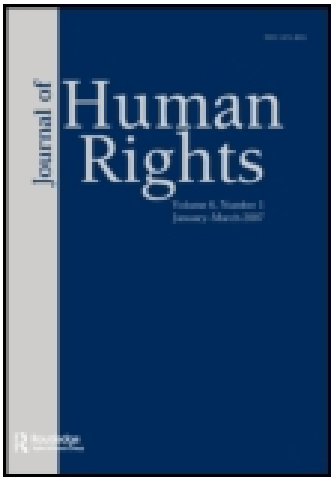

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Kidnapped Memories: Argentina's Stolen Children Tell Their Stories

MICHAEL J. LAZZARA

One of the most deplorable and characteristic aspects of Argentina's "Dirty War" (1976–1983) was the stealing of babies by military families or regime supporters. Approximately 500 children were "transferred" during this time period. Thanks to the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, 108 children have had their identities restored to date. This article focuses on how child transfer in Argentina has affected the construction of memories at both the individual and societal levels. By studying a few well-chosen cases of children whose identities have been restored, I seek to characterize the different and often radically opposed ways in which the sons and daughters of disappeared leftist militants have told their stories and understood their experience. My goal is to identify some of the most capacious and emblematic memory scripts that have emerged to accommodate variegated individual biographies. From these cases, it becomes abundantly clear that what is in the "best interest of the child" has no easy answer. One important conclusion is that the stolen children's memories (as young adults) are almost always a reflection of politically motivated, present-bound interests and manifest in tandem with the dynamics of Argentina's transition to democracy as a broader historical process.

> The pregnant women were the most horrifying part! It was the possibility of death delivering life! (Munú Actis et al. 2006: 249)

Argentina's Stolen Children: Struggles for Identity, Frameworks of Memory

As is well known, the Argentine military took power in 1976 with the goal of exterminating leftist "revolutionary" enemies who threatened to undo the longstanding privilege of ruling elites and who, in certain instances, fomented armed struggle as a vehicle for radically restructuring society. The military junta's genocidal backlash, which resulted in more than

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30,000 disappeared as well as countless tortured and exiled, ended in 1983 when the military was disgraced by its defeat in the Falkland Islands. From there, a transition to democracy began in which human rights groups have fought arduously for memory, truth, and justice amid the consolidation of neoliberal economic policy, extensive periods of impunity, numerous silences, and competing memory narratives. Within this saga, child transfer has been one of the most poignant issues to capture public attention and, indeed, has been discussed more publicly and openly than in other Latin American cases, like El Salvador or Guatemala, in which it also occurred.

From Luiz Puenzo's 1985 film *The Official Story*, perhaps the most emblematic film on Argentina's "Dirty War," to documentary films like David Blaustein's *Spoils of War* (2000), popular songs by Argentine rockers, media representations, soap operas like the 2006 series *Montecristo*, or the 2007 project "Televisión por la Identidad" in which grandmothers told the stories of their missing (and sometimes recovered) grandchildren, the issue of child transfer has pervaded Argentine public imagination and, I would argue, has functioned as a nodal point around which reconstruction efforts have hinged in the aftermath of state violence. In fact, the recovery of lost children was and continues to be a vital trope deployed in the re-suturing of a posttraumatic nation and the invention of an integrated national story. An imagined community torn asunder by a violent period in which certain "family members" once sought to extirpate a "Marxist cancer" from the body politic now finds itself in need of a new national fiction in which that same family once again becomes integrated, reconciled, and (despite difference) capable of nonviolent coexistence. Yet, just as we might read this re-suturing of the nation in a nationalist key (e.g., reuniting a broken family), it also seems possible to argue that the Argentine dictatorship's stolen children can be read in the opposite direction, and that perhaps their symbolic importance lies not in their function as a trope deployed toward the goal of reconstruction but rather, and more importantly, in that they signal the very *limits*, dangers, and ongoing traumas that stem from nationalist extremism.

The phenomenon of child transfer is mentioned in the Argentine National Truth Commission's report—the famous *Never Again* report—first published in 1983. In this report, it is claimed that approximately 500 babies were taken from detained pregnant women, many of whom were induced and forced to give birth by C-section during sessions of physical and psychological torture, most often at the infamous Naval School of Mechanics torture center (ESMA) or the Campo de Mayo military hospital. In the worst cases, methods were developed for applying electric shock to unborn fetuses. Mothers would often give birth blindfolded, in squalid conditions, hidden away in clandestine "maternity wards" (*maternidades*). Most babies were taken at birth and the mother forced to write a letter with instructions to the "adoptive" parents. Soon thereafter, mothers would be drugged and dropped into the ocean from military planes. The babies were subsequently placed either with military families or families sympathetic to the military's cause and given false names—and false documentation—that sought to erase any trace of their biological origins. The military's main goal was to socialize and inculcate these future Argentine citizens with the victors' ideology and to eliminate any vestige of its leftist enemies and their legacy. Most of these children lived through their formative years never knowing for sure (and sometimes never even suspecting) that their illegal adopters were responsible for their parents' deaths.

The Argentine military has spent years denying that there was ever a systematic plan in place for stealing children. At the time of the Trial of the Juntas (1985), early in Argentina's transition to democracy, society was taught to believe that the kidnapping of children was an isolated phenomenon, the product of "excesses" committed by one or another

perpetrator (De Vecchi Gerli 2010: 65). As recently as July 2012, General Videla, from prison, continued to deny the concept of a "Systematic Plan." Nevertheless, the evidence abundantly shows that despite the heterogeneity of cases and experiences, the Argentine junta, acting out a self-aggrandizing narrative that cast them as "saviors" of the nation and guarantors of Western, Christian family values, created multiple formal and informal mechanisms for stealing children, for placing them with families, and for indoctrinating them as acolytes of the regime's ideology. Of all the South American dictatorships, no military went as far as the Argentine military to assure that no trace of its enemies would remain. Not even their children would bear any memory of them.

Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, one of Argentina's main human rights groups, has taken the lead in the quest to identify the stolen children and to reunite them with their biological families. To date, of the 500 suspected cases of child transfer, the Grandmothers have managed to correctly identify 108 kidnapped children. Over time, they have had many noteworthy achievements. They have heroically and impressively centralized the struggle for identity in Argentine society through penetrating and forceful media saturation: theatrical events, concerts, television programs, radio shows, and protests. They have been integral in the push for creating a DNA bank for families of the disappeared and have worked with scientists abroad in the analysis of samples that could lead to the resolution of cases. They have provided for the emotional and psychological needs of stolen children, created the National Commission for the Right to Identity (CONADI) and, on an international scale, have achieved the inclusion of Articles 7, 8, and 11 (known as the "Argentine Articles") in the *International Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Furthermore, they have pushed for judicial reprisals against perpetrators. Thanks to their efforts, in February 2011, a judicial case was opened against a group of military and police officials accused of involvement in kidnappings. During the trial, Elliott Abrams, Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs during the Reagan administration, shockingly revealed both the systematic nature of the kidnappings and the extent of US complicity when he testified that the United States was in full knowledge of the situation and even urged the junta to reveal the children's identities when the transition to democracy began. The case reached its historic conclusion in July 2012 when Generals Jorge Rafael Videla and Reynaldo Bignone, two of the main junta members already serving life terms, were sentenced to 50 and 15 years respectively for their involvement in these crimes. Based on this case's precedent, at least 17 other related cases are being pursued in Argentine courts in hopes of providing symbolic justice and healing.

It is not surprising that over the 30 long years of Argentina's postdictatorship period both the political climate and conditions of possibility for memory, truth, and justice have changed. María de Vecchi Gerli details four periods in which the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo have rearticulated their strategies (De Vecchi Gerli 2010: 114–116). During the first memory cycle (1983–1987), the "Theory of the Two Demons"—that the military and the revolutionaries were equally responsible for the country's fate—coexisted with the idea that the "victims" of the dictatorship's violence were innocent, apolitical beings. Consequently, the Grandmothers capitalized on this already existing public discourse, testifying at the Trial of the Juntas, visiting universities, and collaborating with the truth commission to stress the idea that pure and innocent children, like their pure and innocent parents, had also been victims of state terror. A second memory cycle (1987–1995), largely characterized by impunity and the institutionalization of the Full Stop and Due Obedience laws, emphasized the need for reconciliation following truth. Within this restrictive context, the Grandmothers began to identify the first kidnapped children and argued publicly that such cases had to be resolved for the country to move forward and become reconciled.

Public vindication of the disappeared as *political* actors came during the third memory cycle (1995–2003), particularly owing to the efforts of the H.I.J.O.S. organization (Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice Against Oblivion). During this cycle, capitalizing on renewed public presence and debate about the dictatorship, the Grandmothers helped establish the National Commission for the Right to Identity and shifted their strategy from simply disseminating information to actively orchestrating media campaigns to find stolen children. Their famous campaign "And You, Do You Know Who You Are?" (*"¿Y vos?, ¿sabés quién sos?"*) is characteristic of that time period and of this shift in public strategy. A veritable explosion of memories of militancy characterized a fourth memory cycle (2003–present), corresponding to the Kirchner period. This deepening of the country's collective memory permitted an intensification of the Grandmothers' work, its further institutionalization, and a more generalized acceptance of it by Argentine society.

Given this history and this context of memory's ebbs and flows—a climate that the Grandmothers not only responded to but also actively helped to create—how are formerly kidnapped children narrating their experiences today? What stories do they tell? How do they tell them? And why do they tell them as they do? These are the basic questions that interest me in this article.

In his remarkable studies on the construction of collective memories in post-Pinochet Chile, historian Steve Stern provides some conceptual tools that I find useful for analyzing the basic memory scripts that have emerged in the discourse of formerly appropriated Argentine children. "Emblematic memories," according to Stern, are memories that circulate in public or semi-public domains (in the media, arts, books, political discourse, schools, or activists organizations) and that offer broad frameworks into which individuals can inscribe their personal experiences. According to Stern, emblematic narrative schematics purport to "capture essential truth[s] about the collective experience of society" and are broad and flexible enough to encompass an array of sufficiently differentiated, though generally related stories (Stern 2004: 113). They serve either as overarching scripts for writing history or can be used as starting points for debates about the very construction of historical meaning. Furthermore, different political actors, often with specific political or ideological motivations, promote emblematic memory scripts to give them legitimacy in the public sphere. Stern enumerates a number of criteria that must be met for emblematic memories to gain public traction: (1) the memory script must refer to historically transcendental or defining events that will have society-wide repercussions for generations to come; (2) the memory script must be authentic, convincing, and have resonance with people's lived experience; (3) the memory script must be capacious and malleable enough to accommodate different, though related individual stories; (4) the memory script must have sufficient public visibility to give it staying power (Stern 2000: 18–21).

In the case of Argentina's stolen babies, these now-young adults were deprived of their parents, their names, and their origins. Forced to live in fear and oblivion for decades, their narratives, spoken in the present, are attempts to pick up the pieces of a shattered existence and to stitch together a coherent story based on minimal information and riddled with difficult questions. "The resolution of these questions implies, in every case, complex [narrative] elaboration" that is inextricably linked to the family and life choices the individual makes and usually requires psychological and personal support and/or therapy (Kaufman 2006: 63–64). In no case is there an easy answer or clear-cut resolution. Each story is dense, conflicted, and unique, even when its narrative thrust resembles that of another peer's experience.

Notwithstanding the uniqueness of each individual's experience, my research has revealed three capacious memory frameworks that characterize the stories told by formerly

appropriated children. In the pages that follow, I will explore each of these frameworks in turn by referring specifically to cases that illustrate the different positions and their variants.

The first emblematic memory framework focuses on the vindication of the biological parents' militancy. Such vindication can sometimes imply an outright severing of ties with the kidnapper (as in the case of Horacio Pietragalla), while other times a rejection of the perpetrator's deeds paradoxically coexists with a continuing affective bond or feelings of love toward the kidnapper (as in the case of Victoria Donda).

A second memory framework scripts the subject's life story in a reconciliatory key. Within this framework, the subject seeks to make peace with his or her past by focusing on the need for familial harmony and subjective stability, which by extension almost always implies a forgetting of history's sordid details. Reconciliatory narratives usually closely echo the well-known "Theory of the Two Demons" whereby both the "terrorists" (leftist militants) and the military are cast as equally responsible for the violence. The speaking subject, to achieve inner peace, balances the adoptive parents against the biological parents, absolving them all of their "sins" in the interest of achieving consensus. Moreover, these reconciliatory scripts can sometimes be deployed to propagate a right-wing ideological agenda (as in the case of Eva Donda).

In the third and final memory framework—what I will call the script of "oblivion"—the subject blocks out the reality of his or her past because engaging with it is felt to be too painful. In these cases, the young adult clings to the adoptive parent as a defense mechanism so as not to disturb psychological homeostasis in the present, thus denying him or herself an identity that goes beyond the lie that he or she has been forced to live. When subjects choose this route, they often find the tensions created by the trauma to be inescapable and are repeatedly forced to repress the past (as in the case of Evelyn Bauer Pegoraro).

Vindicating Militancy: The Cases of Horacio Pietragalla and Victoria Donda

When the Argentine economic crisis hit in 2001, *piqueteros* and common citizens took to the streets in throngs to protest the impact of the International Monetary Fund and neoliberal policies on the country. Then, in 2003, Néstor Kirchner, a politician favored by both piqueteros and former Montonero revolutionaries, was elected to the presidency on a leftist platform that stressed his own past as a militant in the Peronist Youth organization. His legacy has continued during the presidency of his wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who was elected in 2007. During Kirchner's time in office, several noteworthy things happened that opened spaces for the public vindication of leftist militant actions of the 1960s and 1970s. If until Kirchner's rise the Argentine state had officially promoted the "Theory of the Two Demons," which alleged that leftist "terrorists" and the military junta were at "war" in the 70s and were hence equally responsible for the coup's bloodshed and violence, Kirchner ceased to espouse this theory and ran instead on a platform that vindicated the actions of militants who fought to create a better society. In one of his first policy moves, he repealed the longstanding Full Stop and Due Obedience Laws, ushering in a new era of trials and prosecutions of military criminals. Likewise, in 2004 Kirchner appropriated the ESMA, one of the country's most notorious detention and torture centers from which babies were stolen, and gave it to the human rights organizations to create a memory site. Additionally, he opened spaces in the media for the discussion of past human rights violations while also granting positions of public prominence to former militants from the early 1970s. All of these symbolic actions sent a clear message to the nation that certain memories—militant memories—that had been delegitimized in the past were now important for the citizenry to hear and value.

This series of political events and symbolic gestures post-2001 provides a context in which to understand the conditions under which the first emblematic memory narrative told by formerly appropriated children—the vindication of militancy—became possible. In this memory narrative, young adults reject their captors and instead stake their identities to a certain extent on their recently discovered linkage, via their biological parents, to a militant past.

Peter Sanders's 2007 documentary *The Disappeared*, the first film about appropriated children to focus exclusively on a single case, follows the story of Horacio Pietragalla Corti, formerly known as César Castillo, over the course of five years. As the son of Horacio "Chacho" Pietragalla and Liliana Corti, Montoneros who were killed by the Triple A and the dictatorship's special forces in 1975 and 1976 respectively, Horacio was five months old when Lieutenant Coronel Hernán Tetzlaff, head torturer at the infamous El Vesubio concentration camp, stole him with the intention of giving him away to a couple that he knew. When the couple rejected the baby, Tetzlaff's maid, who lived in the same apartment building, agreed to keep the child and to raise him with her husband, Chaco Castillo. The maid and her husband, always under the vigilant eye of the child's military captor, falsified Horacio's adoption papers and raised him as their own. When interviewed by Sanders, Lina, the adoptive mother, claims to have taken Horacio in out of "fear" of Tetzlaff, who was rumored in the building to be a murderer, reviled by some and revered by others. Chaco, on the other hand, claims to have accepted the child out of blind respect for the military because they were in power. Of humble socioeconomic means, the maid and her husband position themselves as powerless cogs in the machinery of the totalitarian state, claiming to have asked no questions of Teztlaff. When they baptized Horacio at age six, they even appointed Tetzlaff as the child's godfather, in deference to his authority and will.

At age 14, César/Horacio read the famous *Never Again* report and was very moved by it. He always knew he had been adopted, but around that age he began to wonder whether he could be the son of disappeared parents. It wasn't until years later, however, that Horacio's girlfriend urged him that it would be advisable to resolve doubts about his identity before they got married and started their own family. She took it upon herself to search the Grandmothers' database and, in so doing, happened upon a photo of a woman holding a baby who looked like the man she knew as César. In 2002, César approached CONADI (the National Commission for Identity Rights) and submitted to a DNA test. The result: he was really Horacio Pietragalla, the seventy-fifth "grandson" of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo. Around the same time, a girl nearly Horacio's age who lived upstairs told him that Tetzlaff's wife had admitted to her that they were both stolen babies. Later, Horacio came to find that the building superintendent also knew the truth and kept it from him so as not to hurt him. Horacio, rightly, felt deceived not only by his appropriating parents but also by his entire community. He had been living a lie for 25 years.

One of the most interesting aspects of Horacio's case is his outright rejection of his surrogate family in favor of his biological family. His rejection of Lina, the woman to whom he once referred as "the mother of my heart," is visceral. He blames her for many things: for keeping the secret, for never allowing him to meet his biological grandparents before they died, and for making him live all those years in the same building as his captor. Why did Lina make Horacio greet Tetzlaff on his birthday? Why did she always do favors for the torturer? Why did she visit him in the hospital when he was sick? "I don't believe her," Horacio says of Lina, who he no longer calls "mother" but rather "appropriator" (*apropiadora*, or kidnapper). "How could she feel affection for a person who could kill a child?" "I am grateful to my adoptive parents for giving me material things," he

continues, "but I can't thank them for giving me love. I feel like there was never love in my home."

As the film draws to its conclusion, Horacio readily embraces and begins to integrate into his extended biological family. The reunion sequences are striking insofar as they make it seem like the process of discovering his real family was fluid and easy. The film, therefore, follows a clear (and rather clean) narrative emplotment from deception to truth, from grief and anger to reintegration and the mourning of his biological parents (whose remains were discovered and identified in 2003 and 2004 by forensic anthropologists). In one of the film's final sequences, after attending his father's belated funeral, he stands over his parents' graves and vindicates their *political* legacy as militants: "Mom, Dad, I'm proud of the struggle you fought in your short lives. I'm proud of the example you left me . . . I love you a lot and am proud of what you did." Soon thereafter, Horacio faces the camera and says that "what really hurts the most is the image that society has of them [my parents], that there are still people who think they were crazy subversives or terrorists, when all they wanted was social justice." His narrative, simple and unmediated by historical debates about the political circumstances that gave rise to the coup and the killing, rejects the "Two Demons" theory and vindicates militancy in a way that stabilizes his subjectivity by giving him a personal and political identity. Vindicating his parents' memory—making it his own—assuages his pain by placing him on moral high ground.

If Horacio Pietragalla's narrative establishes a baseline discourse for the vindication of militancy as a way of stabilizing his subjectivity and autobiography, Victoria Donda elevates this simple vindicatory narrative framework to the level of public politics. Today a member of Argentina's lower house of congress, Donda, the seventy-eighth "granddaughter," was born in captivity at the ESMA in 1977 to parents who remain disappeared. Her case, because of its poignancy and symbolic value, remains one of the most highly publicized in Argentina. Two films have been made about her life, and in 2009 she published her autobiography *My Name is Victoria*, whose English version appeared in 2010. Raised as Analía Azic, she was appropriated by Esther Abrego and Juan Antonio Azic, a retired coast guard officer. She maintained a close relationship with her adoptive father for 26 years, never suspecting that he was a torturer and kidnapper. Her idyllic childhood, however, came to an end in 2003 when a Spanish judge ordered Azic's extradition for crimes against humanity. The next thing Analía/Victoria knew, she would be facing her father, tending to him in his hospital bed after he attempted to commit suicide by shooting himself in the head.

Victoria's narrative, as told in her autobiography and other sources, incorporates the trope of her ongoing rebelliousness since girlhood. From a very young age, she always embraced liberal causes and was sent home frequently from Catholic school for talking back to the nuns. Later on she worked in a soup kitchen, actively sympathized with human rights groups, and as a law student wrote a human rights column for the campus newspaper. Her military captor never made much of a fuss about the poster of Che Guevara that hung in her room and turned a blind eye to his "little princess"' leftist political engagements.

Unbeknownst to Analía/Victoria, some of her friends in human rights organizations suspected that she might not be who she thought she was and initiated an investigation of her origins. In 2002, a close friend and activist confronted her with the news, showing her a birth certificate signed by a doctor accused of coordinating baby kidnappings at ESMA. Then, in 2003, while thumbing through a book containing pictures of women who were disappeared while pregnant, she recognized that one of the women had similar eyes to hers. She was moved but still resisted the DNA test out of fear. In fact, it took two full years before she felt capable of submitting to testing. During that time period, she never

abandoned her kidnapper, though she condemned his actions. Although she feels to this day that he should pay for his crimes, she still "loves" him, visits him in prison, and calls him *papá* in private. Publicly, however, she refers to him as her "appropriator," an interesting detail that points to the conflicted and anguished reality that the truth can create for stolen children. In October 2004, her suspicions were confirmed when a judge read her the results of her DNA test. She now had definitive proof that she is the daughter of María Hilda Pérez (known as "Cori") and José María Donda (known as "El Cabo"), who named her Victoria in honor of the Cuban Revolution.

Like Horacio Pietragalla, Victoria Donda gradually got to know her biological family, though more reluctantly and with less fluidity than her peer. Unlike Horacio, her vindication of her parents as militants did not imply an outright rejection of her captors but rather an attempt to integrate the conflicted parts of her life story into a tolerable, though contradictory, whole. She speaks of this difficult integration in the final pages of her autobiography:

> After facing a newly revealed truth, or a lie that had been unmasked, I had to gradually learn to internalize a new history, a new family, and a new past. Throughout that process, I repeatedly found myself unable to move forward, rejecting what had seemed valid to me before, and even at times rejecting myself. I feel able to reconcile myself with everything that brought me here—good and bad, truth and lies. I'm just as much a product of the dictatorship as I am of the affection I received from Raúl and Graciela [the names by which she knew her adoptive parents], and I recognize myself as much in them as I do in Cori and El Cabo, whom I love as much as it's possible to love someone you never met. I'm no less the niece of the former head of intelligence at the ESMA, who was there when his brother and sister-in-law [her parents] were murdered, than I am that teenage girl who went into ecstatic fits and starts at concerts of the Caballeros de la Quema. All of which means, above all, that I'm no less Analía than I am Victoria. (V. Donda 2010: 196–197)

Vowing to keep moving forward and learning from her past, Donda has channeled her energy into organized political activity. In 2007, she became the first child of the disappeared to serve in Argentina's national congress as a *diputada*. Her book and all of the interviews she gives, therefore, are framed from the vantage point of a congresswoman whose public service is a way to honor her biological parents' political legacy: "Today my political activity has renewed meaning within the story of my parents, and in their legacy, in all that I carried inside me but that took decades for me to understand" (V. Donda 2010: 200).

Reconciliatory Frameworks: The Case of Eva Daniela Donda

In her illuminating book *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (2002), Susan J. Brison asks what the subject's goal is or should be after surviving trauma. "Ultimately," she claims, "it is not to transcend trauma, not to solve the dilemmas of survival, but simply to endure" (Brison 2002: 64–65). This endurance, she asserts, implies constructing a narrative of the self that incorporates, in the present, the "successive selves" that one has been over time. When the traumatic moment presents as a void in the narrative, the subject sometimes invents compensatory (narrative) mechanisms to fill that void or to contextualize the trauma in ways that make sense or assuage cognitive dissonance. In other words, posttraumatic subjects tend to construct narratives that seek to understand or integrate the trauma with the goal of exercising *control* over the narrative and taming intrusive memories. Controlling

one's life and one's story so as to project a future free of profound psychological disturbance is a primary goal for many survivors.

Reconciliation, of course, is a narrative trope that occurs frequently in posttraumatic scenarios and constitutes one narrative modality for gaining control over a traumatic past. Presidents seek reconciliation, or ordain it from above, to bring healing to societies torn asunder by violence. Truth commissions, trials, and other mechanisms also provide spaces in which reconciliation—real or imagined—can play out. In Argentina, "The Theory of the Two Demons," which as I explained above has been delegitimized by the Kirchner and Fernández administrations, for more than 20 years served as the most prevalent official state narrative about the country's recent past. The logic of a nation "at war" in which "both sides" were equally guilty of excesses and atrocities became a way of justifying impunity and pardoning genocide, a reconciliatory narrative *par excellence*. Interestingly, the reconciliatory memory framework that dominated Argentine public consciousness for so long has become for some formerly kidnapped children a narrative framework for understanding and explaining their own life experiences, for taking control of their intrusive memories. The shocking case of Eva Daniela Donda (now called Daniela), Victoria Donda's sister, brings this into high relief.

Daniela Donda has had much less public visibility than her sister Victoria, but her occasional public appearances and statements have been polemical to say the least because of her declared right-wing ideology. Daniela's life followed a different path from her sister. As a baby she was sent to live with her biological grandmother until, at a very young age, her uncle Adolfo Donda Tigel, one of ESMA's most psychopathic torturers, "legally" adopted her and absconded with the child, threatening the grandmother. Adolfo Donda, an ex-marine, was said to be present when Daniela and Victoria's mother was tortured. Not much is known about Daniela's life during her formative years. What is clear, though, is that after being identified as a kidnapped child she has clung vehemently to her uncle's side, defending him, loving him, and continuing to live with him to this day. To the outside observer, unaware of the internal dynamics of this situation, it would seem that she was ideologically brainwashed and on some level continues to live in fear of her captor, unable to break free of his influence. This situation is clearly incomprehensible to her sister Victoria, with whom Daniela has spoken directly only twice, but who sees Daniela's decision to remain with her uncle as a "choice": "I can't understand that she defends our parents' killers. I'll never understand it. A military man raised me too, and that's why I know that brainwashing doesn't exist. One always chooses one's path, and she chose" (Di Marco 2011). Because of their radically different ideologies—Victoria on the left and Daniela, it appears, on the far right—the two women have been unable to find common ground and remain profoundly estranged from one another. Victoria writes in her memoir: "Daniela had been well indoctrinated. The long, sinister arm of Adolfo Donda Tigel had reached her. . . . Our resentment and difference of opinions would forever condition our relationship. Perhaps one day we'll be able to build something new, but not for now" (V. Donda 2010: 159).

In her public discourse, Daniela Donda calls incessantly for reconciliation or *concordia* and frames her life through the Theory of the Two Demons. Flaunting her conservative ideology, in late 2009, she spoke publicly at a commemorative act in honor of the "victims of terrorism"—in this case the military who fell defending the nation from a Marxist-terrorist threat. She urged the promilitary throngs gathered at the Plaza San Martín to set aside "rancor, hatred, and interests" for the nation's greater good. Though on several occasions she has acknowledged that she is proud of her militant parents for their unflagging dedication to fighting for a better society, she condemns their actions and their use of violence as acerbically as she condemns the military regime's violence. As she explained

when interviewed on the C5N news program following the 2009 commemorative act: "We have to be honest. No one can support what happened during the dictatorship, but we also can't support the terrorists' actions" (C5N 2010). Tired of being a victim, her discourse positions her memory as realistic, altruistic, and nationalistic, sublimating her individual biography in the name of an imagined *argentinidad*, a utopian reconciled nation. Incensed by what she sees as the Kircher administration's self-righteous redemption of the revolutionaries, in an open letter to *La Nación* published on September 12, 2010, she points a finger at the reigning political establishment and its supporters: "I am sure that no one in the Government can cast the first stone free from sin. You, like the military, were responsible for this country's suffering!" (D. Donda 2010). She recently echoed her positions by participating in a panel discussion organized for the 2012 Buenos Aires Book Fair in which soldiers and militants sat together to confess their "sins" and to teach younger generations the "truth" about Argentine history. At its core, the panel amounted to a fascinating theatrical staging of the Theory of the Two Demons, aimed at reasserting that theory's viability in a now-changed political climate in which its logic has been threatened.

Narratives of Oblivion: The Case of Evelyn Bauer Pegoraro

Documentary films like Blaustein's *Spoils of War* and mainstream media representations have gone a long way toward portraying the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo as valiant heroes who have taken on the system and won, assuming that stolen children *want* to be reconnected with their biological families. Nevertheless, it seems that not all of those whose identities have been recovered desire such an outcome.

Susana Kaiser's book *Postmemories of Terror* (2005), for example, refers to the subject of child transfer and reveals a shocking conclusion. Kaiser interviewed a cross-section of Argentine youth. The kids came from different ideological, class, and racial backgrounds. Surprisingly, an overwhelming majority of those interviewed directly challenged the Grandmothers' right to "force" children to know their true identities and, in some cases, even defended the torturer's right to keep the children. Some interviewees cited the benefits of silence and ignorance to protect the stolen child's psyche. Others cited the torturer's ability to provide a stable and economically sound environment. Kaiser reads such responses as indicative of a more widespread and nefarious process of "naturalization or normalization of living with major criminals and human rights abusers" (Kaiser 2005: 115). Because the torturers spent so long in impunity, strangely, some Argentine youth are able to separate the persona of the torturer from that of the "good parent" who, they claim, raised the adopted child well despite the criminal nature of the circumstances. In Argentina, then, like in post-war Europe, what is in the "best interest" of the stolen child can be decided and couched in an ideological narrative that defends a particular vision of society: in this case, of a society in which well enough should be left alone, a narrative of reconciliation and forgetting that harkens back to the case of Daniela Donda. The Grandmothers, to the contrary, have taken a more stalwart position that aims to establish truth and justice at all costs. In fact, in 2007 the Grandmothers managed to have a law passed—the "DNA Law"—that *requires* individuals potentially identified as stolen children to submit to DNA testing even if they would prefer not to do so.

Prior to the ratification of the DNA Law, arguments existed on both sides of the issue. Those against obligatory DNA testing argued that it could cause physical or moral harm to the victim, re-victimize him or her, force incrimination of the parents who lovingly raised the kidnapped child, or violate the victim's right to privacy (De Vecchi Gerli 2010: 133). Those in favor of the law argued primarily that biological families also have a right to know

the truth, as does society at large. If the state was responsible for creating the conditions under which children were stolen in the first place, it is now incumbent upon the state to rectify that debt independently of the victim's wishes. Essentially, the debate pitted the right to identity against the right to privacy, calling into question the very nature of identity itself. For those who opposed compulsory testing, identity was seen as an individual construct solely involving an individual's right to choose. Those in favor, like the Grandmothers, viewed identity as a *social* construct, claiming that Argentine society had a right to know the truth about its collective past. On November 4, 2009, shortly before congress voted to approve the law, a group of "grandchildren" gave an impassioned address:

> The right to identity is an undeniable human right. It is just as important as the rights to life, liberty, and physical integrity. It is not up to an individual to decide if he wants to exercise this right because the state is responsible for guaranteeing and preserving it. Today this congress has the responsibility and obligation to remedy the harm that state terrorism caused us. (De Vecchi Gerli 2010: 134–135)

Prominent Argentine psychologists, several of whom worked with the Grandmothers, helped to popularize this notion by arguing that because kidnapped children were deprived of all links to their biological families and beholden to their captors, their identities were fundamentally modified to such an extent that they are incapable of connecting with who they truly are and, hence, are not fully equipped to decide for themselves what is in their own best interest (Teubal 2003: 236–237). Consequently, their right to choose an identity, or one family over another, can only come when they are in full knowledge of the facts. Thus, the argument goes, it is the state's responsibility to provide them with those facts and to act as the guarantor of truth.

Evelyn Bauer Pegoraro offers a dramatic case in which a former kidnapped child refused to submit to DNA testing in an attempt to protect her "physical, psychic, and moral integrity" (Argento 2008: 168–169). For Evelyn, forgetting the past, blocking it out, became her best chance to survive.

Born in the ESMA's clandestine maternity ward to Susana Beatriz Bauer and Rubén Santiago Pegoraro, both disappeared, baby Evelyn was given to the ex-marine Policarpio Vázquez and his wife Ana María Ferrá who secured false adoption papers. Evelyn harbors fond memories of her childhood, happy days as a girl scout supported by loving parents. She lived in oblivion for years until her world came crashing down on March 4, 1999. On that day, police stormed her house with an order for her father's arrest. Even though Vázquez and Ferrá admitted that they were not Evelyn's biological parents, Evelyn had no interest in submitting to DNA testing or knowing her biological family. On one hand, she did not want to create further proof that could incriminate her loving "adoptive" father (note that she refuses to call him an "appropriator"); on the other hand, she did not want to open herself up to emotional distress that might derail her relatively stable and happy life. In interviews, her attitude is consistently defensive. She claims not to care about her biological family's wishes: "It's not my job to mitigate other people's pain. I'm not saying that the pain isn't terrible, but I didn't cause it. Is it my fault? I'm a product of having been born at the wrong time; I am what I am. Everyone is concerned with others' rights, but I'm a victim of what happened. That's clear. The state is guilty of stealing me and now the state is out to get me again" (Argento 2008: 174).

Evelyn's refusal to submit to DNA testing was upheld by Argentina's Supreme Court in 2003. She seemed to have won the battle for privacy and the right to forget, a reality

that troubled the Grandmothers who feared that Evelyn's case would set a precedent that could hinder their ability to investigate other cases and to find out the truth about the past. The Grandmothers, consequently, pressured the courts to revisit the case. In October 2006, Judge María Servini de Cubría went against the Supreme Court's ruling, ordering the blood test, which Evelyn wrathfully refused. Her lawyers successfully skirted the order by filing a motion stating that the Supreme Court had already ruled on the matter. But Servini and the Grandmothers persisted in finding a loophole. Finally, on February 14, 2008, ordered by the judge, a group of detectives raided Evelyn's house, confiscating her toothbrush, underwear, tweezers, and other personal effects. She screamed at the men as they rooted through her personal things: "This is illegal! The court said no! You can't take my blood; you can't take parts of my body. What? Are you pissed that an insolent young girl got your goat?" (Argento 2008: 181). By April of that year the results were in with 99.9 percent certainty. Evelyn was indeed who the Grandmothers claimed she was. The case set a monumental precedent that has resulted in other formerly kidnapped children being forced to give their DNA "by other means" (i.e., other than blood tests).

Evelyn's case raises interesting questions that continue to hover over Argentina today. Where do the rights of the individual end and those of the state begin? Should a kidnapped child be forced to confront his or her past against his or her will? Is the young adult, no longer a minor, equipped to make that decision? Should the truth have limits in certain cases? Do victims of state terror have a right to oblivion and their "psychic integrity," even when that integrity remains threatened, fragile, and precarious?

Conclusion

Primo Levi once noted that when posttraumatic subjects attempt to tell their stories, to understand their experience, and to transmit that experience to others, "What we commonly mean by 'understand' coincides with 'simplify': without a profound simplification the world around us would be an infinite, undefined tangle that would defy our ability to orient ourselves and decide upon our actions" (Levi 1989: 36). He goes on to add that human beings tend to reduce complex phenomena to knowable "schemata" and that history has a tendency to wipe away the grays in favor of cleaner, more black and white explanations.

Although the memories of formerly kidnapped children are riddled with complexities and contradictions, their narratives on some level speak to the logic that Levi outlines. Faced with a situation in which their previous identities have been undone, these children are forced as young adults to remake themselves, to reinvent themselves in accordance with the new information that has been thrust upon them. It is logical, then, that their memories will take shape within larger memory frameworks that help them to make "sense" of senseless and unexplainable phenomena and to gain control of their lives. Moreover, these memory frameworks, as I have shown, emerge and evolve in a dialectical relationship with the public and political processes of memory formation that have shaped Argentina's transition to democracy. The repertoire of memory narratives available to subjects in a given historical moment is not infinite. Subjects are shaped by political, moral, religious, and ethical narratives that circulate in a given historical moment and that operate upon them as subjects, thus making them more likely to narrate their lives in ways that either reflect or refute those broader stories.

As I have found, sometimes formerly kidnapped children's memory narratives frame their lives and imbue them with meaning in relation to the militancy and heroism of their deceased biological parents. Other times, subjects favor reconciliatory narratives that allow

them to harmonize the contradictions that constitute the very fabric of their being. Still other times, forgetting and denial seem to be the easiest routes to follow because they allow the subject to compartmentalize pain indefinitely, blocking out a reality that is difficult to face.

Cases in which victims choose oblivion and privacy over truth and the so-called "public good" raise questions about whose human rights should be upheld in the aftermath of state-sponsored violence. When it comes to deciding what is in the best interest of the stolen children, the Argentine state, urged by the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, has clearly made its decision. The 2007 DNA law and the precedent of testing "by other means" send an unambiguous message that the state values truth and transparency over the individual's right to privacy. The dilemma, however, persists, thus reminding us that what is in the "best interest of the child" and, by extension, "the best interest of the survivor" is not always easily discernible.

Identifying basic memory frameworks is only a starting point for understanding the configuration of histories, both individual and collective. No narrative complies fully with an established mold or skeletal hermeneutical model. Such models are merely tools. More accurately, listening to the voices of Argentina's stolen children urges us to stay attentive to the silences, omissions, fantasies, and fears that operate not only within individual memory narratives but also within the larger collective narratives that circulate in posttraumatic societies.

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