip and fall. Then, when we were completely prostrate on the floor, they started throwing ice-cold water over us, and with electric prods they would force us to our feet and take us back to the place we had come from.<sup>12</sup>

Retamozo goes on to say that these instances of collective punishment occurred daily, with new, horrific, and strange methods being invented from one torture session to the next. Scholar Marguerite Feitlowitz argues that the regime may have reached its outer limits of obscene deviance with its treatment of pregnant detainees, claiming, “they presented a truly sickening combination—the curiosity of little boys, the intense arousal of twisted men.” One disappeared woman who was pregnant while in captivity remembers, “Our bodies were a source of special fascination. They said my swollen nipples invited the ‘prod...’”<sup>13</sup> As these examples illustrate, the depravity knew no limits.

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Back outside the walls of the detention center, just a few blocks away, a crowd roared. Argentina wins! It was June 25, 1978, and Argentina had just secured its first FIFA World Cup victory in a close game against the Netherlands. Most of the country

was caught up in the prideful celebration, if only for a brief moment. Inside the ESMA, one of the clandestine detention centers located about a mile away from the stadium where the final match was held, singing, cheering, and hysteria filled the air.<sup>14</sup> Sounds of joy, yes, but also a sore reminder of the prisoners' forgotten existence. As Mario Villiani watched the game from inside the halls of an SDC, forced by the guards to shout "Goooooal!" when the national team scored, he stared into the screen, imagining it as "a window into a world going on without him. A packed stadium didn't know he'd been kidnapped."<sup>15</sup> For the disappeared, the World Cup win was more painful than celebratory. On the one hand, they had cheered for the Argentine national team all their lives, and this win was certainly a historic moment. But on the other, many prisoners were angry that the dictators had used the team as yet another weapon in the war against their own people.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the moment of reprieve for those on the outside, it was becoming more and more difficult to ignore the state's policy of terror and violence. By the time of the World Cup victory, people had seen young girls kidnapped, screaming, from city busses by armed personnel and bodies were washing up on the shores of the Río de la Plata. In response, the people stared straight ahead and kept to themselves.<sup>17</sup> Even as evidence piled up, the unofficial, vernacular policy of denial held for at least another five years. However, after the restoration of democracy in 1983, knowledge and memory of what had happened fought its way to the surface, and it was impossible to ignore the atrocities the dictatorship committed any longer. Argentines could not look back on the World Cup win and not simultaneously remember the repression and fear that defined the junta's

rule. One woman whose son was disappeared by the dictatorship and still has not been found described this phenomenon. "When you hear the words 'World Cup,'" she says, "it reminds you what happened. It reminds you of the disappeared, of the kidnappings, of the murders. Everything comes together."<sup>18</sup> This coming together gained momentum as it moved from the private to public sphere after the return of democracy. People finally felt safe to ask questions about what had happened and share their experiences with each other.

As Argentines gained access to knowledge of what had happened, especially through the publishing of the "*Nunca Más*" report, their right to memory was also officially established. The new state, no longer afraid of the freedom of information, allowed access to knowledge and dialogue, which provided the foundation for the memory work Argentina would engage in for the next forty years, continuing to this day.<sup>19</sup> From 1976 to 1983, severe dehumanization, the denial of both human and civil rights, the appropriation of children, and the disappearance and murder of over 30,000 nationals, dismantled the entire system of human relationship in Argentina, "a massacre of links and a fracture of memory."<sup>20</sup> In response, the people of Argentina had no choice but to begin picking up the pieces of their broken society and embark on the painful, endless journey of remembering what had happened to them—and more importantly, healing from the violent, traumatic assault on their identity and reclaiming the pride they once felt in being Argentine.

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<sup>1</sup> Wright Thompson, "While the World Watched," *The ESPN Magazine & ESPNFC.com*, June 9, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Amy K. Kaminsky, *Argentina: Stories for a Nation* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 198-199.

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- <sup>3</sup> Emilse B. Hidalgo, “Argentina’s Former Secret Detention Centres: Between Demolition, Modification, and Preservation,” *Journal of Material Culture* 17, no. 2 (2012): 194.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.
- <sup>5</sup> Gigi Otálvaro-Hormillosa, “EX-ESMA,” *Performance Research* 18, no. 4 (2013): 117.
- <sup>6</sup> Alicia Partnoy, *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival* (San Francisco: Midnight Editions, 1998), Kindle Locations 140-148.
- <sup>7</sup> Hidalgo, “Argentina’s Former Secret Detention Centres,” 195.
- <sup>8</sup> Thompson, “While the World Watched.”
- <sup>9</sup> Partnoy, *The Little School*, Kindle Location 104.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Kindle Location 93.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Kindle Locations 80-104.
- <sup>12</sup> National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons “Never Again,” *The Argentina Reader*, ed. Gabriela Nouzeilles and Graciela Montaldo (London: Duke University Press, 2002), 443.
- <sup>13</sup> Marguerite Feitlowitz in Francisco Goldman, “Children of the Dirty War,” *The New Yorker* (March 19, 2012), 56.
- <sup>14</sup> Thompson, “While the World Watched.”
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> Kaminsky, *Argentina: Stories for a Nation*, 201.
- <sup>20</sup> Alicia lo Giúdice quoted in Gabriel Gatti, “Imposing Identity against Social Catastrophes. The Strategies of (Re)Generation of Meaning of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (Argentina),” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* (Journal of the Society for Latin American Studies) 31, no. 3 (2012): 363.

### III. STOLEN LIVES: RECOVERING THE IDENTITY OF THE CHILDREN OF THE DISAPPEARED

*“Where are you, my son? You are out there somewhere, perhaps closer than I imagine?... Every day, and even more at night, I see you arrive, or I hear knocking on the door. I open it, and there is nothing but silence, silence for everything.”<sup>1</sup>*

The military junta’s policy of forced disappearance directly assaulted the identity of the disappeared. Beyond the already devastating effects of state sponsored repression, terror and violence, the disappeared person created an authentic catastrophe for both the society and individual affected, because this attack on identity forced a rupture of all relationships, affiliations, and history connected with that identity. This renders the disappeared person as a ghostlike figure, a body without an identity, identity without body, neither living nor dead.<sup>2</sup> No longer possible to conceive who or what someone was, the concept of identity, symbolically and physically, was completely shattered.<sup>3</sup> Without a way to position oneself and others in the world, and with over 30,000 people in a state of both existence and nonexistence simultaneously, the trauma inflicted by the junta was essentially irreparable. In order to heal the trauma and begin to move forward, Argentines first had to find out what had happened to the disappeared, repair the concept of identity, and create a mechanism by which stolen or destroyed identities could be recovered.

Even though extreme repression limited any kind of resistance, some identity recovery work began while the junta was still in power. In 1977, the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, was the only publically known resistance group

formed under the dictatorship. The *Madres* demanded that the government return their disappeared sons and daughters and, as so many of the disappeared are still unaccounted for, their work continues to this day. The junta's policy of forced disappearance deeply affected the mother-child relationship. When their sons and daughters went missing, frantic mothers went searching for answers, spending days on end in local police stations, city courthouses, and even at the *Casa Rosada*, Argentina's equivalent of the White House, looking for anything that might lead them closer to finding their children. In the early days, no one expected that they might never see their children again; most mothers thought their waiting without children would last only a few months.<sup>4</sup>

As the search dragged on, the mothers sought some sort of relief or distraction, hoping to unburden themselves of such a devastating loss. One mother remembers,

When Jorge first disappeared, I felt a tremendous void, a desperation, a bewildering shock...I had to react with an almost frenetic activity, to recuperate quickly from the loss by doing things. The search was transformed into a dizziness that kept me from thinking, but sparked my inner strength and propelled me out into the street, to the ministries, to write letters. Working was the only way not to feel dead, humiliated, and empty.<sup>5</sup>

Quickly, this shared burden transformed a waiting room full of stricken mothers, seemingly alone in their strife, into a powerful community capable of standing up to Videla and his cronies. In April of 1977, a small group of women decided to gather at the *Plaza de Mayo*, the main plaza in Buenos Aires located outside the *Casa Rosada*, to

silently protest the government's policy of forced disappearance. Most of the women were housewives who were not generally politically active; instead, they were brought to action by the "agony and controlled fury that only a mother whose children have been taken away could feel."<sup>6</sup> As more and more children disappeared, the number of grieving, angry mothers grew; by September, more than fifty women joined the protest each week.

Of course, the junta did not tolerate such opposition, for fear of any person or group who might question the legitimacy of the military government's power. Yet, because the women based their protest on their condition as suffering mothers, the dictatorship struggled to repress the mothers.<sup>7</sup> The *Madres* recognized that their traditional status in society as nurturers gave them power, one member of the group wrote, "The truth is, they don't know what to do with us. If there is anything left in their hearts it is the line from all those macho tangos about 'my poor old lady.' That keeps us safe for the moment."<sup>8</sup>

Regardless, the junta felt pressured to respond in some way, so, in order to deny the legitimacy of the *Madres* accusations, military officials called them *las locas*, meaning the madwomen, and ridiculed their despair in the national media.<sup>9</sup> This childish and ultimately ineffective response escalated to absurdity a few years later when, instead of shutting down the protests, the government built a fenced-in area in the middle of the Plaza, forcing the *Madres* to circle the central obelisk to keep the rest of the Plaza safe from "contamination."<sup>10</sup> However, the *Madres*, wearing white kerchiefs on their heads, continued to gather every week until the restoration of democracy, silently walking

around the obelisk, never giving up the search for their *desaparecidos*. Following the election of Raúl Alfonsín and the return to civilian government in 1983, the *Madres*, still united by the pain of losing their children, began working with CONADEP to help uncover the truth of what had happened to their sons and daughters.

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In addition to shedding some light on the experience of the disappeared and what occurred in the clandestine detention centers, the “*Nunca Más*” report revealed that officers and government workers who were loyal to the junta illegally adopted as many as 500 babies from women who had given birth in captivity or who had a young child with them at the time of their kidnapping. The children of subversives were seen as “seeds of the tree of evil,” but leaders of the junta believed that through adoption, they could be replanted in healthy soil.<sup>11</sup> The captors forced many of the women who were pregnant when they were kidnapped or who became pregnant after having been raped in captivity to give birth blindfolded in squalid conditions in designated “maternity wards” in the SDCs. These women were often induced and forced to give birth by cesarean section while being simultaneously tortured. In the worst cases, guards applied electric shock to unborn fetuses.<sup>12</sup> After giving birth, the mothers were told to write a letter with instructions for the “adoptive” parents and were then killed on the next death flight. In an attempt to erase all evidence of the child’s biological identity, a falsified birth certificate and adoption papers accompanied the baby to her new family, where she received a false name, never to be told of her true origin.<sup>13</sup> In a cruel twist of fate, the people whom this

child would grow up calling *mama y papa* were responsible for the death of the child's biological parents.

As of 2015, of the approximately 500 children who were “transferred” during the Dirty War, 119 children have restored their identities, largely thanks to the efforts of the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*.<sup>14</sup> The *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*, the Grandmothers of the Plaza del Mayo, have expanded upon the work of the *Madres*, “centralizing the struggle for identity in Argentine society.”<sup>15</sup> Upon recognizing that their pregnant daughters or daughters-in-law gave birth in captivity, the grandmothers set out to find their stolen grandchildren. Before the advent of DNA identification technology, and particularly in the years when the junta was still in power, the grandmothers spent days in archives, tracking down hospital records, and talking to military officials to try and find their grandchildren. After the restoration of democracy in 1983, the *Abuelas* extended scope of their work, seeking judicial proceedings and punishment for the perpetrators of these crimes, advocating for the establishment of a DNA bank, and providing support for all stolen children in partnership with the government. Ten years later, having maintained a forceful media saturation, including concerts, television programs, theatre, radio shows, and protests, the *Abuelas* gained sufficient political mainstay to persuade President Carlos Menem's administration to establish the *Banco Nacional de Datos Genéticos*, a DNA database seeking to match missing children with any living relatives in 1993.<sup>16</sup>

The *Abuelas* have maintained a strong presence in Argentina since the time of the dictatorship, where they found their roots as a resistance group. However, continual shifts in the public rhetoric around how the era of the dictatorship ought to be discussed and

remembered forced the *Abuelas* to change their strategies and demands numerous times. A scholar who specializes in the study of enforced disappearance, Maria de Vecchi Gerli, names four distinct periods that demonstrate these shifts and illuminate the general political moods that have demarcated Argentina's official response to *la dictadura* over the past forty years. The first, spanning from 1983 to 1987, responded to the "Theory of Two Demons," which argued that the period of the dictatorship was a war between the junta and the revolutionary Monteneros, who were equally responsible for the violence. In response, the *Abuelas* claimed the innocence of the disappeared and their babies, stressing that the "pure and innocent children, like their pure and innocent parents, had also been victims of state terror."<sup>17</sup> Then, from 1987 to 1995, the second memory cycle, the *Abuelas* emphasized the need for "reconciliation following truth."<sup>18</sup> Under Menem's *Ley de Punto Final* and *Ley de Obediencia Debida*, the Full Stop law and Due Obedience law respectively, the *Abuelas* identified the first stolen babies and publically proclaimed that in order for the country to reach reconciliation, these cases had to be solved.<sup>19</sup>

The third cycle, from 1995 to 2003, marked a total change in political and historical discourse with the public vindication of the disappeared as political actors. This allowed the *Abuelas* to actively orchestrate media campaigns to find stolen children. This era gave birth to their famous campaign "*¿Y vos? ¿Sabés quien vos?*", meaning "And you, do you know who you are?"<sup>20</sup> After the election of Nestor Kirchner in 2003, the fourth and current memory cycle began, this time emphasizing collective memory, which has led to the institutionalization and acceptance of the *Abuela's* work by society at large.<sup>21</sup> Overall, throughout their transformation from a resistance group to a human rights group,

to an advocacy network, the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* have had considerable success in identifying the biological families of illegally adopted children and have secured their own position as a forceful, important voice in Argentina's reconciliation process, both politically and culturally. The inclusion of the voices of the *Abuelas* in Argentina's official response to the Dirty War, especially since the election of Kirchner in 2003, has allowed for vernacular memory to emerge at the forefront of official discourse, giving it considerable power in shaping public memory.

Despite the concerted efforts of the *Abuelas* which certainly had brought the plight of the stolen children to the forefront of Argentine concern, simply finding a match in the DNA bank did not solve the many of the deeper challenges of identity recovery for most stolen children. An individual who is said to have a "recovered identity" must both discover and *claim* their biological identity. In the cases where a young adult does fully claim her biological identity, she must reject her adoptive parents who are then no longer referred to as *mama* or *papa* but as *apropiador*, or kidnapper.<sup>22</sup> Yet, this outright rejection of the only family one has ever known and of the entire identity that one has built for themselves does not come easily or naturally to most stolen children. Having had their identity taken and replaced with an "appropriated identity" before they could even speak, only to then be confronted with this information once they have already built an entire life upon their false identity, many stolen children struggle to embrace their biological family.<sup>23</sup> After all, the grandparents who so desperately seek reunion are strangers to them.

Acknowledging that the state itself was responsible for the violation of the biological identity of these children and in response to demands of the *Abeulas, Madres* and other human rights groups, the Argentine government established the *Comisión Nacional por el Derecho a la Identidad* (CONADI), or the National Commission for the Right to Identity, in 1993, aiming to fulfill a policy of reparation through the restoration of these children, now young adult's, right to identity. While CONADI acknowledges that experiences and environment form one aspect of identity, the governmental agency holds that,

The basis of identity is the truth, knowledge of the truth, and the truth is unique. In fact, the truth is that one has an inescapable biological origin, with an inescapable genetic load, and later one has a history and a cultural and social development... When the biological is disassociated from the cultural, a false contradiction is created.<sup>24</sup>

To the Argentine government, identity is thus both a result of biology and upbringing. Restoring the relationship between the two was critical to recovering one's identity, as well as repairing the social fabric of a culture that has been shaped by state-sponsored identity theft.

Though the issue of child-transfer has been one of the principal issues in post-dictatorial Argentina, on which healing efforts have centered, not all Argentines were interested in questioning or recovering their "true" identity.<sup>25</sup> There were other stolen children who, out of loyalty, refused even to be tested, as they were afraid of the consequences for the people who had raised them as their own.<sup>26</sup> Baby-theft cases

represent a loophole in the existing amnesty laws that protect many civil servants who worked under the junta's rule. Parents who appropriated the children of the disappeared, "while knowing the truth about their origins," are subject to being imprisoned, even though the police officers physically responsible for the abduction of the baby have been granted amnesty.<sup>27</sup> This narrative of oblivion, in which stolen children prefer not to know their true identity or be reconciled with their biological families, has resulted in many Argentine youth challenging the *Abuelas*, claiming that they do not have a right to "force" children to know their identities. In May 2009, however, the "DNA Law" was passed, "requiring individuals potentially identified as stolen children to submit to DNA testing even if they would prefer not to do so."<sup>28</sup>

The debate around the law essentially comes down to the right to identity versus the right to privacy. Those against the law claimed that it could potentially retraumatize the victims and violate their right to privacy by forcing them to give highly personal information to the national Genetic Bank, information that could once again give the state the power to irrevocably alter their identities. From this understanding, identity is construed as an individual construction of one's own choosing. Those in favor of the law, on the other hand, understand identity as a social construct, intimately connected to Argentine society's "right to know the truth about its collective past."<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the *Abuelas* believed that in reconstructing the violated identities, it becomes possible to compensate, in part, for the devastation caused by the policy of disappearance.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, the law was passed on grounds of state responsibility, claiming that because the state was responsible for creating the conditions that allowed the children to be stolen

in the first place, it was now the responsibility of the state to rectify that wrong, regardless of the victim's wishes.<sup>31</sup>

This decision on behalf of the state, which the *Abuelas* and many other human rights groups supported, signified both a collective yearning and a public responsibility to remember, record, and tell the stories of the children of the disappeared as a means by which to heal the trauma inflicted by the dictatorship. In many cases, the children of the disappeared have themselves been kidnapped, tortured, and appropriated, making them not only the children of victims, but direct victims themselves, "the first generation of victims of those crimes."<sup>32</sup> Thus, the children of the disappeared have directly experienced embodied trauma in their own right, requiring them to process both their parents' trauma and their own experiences of trauma.<sup>33</sup>

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Theatre and literature have been widely employed to make the stories of these first-hand experiences of trauma accessible to the greater population, particularly to the generations born after the restoration of democracy. Further, the use of these artistic forms provides a platform for those born under the dictatorship to make sense of their individual pasts while permanently recording the greater experience of state-sponsored trauma and violence in the collective memory. The inclusion of these vernacular experiences in the archive of national memory aids in constructing a more accurate and robust national identity.

One of these works, a play called, *Mi vida despues*, My Life After, written in 2009 by Lola Arias, offers a collective testimony of how those who were children at the

time of the dictatorship deal with its legacy, whether they were physically effected by the violence or not. The performers, who play characters based upon their own testimony and that of their parents, seek to answer the question “What was Argentina like before I learned to speak?”<sup>34</sup> Often times, as scholar Mariana Eva Perez asserts, the children born under the dictatorship “experienced in their own bodies traumatic events for which they had no language or memory.”<sup>35</sup> Attempting to put language and memory to these events, the play presents a total of six testimonies, ranging from children of the disappeared to a child born in exile to the son of a military police officer who partook in enforcing state sponsored terrorism. Together, the sharing of these six individual testimonies provides a collective testimony that transcends the personal histories of each character.<sup>36</sup> The playwright, Arias, says, “The play tells that we are all children of what happened. Our entire generation was affected in one way or another by being born in that context.”<sup>37</sup> Moreover, by addressing their testimonies to a public audience, the actors involve the public in an act of collective remembrance and mourning, freeing individuals from carrying they weight of their stories alone.<sup>38</sup>

While theatre and other art forms encouraged Argentines to remember their experiences from the time of the dictatorship and explore its impact on their collective identity, for the real people upon whom many the stories are based, these efforts were not enough to resolve the disjointedness felt by many individuals in regards to their self-identity. The complexities of identity reclamation are perhaps the most challenging for the stolen babies. In 1997, Estella Carlotto, former president of the *Abuelas*, stated that the grandchildren have a non-identity, “by lacking roots, family, or social history, nor a

name that identifies one, one ceases to be who one is.”<sup>39</sup> For Carlotto and the other *Abuelas*, family is the second foundational aspect of identity, outweighed only by genetics. As the rupture in the mother-child relationship exemplifies, the policy of forced disappearance utterly disrupted the entire family structure: “normality was truncated: genealogies were ruptured... the old categories, although available, no longer worked.”<sup>40</sup>

Currently, the *Abuelas* are working to make those old categories new again, preparing a legacy for the grandchildren who might be recovered in the future, when no one will be alive to remake for them the history of their family. When completed, the *Archivo Biográfico Familiar*, Biographical Family Archive, will contain a box for each disappeared person with recordings, photographs, and histories, with the aim of reconstructing the life of the disappeared person and the history of his or her family.<sup>41</sup> The grandmothers hope to leave a legacy of identity, “woven with the solid thread of family history,” for their descendants who were born in captivity or kidnapped, whether they are still appropriated or have recovered their identity.<sup>42</sup> In doing so, the *Abuelas* are working not only to restore the identities of their own grandchildren, but are making a critical contribution to public memory efforts, demanding that Argentines remember and commemorate the lives of the disappeared.

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<sup>1</sup> Hebe de Bonafini and Matilde Sanchez, “The Madwomen at the Plaza de Mayo,” in *The Argentina Reader*, ed. Gabriela Nouzeilles and Graciela Montaldo (London: Duke University Press, 2002), 430.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Gatti, “Imposing Identity against Social Catastrophes. The Strategies of (Re)Generation of Meaning of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (Argentina),” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* (Journal of the Society for Latin American Studies) 31, no. 3 (2012): 355-357.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

<sup>4</sup> Bonafini and Sanchez, “The Madwomen,” 433.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 438-439.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 429.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 434.

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- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., 429.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., 435.
- <sup>11</sup> Francisco Goldman, "Children of the Dirty War," *The New Yorker* (March 19, 2012), 56.
- <sup>12</sup> Michael J. Lazzara, "Kidnapped Memories: Argentina's Stolen Children Tell Their Stories," *Journal of Human Rights* 12 (2013): 320.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> "Argentina Plaza de Mayo Grandmothers find Child 119," *BBC World Online*, December 1, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-34971566>.
- <sup>15</sup> Lazzara, "Kidnapped Memories," 321.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 321-322.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 324.
- <sup>23</sup> Gatti, "Imposing Identity," 353.
- <sup>24</sup> Gatti, "Imposing Identity," 353.
- <sup>25</sup> Lazzara, "Kidnapped Memories," 320.
- <sup>26</sup> Goldman, "Children of the Dirty War," 63.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 57.
- <sup>28</sup> Lazzara, "Kidnapped Memories," 328.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., 329.
- <sup>30</sup> Gatti, "Imposing Identity," 353-354.
- <sup>31</sup> Lazzara, "Kidnapped Memories," 329.
- <sup>32</sup> Mariana Eva Perez, "Their Lives After: Theatre as Testimony and the so-called 'Second Generation' in Post-Dictatorship Argentina," *Journal of Romance Studies* 13, no. 3 (Winter 2013): 9.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., 10.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., 12.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., 14.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., 15.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., 362.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 361.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 362.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.

#### IV. COMMEMORATING LA DICTADURA: RECONSTRUCTING THE BUILT LANDSCAPE

*“Pilgrimage is not tourism, it should be difficult. You should give, not just get.”<sup>1</sup>*

Beyond attacking the *desaparecidos*’ socially constructed identities through the systematic erasure of their names, histories, and affiliations, the junta’s policy of forced disappearance also eliminated all physical proof that the disappeared persons ever existed. The bodies of the disappeared were disposed of in the so-called “death-flights,” a practice that naval captain Adolfo Scilingo, who served under the dictatorship, described as, “based on a fiction: that their [the disappeared] existence could be forgotten, and the perpetrators exonerated of blame.”<sup>2</sup> Guards told the prisoners that they were being transferred to a different detention center, and then gave them strong sedatives, which the prisoners believed were vaccines. After being flown out over the Atlantic Ocean and receiving an even stronger sedative, the detainees were thrown out of the plane, unconscious but alive.<sup>3</sup> Though some bodies did eventually begin washing ashore, military officials quickly removed them and never identified them publicly. The rest settled to the bottom of the ocean, remaining in a state of disappearance indefinitely, their identities and bodies never to be recovered.

Despite the egregious loss that the families of the disappeared endured, the uncertainty clouding their fate has left loved ones hopeful that their *desaparecido* might one day be returned to them. For many Argentine families, there is not strong evidence

that mourning is the proper response, as opposed to waiting. In 2002, the then president of the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, who continue to actively search for their disappeared sons and daughters, Nora Cortiñas, proclaimed, “We are left with the mystery of that body which we are denied. Without it, we cannot elaborate the death and give it the burial it deserves...the questions do not close and nor does the tragedy. One is permanently asking oneself questions. Our children are not dead. They are disappeared.”<sup>4</sup> While Cortiñas correctly acknowledges that the questions will never fully be answered, the tragedy ought not remain a permanently open, festering wound. In order to heal the trauma that the dictators inflicted, Argentines must actively and continuously engage in commemorating the lives of the disappeared, regardless of lingering ambiguities surrounding their fate.

Whereas death is a static, unchangeable condition for which there is a set of established responses and rituals, the vagaries inherent to the state of disappearance have caused a paralysis of response in Argentina. With no physical remains to bury or say goodbye to, traditional mourning and commemorative practices have been rendered impossible. Most religious practices and the conventional administration of death necessitate a grave or a physical space of some sort that is dedicated to honoring the lives of those who have died, a site to which families can attach their memories of the deceased, or in this case, the disappeared. Such a place serves as a site of linkage between the living and the dead, facilitating the continuation of the relationship that existed before disappearance or death. Those still living require a space that can facilitate the formation of this bond in order to heal their grief.<sup>5</sup> Despite the need for commemorative spaces that

this loss necessitates, cemeteries and individual gravesites seem inadequate to many Argentines because there are no physical remains to bury. Furthermore, the junta's policy of mass disappearance created a *shared* experience of trauma, requiring commemorative spaces that also work to repair the social fabric of the victimized nation and serve as public sites for collective mourning, remembrance and healing.

Although human rights discourse marked the transition back to democracy in 1983, with society at large demanding to know what had happened to the disappeared, it was not until the election of President Nestor Kirchner in 2003 that commemoration became a central aspect of Argentina's official response to the era of the dictatorship.<sup>6</sup> At the turn of the twenty-first century, the Kirchner administration reinstated a policy of remembrance, bringing widespread attention to the horrors inflicted by the military junta during the Dirty War. This helped move Argentina away from the policies of erasure endorsed by President Carlos Menem in the 1990s. The massive reversal in the national government's policies toward the memory of *la dictadura* led to the repeal of Menem's amnesty laws, allowing for the re-prosecution and re-indictment of the junta's leaders and other military officials. Kirchner also established a new national holiday, *Día de la Memoria por la Verdad y la Justicia*, the Day of Remembrance for Truth and Justice, and supported the reclamation of the physical spaces previously inhabited by the dictatorship that continued to haunt Argentine cities.<sup>7</sup>

The physical reclamation of space was vital to Argentina's repossession of the memory of what happened to them at the hand of the junta. Because past events are narrated in buildings, monuments, parks and even cemeteries, the stories that these spaces

tell have the power shape the remembrance of those events. While victorious events easily find representation and public attention, horrific events are often muted or forgotten until and unless they are deliberately given a distinct voice.<sup>8</sup> In Argentina, the physical landscape embodies the junta's violent and repressive policies, particularly in the larger cities of Buenos Aires, Córdoba, and Rosario where most of the clandestine detention centers were located. While the junta occupied nearly every space, public and private, in some way during its reign, the secret detention centers (SDCs) are particularly significant as they hold the last memories of the disappeared and what happened to them. Thus, the recovery of these spaces is central to Argentina's commemorative work, serving to unmute the voices of the disappeared in a material representation of the trauma they, and by extension, the rest of the country, endured.

The significance of these former sites of torture, rape, and murder cannot be underestimated. The SDCs are the "operating theatre" of the military junta; without these physical spaces to detain, torture, and kill the *desaparecidos*, the regime's political and social repression would have been impossible.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, SDCs are what the repressive power hides from society, what is shameful about that power, and what contradicts the leaders' publicly stated goals. As the physical space wherein the mechanism of repression takes place, Emilse Hildago argues, "SDCs *are* therefore the terrorist state... It is for this reason that SDCs need to be preserved as material reminders of the extreme vulnerability and extreme cruelty a society may be subjected to."<sup>10</sup> Recent work to convert the former SDCs into museums and memory sites is then of the utmost importance, as the reclamation of these buildings fundamentally alters their functionality and thereby

removes their residual repressive power, offering instead a place from which to bear witness to plight of the disappeared. Moreover, the transformation of these torture spaces into commemorative sites allows for the construction of a national memory that incorporates the trauma inflicted by the dictatorship into its identity, while not becoming entirely defined by it. This reimagining of the Argentine community is an essential aspect of healing the collective trauma.

Given what is at stake, namely the Argentine national identity, but also how future generations of Argentines will come to understand and remember this era of their history, political and social tensions ran high as human rights groups, local and national governments, and survivors attempted to reach consensus over how the dictatorship and the lives of the disappeared ought to be remembered. The SDCs in particular embody these “conflicting national collective memories.”<sup>11</sup> After all, both the torturers and the tortured were Argentine citizens. These conflictual sites were repositories of negative memory, operating between transformation and elimination, and the country had to either reclaim them as spaces for education or, if they could not be culturally reincorporated into the national memory, erase them.<sup>12</sup> Argentina ultimately decided to turn the SDCs into museums, a choice made in direct response to the junta’s systematic denial of the realities of the SDCs, and driven by the desire to make knowledge accessible and history tangible. This impulse toward preservation indicates that so far, Argentines have been willing to transform the memory of collective trauma experienced during the dictatorship for positive didactic purposes, which is particularly valuable in a country where historical preservation has not previously been prioritized.<sup>13</sup>

The *Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada* (ESMA), Naval School of Mechanics, in Buenos Aires was the most notorious clandestine detention center during the time of state terrorism and has now been transformed into one of the most notable memory sites dedicated to commemorating the lives of the disappeared in all of Argentina.<sup>14</sup> Now referred to as the ex-ESMA, this site re-opened as a memory space on March 24, 2004, the 28<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coup that put the junta in power. An advisory board of former ESMA survivors, an executive board of government representatives, and a coalition of human rights organizations all run the site, working together to decide how to layer all of the memories that the space holds, preserving the “old” while incorporating new globalized styles of sterilized memory.<sup>15</sup> The interest and investment of so many groups in reclamation of this building represents a challenge that can be seen in all of Argentina’s commemoration efforts: who decides *how* we remember? Because spaces like the ex-ESMA are material, publically accessible memories, they have significant power in forming the collective memory. Such power requires that the wide variety of experiences of those who lived under the dictatorship be represented, so as to bring the official narrative into alignment with the vernacular memory.

The ex-ESMA now serves as an open source of memory, a space that continues to be marked by trauma and violence, while simultaneously demanding that the visitor bear witness with compassion and an openness to transformation.<sup>16</sup> What is most remarkable about the ex-ESMA is not the way that the government agencies preserved the physical site to look and feel exactly as it did when it functioned as a torture center, but that anyone who enters is partaking in the act of collective memory making, mourning, and

civic engagement.<sup>17</sup> This collaborative experience begins at the very first moment of each tour group, when visitors introduce themselves to the group. Gigi Otalvaro-Hormillosa, a performance researcher conducting a phenomenological study, describes her experience of visiting the Ex- ESMA:

We enter the waiting area of the *Instituto Espacio para la Memoria*, Space of Memory Institute, ... The tour guide gives us a brief overview and immediately begins to ask the group for introductions. She wants us to share who we are and our reasons for being there... The introductions go on for about half an hour... an experience that is collaborative and that is guided by the participants. Thus, it was an open space, an open source for memory where the individual and the collective, the past and the present, and ESMA and Ex-ESMA, all converge.<sup>18</sup>

In this kind of memory site, each person who enters the space creates community with anyone else who is present, and together they engage in collectively remembering, enacting ritual, and merging their private and public memories. As a result, the memorial activity contributes to an ever-evolving collective memory in which people, in reflecting on the past, are simultaneously participating in the present historical moment.<sup>19</sup>

As Otalvaro-Hormillosa's tour group made its way to the *Capucha*, meaning hood, the area of the ESMA where the disappeared were held in cells, she was struck by the cage-like feeling of the space, created by the metal support beams and the lack of light and air in the second-story loft. She comments, "The torturers must have chosen this space due to its ability to make a person feel like an animal... The space of memory we

have created transforms into a space of mourning.”<sup>20</sup> The duality of the space, transforming from memory to mourning, and back to memory again later in the tour, signifies a microcosm of the overall commemorative discourse currently taking place in Argentina. The action of recalling the past is intertwined with the present action of mourning, creating a liminal space in which the visitors exist in neither past nor present, but rather actively participate in both realities in an effort to extract meaning. Moving between the two poles of mourning and remembrance, the physical space of the *capucha* represents the commemorative space being carved out by Argentines as they attempt to rectify and make sense of this traumatic moment in their history.

Otalvaro-Hormillosa makes two other significant observations as she moves through the former SDC: the lack of doors and the presence of a number micro-sites, indicating where the physical landscape itself was traumatized. She describes the entire site as “open with the exception of signage.”<sup>21</sup> All of the doors were taken out of the space, removing one of the most basic mechanisms of imprisonment and creating an open environment that is not conducive to any secret or clandestine activity. In the ex-ESMA there is no longer anything to hide behind, nor are there any physical barriers that could keep someone detained. The micro-sites represent the repetitiveness and the depth of the torture that occurred at the ESMA. For example, the tour guide stops Otálvaro-Hormillosa’s group in front of a watchtower to which a chain was once attached and connected to a pole on the other side of the road. A heavy indentation on the road stands out to Otálvaro-Hormillosa, it deepened each time the chain was dropped on the ground to let a truck or Ford Falcon, filled with detainees, alive or dead, pass between the SDC

and the outside world. Otálvaro-Hormillosa writes, “The weight of terror dug the chain deeper into the concrete, increasing the indentation and repeatedly wounding this site.”<sup>22</sup> These physical remnants of state-sponsored terror, which are located all throughout the Ex-ESMA as well as in the streets of nearly every Argentine neighborhood, remain embedded in the landscape, even forty years later, serving to remind Argentina of the horrors of its past and the human capacity for evil. Encountering such micro-sites requires whoever walks by to engage with the legacy of trauma that marks their environment, urging their participation in the collective act of remembrance.

Outside the walls of the Ex-ESMA and other torture center-turned-museums, exist a variety of memory sites, sprinkled throughout Argentine neighborhoods. These sites require the same active engagement with Argentina’s violent past that the Ex-ESMA tour does. One of these sites, the national memorial for the disappeared, *Parque de la Memoria*, or Remembrance Park, built in 1998 in Buenos Aires, features a wall with the names of all of the junta’s known victims. Inspired by the United State’s Vietnam Memorial, this monument works to restore the identity of the disappeared while creating a public space for mourning. There are also numerous grassroots memorial sites and public art installations throughout the city of Buenos Aires. In 2009, one human rights group, *Memoria Abierta*, published a volume called “*Memorias en la ciudad: Senales del Terrorismo de Estado en Buenos Aires*,” “Memories in the City: Signs of State Terrorism in Buenos Aires”, a geographic guide to the city that reveals both the sites where state terrorism happened and the locations of community memorials to the era. Unlike other similar texts, *Memorias en la ciudad* does not separate historic sites from memorial sites,

instead acting as a map, a history of events under the dictatorship, and a history of memorial efforts all at once.

*Memorias en la ciudad* also maps the location of the innumerable *baldosas*, or street tiles, that signify the homes from which people were kidnapped.<sup>23</sup> *Baldosas* and other vernacular memorials operate on three levels: remembrance, warning, and healing. First, these public art pieces bring the past into the present, embedding the memory of the disappeared into the built environment and making the act of remembrance accessible to anyone who encounters the installation. These pieces also serve as a warning for future generations, physically marking the wide, intrusive reach of state-sponsored terror. Lastly, by visually infiltrating the environment and constantly bringing the crimes of the junta to public attention, the activist artists help set the political conditions for procedural justice to be achieved.<sup>24</sup> Incorporating these aspects of commemoration directly into the built landscape allowed this strategy to achieve an embodied permanence, requiring continued attention to the trauma inflicted by the dictatorship.

In addition to the built environment, commemorative discourses also serve as sites of collective memory, as they create, reproduce, and challenge groups of ideas, images, and feelings associated with the collective experiences that necessitate remembrance.<sup>25</sup> On the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coup d'état, March 24, 2006, President Kirchner implemented a new public holiday: *Día de la Memoria por la Verdad y la Justicia*, or Day of Remembrance for Truth and Justice. In the speech he gave commemorating the event, Kirchner condemned the past, naming each sector of Argentine life that the junta's repressive policies infiltrated: political, social, cultural, and economic. This rhetoric was

meant to demonstrate the totality of the dictatorship's reach and to signify that each of these affected sectors now denounce the entire historic period.<sup>26</sup> By way of condemning the actions of the leaders of the junta and excluding them from the national group, Kirchner used this day to promote unity among all other Argentines and call for justice on the public's behalf. In this vein, the annual commemoration of the coup on March 24<sup>th</sup> continues to serve as an occasion to bring the past into the present, to break up the linear narrative of an official national history, to create space for retellings of this unfinished story and to renew the drive toward healing.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jay Winter, "Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning," *Oklahoma Humanities* (Fall 2014): 37.

<sup>2</sup> Mario Benedetti, "The Disappeared: The Triumph of Memory," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 29, no.3 (November 1995): 80.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>4</sup> Gabriel Gatti, "Imposing Identity against Social Catastrophes. The Strategies of (Re)Generation of Meaning of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (Argentina)," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* (Journal of the Society for Latin American Studies) 31, no. 3 (2012): 361.

<sup>5</sup> Winter, "Sites of Memory," 36-37

<sup>6</sup> Lucas M. Bietti, "The Commemoration of March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1976: Understanding the exceptionality of the Present Political Discourse about the 'Dirty War' in Argentina" *Journal of Language and Politics* 10, no. 3 (2011): 349.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 351-352.

<sup>8</sup> Max Page, "The Arc of Memory and the Arc of Justice," *The Massachusetts Review* (Summer 2013): 240.

<sup>9</sup> Emilse B. Hidalgo, "Argentina's Former Secret Detention Centres: Between Demolition, Modification, and Preservation," *Journal of Material Culture* 17, no. 2 (2012): 192.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 196-197.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>14</sup> Gigi Otálvaro-Hormillosa, "EX-ESMA," *Performance Research* 18, no. 4 (2013): 116.

<sup>15</sup> Hidalgo, "Argentina's Former Secret Detention Centres," 199.

<sup>16</sup> Otálvaro-Hormillosa, "EX-ESMA," 122.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-117.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>23</sup> Page, "The Arc of Memory," 240-242.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 243-244.

<sup>25</sup> Bietti, "The Commemoration of March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1976," 354.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 364.

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<sup>27</sup> Mary Watkins and Helene Schulman, *Toward Psychologies of Liberation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 130.

## V. REIMAGINING ARGENTINA: A SPACE FOR REMEMBRANCE AND HEALING

*If the disappeared 'must have done something,' then we  
have to rethink never again. Say never again to repression,  
never again to genocide, never again to dictatorship.  
But also say never again to changing the world, to struggling?  
Everyone be quiet, careful, obedient? That would be  
the easiest way to cover up what happened,  
and to that too we must say, Never again.<sup>1</sup>*

In 1991, feeling pressured by military unrest, President Carlos Menem pardoned many members of the junta who had previously been convicted of various war crimes and crimes against humanity, instating a policy of forgetting in order to move forward. In response, Uruguayan poet Mario Benedetti wrote an essay entitled “The Triumph of Memory” arguing for the necessity of remembrance. Bendetti wrote, “It is always a bad symptom when a ruler tries to base his or her power on collective amnesia... The superficial meaning is that we should not cultivate hatred or vengeance... But the hidden meaning that we should renounce being just, that the essence of justice should disappear along with the disappeared. No country, however, can construct a true peace if it has a sinister past pending.”<sup>2</sup> In Argentina, this pending past traumatized its citizens, having wounded the country to its core. Scholar Mariana Eva Perez characterizes the task of healing these wounds as a “dilemma of representation,” a dilemma of how to account for the junta’s ghosts, suspended between life, death, and disappearance.<sup>3</sup> While these ghosts are many, Argentine human rights groups, in conjunction with the government, focused on the fractured identities of children who were born into the hands of the junta and the

sites of military violence that scar the built landscape.<sup>4</sup> These lives and spaces have been suspended between dictatorship and democracy, with much disagreement as to how they ought to be preserved, remembered and shared.

The vernacular prioritization of identity recovery and the reclamation of the built landscape was a direct response to the two foundational aspects of Argentine society that the dictatorship attacked: identity and knowledge. With the restoration of democracy, this fundamental denial of knowledge morphed into an assault on memory. Further, the repression of knowledge retained an embodied potency in the former clandestine detention centers, which represented the “hidden in plain sight” secrecy the dictatorship endorsed.<sup>5</sup> This allowed the fear instilled by the junta to extend beyond its rule, and thus, initially, there was a reluctance to remember. Many Argentines were scared of what they might uncover about what had happened.<sup>6</sup> Yet, as they began piecing their lives back together, Argentines found themselves needing to reinvent their identity, a task that would require them to remember what they had experienced during the dictatorship, as surely, these experiences were a part of them now. This search for identity occurred on both the individual level and the macro-level, affecting the disappeared who survived, the over 500 children with appropriated identities, the families of the disappeared that never returned, and all Argentines as a collective, national group. The crimes Argentinians perpetrated against their own people demanded that all those surviving, no matter what side they were on during the dictatorship, refigure and reclaim their national identity. Both the government and the people needed to incorporate the events of 1976-1983 into their nation’s history, and in order grapple with this era’s brutality, the writing of this

history had to be done in such a way that Argentines could continue to have pride in themselves as a people.

In Argentina, identity recovery has never been regarded as a task that one must face alone. The individual reclaiming his or her identity finds strength in the family structure, just as the nation reconfiguring its identity is supported by the collective of its members. One of the *Abuela's* recent projects is preparing Biographical Family Archives for the grandchildren who might recover their identities after all of the members of their biological family have passed. These archives will attempt to reconstruct the past to which that child is tied by its birth family, a history that informs, in part, who they are. Similarly, much of a nation's sense of identity is written in its past. It comes from traditions, important figures, art, events, and language, all of which make up the national story. This identity is also fluid; shifting over time as a variety of events and factors continuously work to shape and reshape the way a people understands who they are. A historian specializing in the study of nationalism, Anthony D. Smith, defines national identity as,

the continuous reproduction and reinterpretation by the members of a national community of the pattern of symbols, values, myths, memories, and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations, and the variable identification of individual members of that community with that heritage and its cultural elements.<sup>7</sup>

After experiencing collective trauma, this heritage and its cultural elements undergo significant change, needing to incorporate the memories of violence and atrocity into

the national story in a manner that both resonates with the actual experience of that trauma and builds the capacity to confront the lingering traces of the traumatic past.<sup>8</sup>

The military junta's rule in Argentina lasted from 1976-1983, rendering it but a small episode in the larger Argentine story. The episodic nature of the event leads Argentines to regard the period of military rule as a major disruption to their sense of national unity and their understanding of what it means to be Argentine. In the aftermath of state-sponsored oppression, a net of kinship cannot exist between fellow nationals when one group is responsible for the repression, torture, and disappearance of the other. This disunity poses a challenge to Benedict Anderson's notion that the nation is an "imagined community." For Anderson, the nation is imagined because, although members will never meet or know the majority of their fellow members, they still exist in the minds of their fellow nationals, creating a cohesive community beyond those individuals with whom they are in immediate contact.<sup>9</sup> In Argentina, the recreation of this community required that after the removal of the terrorizing group from power, the categorization of persons as either perpetrator or victim, had to be eliminated so that the entire people, regardless of their role during the period of oppression, could once again recognize that they share a nation, a culture, and a history, reimagining themselves once again as members of the same nation.

By choosing to engage in what Patrick O'Connell describes as "the process of reconstructing memories as a collective attempt to redefine a national cultural identity," Argentines have begun solving the dilemma of self-representation.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Michael J.

Larraza, a scholar of Argentine and Chilean culture, contends that following the devastation incurred by the dictatorship, Argentines have found themselves in need of a “new national fiction” that could serve as the foundation for a culture of integration, reconciliation, and peaceful coexistence, despite inherent differences among people.<sup>11</sup> In the absence of a space for open dialogue between representatives of the official and vernacular perspectives, “the narratives of coherent history and identity of a modernist nation begin to shatter under the weight of trauma.”<sup>12</sup> After experiencing collective trauma, this space for identity recovery exists within the space of remembrance. It is the act of memory itself, authentic memory, that allows a society comprised of both the tortured and their torturers to reconstruct a national identity that is representative of the collective body, no longer separated by their previous roles of terrorists or terrorized, but again united in their shared identity as Argentines.

To create this space of remembrance from which a cohesive national identity could be reconfigured in the wake of collective trauma, Argentina’s memory work had to be honest, forthright, and fearless. In recovering from the assault on knowledge and the ability to speak openly and freely about what was happening during the dictatorship, memory became the most powerful antidote. The only way for ordinary Argentines to take control over their own history was to remember. By confronting the repressed history of the evils that their country proved itself capable of, this memory work also restored vitality to the nation.<sup>13</sup> Most importantly, in order to move forward, Argentines had to separate themselves from the junta’s malice. In placing blame on the violating group, specifically its leaders, and excluding them from the nation that was being

reimagined, Argentina declared itself a victimized nation. If not direct victims of the violence and disappearance, all Argentines can consider themselves victims of fear, repression of knowledge, and an attack on their identity. To heal their own individual trauma, in addition to reclaiming their identity, the people had to be the ones to set the course of remembrance.

Not only did ordinary Argentines need to establish the space of remembrance, but also it was imperative that this was then accepted into the official discourse. The views and experiences of ordinary Argentines form the vernacular culture, which represents the special interests of marginalized groups, whether they are presently excluded from society or had been in the past.<sup>14</sup> The presence and power vernacular memory, which in Argentina was largely a result of the work of human rights groups such as the *Madres* and the *Abuelas*, required that the narrative provided in official, governmental discourse was informed by the experiences of the people. When these experiences are omitted from the official history, the retelling of the story continually re-traumatizes the already disenfranchised.<sup>15</sup> The Kirchner administration was the first to achieve this alignment between the official and vernacular narratives. The acceptance of vernacular memory as official memory in Argentina has worked to rebuild trust between the people and the state and has created a national history that resonates with people's experiences. This new, vernacular ownership over identity and memory at both the individual and national level has laid the foundation for healing the collective trauma.

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In his 1971 text, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, Gustavo Gutierrez writes that for the peoples of Latin America, to be liberated from oppressive social and political hierarchies, the marginalized people of the periphery must engage in the struggle to build a just society in which individuals can live dignified lives and control their own destiny. When achieved, Gutierrez argues that this just society will bring new groups, namely the oppressed, to the forefront of community life.<sup>16</sup> The power that ordinary people will acquire as they move toward the center of the new social structure is what sustains vernacular culture.<sup>17</sup> Thus, when official memory is shaped or influenced by the vernacular, it signifies that the society is more inclusive of the people of the periphery, an acceptance and empowerment that ultimately allows for the healing of trauma and the reclamation of national identity. Here, liberation is a social act, manifesting in the interactions between people, particularly between the center and the periphery, that, when achieved, will free the people of the periphery from the oppression of the trauma by which they are still bound.

In Argentina, healing is an on-going, ever-evolving process, requiring repeated performances of commemoration and remembrance.<sup>18</sup> Identity and memory will continue to be reshaped by these performances and by the uncovering of new information as the distance from the time of the dictatorship widens. All future generations of Argentines will continue to engage in this healing process, but their notions of identity and memory will further be altered by events that befall their country in their own eras. Nevertheless, the vernacular participation in the work of healing thus far has positive implications for

Argentina's overall liberation from its oppressive past. By leading the identity recovery and remembrance work, through the organized power of human rights groups such as the *Madres* and the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*, ordinary Argentines have demanded that the outcome of such work be inclusive of their experiences and perspectives. The junta's victims, in the broadest sense, experienced an oppression that disenfranchised them from the dictatorship's society. The reconstruction of a just society that includes and empowers these victims cultivates liberation from the remaining oppression, further working to heal the deepest, most traumatic wounds inflicted by the dictatorship.

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Moreno and Marta Dillon, "The Children of Death," in *The Argentina Reader*, ed. Gabriela Nouzeilles and Graciela Montaldo (London: Duke University Press, 2002), 542-543.

<sup>2</sup> Mario Benedetti, "The Disappeared: The Triumph of Memory," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 29, no.3 (November 1995): 80.

<sup>3</sup> Mariana Eva Perez, "Their Lives After: Theatre as Testimony and the so-called 'Second Generation' in Post-Dictatorship Argentina," *Journal of Romance Studies* 13, no. 3 (Winter 2013): 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Emilse B. Hidalgo, "Argentina's Former Secret Detention Centres: Between Demolition, Modification, and Preservation," *Journal of Material Culture* 17, no. 2 (2012): 194.

<sup>6</sup> Amy Kaminsky, "Memory, Postmemory, and Prosthetic Memory: Reflections on the Holocaust and the Dirty War in Argentine Narrative," *Layers of Memory and the Discourse on Human Rights: Artistic and Testimonial Practices in Latin America and Iberia* (Spring 2014): 107.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 20.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Watkins and Helene Schulman, *Toward Psychologies of Liberation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 95.

<sup>9</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Patrick L. O'Connell, "Individual and Collective Identity through Memory in Three Novels of Argentina's 'El Proceso,'" *Hispania* 81, no.1 (March 1998): 34.

<sup>11</sup> Michael J. Lazzara, "Kidnapped Memories: Argentina's Stolen Children Tell Their Stories," *Journal of Human Rights* 12 (2013): 320.

<sup>12</sup> Watkins and Schulman, *Toward Psychologies of Liberation*, 95.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 14.

<sup>15</sup> Watkins and Schulman, *Toward Psychologies of Liberation*, 237.

<sup>16</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), xiv.

<sup>17</sup> Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 248.

<sup>18</sup> Watkins and Schulman, *Toward Psychologies of Liberation*, 124.

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