

UNSETTLING INTERPRETATIONS: READING PRACTICES, MEMORY, AND
POLITICS IN LAURA ALCOBA'S *MANÈGES/LA CASA DE LOS CONEJOS* (2007),
HÉCTOR ABAD FACIOLINCE'S *TRAICIONES DE LA MEMORIA* (2009), AND
ALBERTINA CARRI'S *LOS RUBIOS* (2003)

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

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December 2017

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UNSETTLING INTERPRETATIONS: READING PRACTICES, MEMORY, AND POLITICS
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At the intersection of the autobiographical, the historical, and the fictional, Laura Alcoba's *Manèges* (2007) [*La casa de los Conejos/The Rabbit House* (2008)], Héctor Abad Faciolince's *Traiciones de la memoria* (2009), and Albertina Carri's *Los rubios* (2003) deal with contemporary quandaries in the aftermath of the Latin American regimes of the seventies and eighties. They make a sideways approach to protracted, polarized discussions on issues surrounding recent history and politics of memory—including present-ramifications that impact concrete governmental policies. The critical reception of Abad, Alcoba, and Carri shows signs of an analogous turn toward polarization. I argue that such turn is unwarranted, for these works challenge our interpretive practices precisely by appeal to rhetorical strategies and innovative uses of textual performativity that *preclude settling on any one reading, thus eroding the basis of*

any “strong,” polarized view. Shifts from direct report to free indirect discourse in three-person dialogue scenes, for instance, prevent us from matching utterances and speakers. In the absence of textual markers to justify one matching over others, *favoring and settling on any one of them involves forcing the text into an arbitrary interpretive framework*. Thus, we violate the formal structure of these texts and foreclose a more nuanced assessment *demand*ed by the very texts: if we can’t make justified matchings, we are *limited* but *urged* to increase the projection of *tentative* matchings. Since each set of speaker-utterance attributions yields different scenarios, the upshot is a palette of varied interpretations of the events, actions, and characters of the *same* dialogue scene. This “centrifugal” move – *into* the text—is complemented by a “centripetal” analogue that sends readers *outside* the text, into the “real world,” in search of “missing pieces” whose necessity is hinted at by the texts themselves. This requirement *to reconstitute what is missing and unsaid* also tends to go unnoticed--or ignored. Such blindness, which leads to misreading and exerting violence on texts, also plagues interpretive approaches to sociopolitical phenomena, whether their focus be current events, recent history, or memory-related issues. If sound, this assessment calls for a deep revision of our interpretive practices.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Gustavo Llarull was born in La Plata (Buenos Aires), Argentina., where he completed a *licenciatura* in philosophy at the Universidad Nacional de La Plata (UNLP). While working towards this degree, he held part-time, mostly free-lance jobs, gradually focusing on, and gaining experience in journalistic writing and research (esp. social and political issues, and cultural commentary), and the twin areas of translation and interpretation (Spanish/English). He applied for a teaching post at the UNLP, and taught introductory courses in philosophy. In 2002, a University of California fellowship allowed him to travel to the U.S. in order to join the graduate program in philosophy at UC-Riverside (Ph.D., 2007). He focused on the cluster-areas of agency theory, ethics, critical theory, and narrative conceptions of identity. He did further graduate work at the University of Massachusetts—Amherst (English Department-MFA Program), before coming to Cornell.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, my endless gratitude to Debbie Castillo, whose contagious enthusiasm, intellectual rigor, creativity, and generosity – palpable in her feedback; transparent in her conversation -- make her the best mentor and Chair one could ever hope for. I'm aware these words may confirm or even enhance a reputation that has already reached mythical proportions. It's probably not a good idea to conflate, or contribute to conflate, myth and reality; but in some rare cases, when one is so close to the other, I don't think much harm can come of it.

By chance, during my first semester at Cornell, I took a class with Gerard Aching. Soon I realized it was *chance* of the Mallarmé kind – could it have been any better? His deep, detailed commentary on your work; his warm, encouraging rigor – a refusal to stop when you've reached a comfortable spot -- always conveyed with a subtle, disarming sense of humor; all this strengthens your work tremendously; but much more important is the way in which it enhances and broadens your outlook. And not just in an intellectual sense. In time, you come to realize that every exchange with Gerard is an exercise in *phronesis*.

I don't know how Debra does it, but there's a way, among her many ways, in which – it's like a magic trick -- she *mentions* something; you blink, and you're on board; you just know it; you're enthused, and you do it. And I doubt I would've dared take Cathy Caruth's seminar on Milton otherwise. It was *Paradise*. Milton's Earth-shattering line-breaks, Hanna Arendt, Cathy's recent work on Latin American theater will be apparent on many of the following pages, even if the reader may become aware of them... belatedly.

Sometime before my A exam, Edmundo Paz-Soldán suggested that I revisit Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez* (2004). I had been introduced to Moya's novel by Edmundo himself, two

years earlier, in a seminar, and, of course, it had caused a deep impression on me. Rereading is a joy and a discovery and a necessity, for reasons that we all know. So, while I had no objections to his suggestion, there was something intriguing about its timing. Evidently, he had seen something I hadn't seen yet. For I was not expecting Castellanos Moya to *reshape* the way I was *seeing* my ongoing work. No radical changes were brought about as a result of that discovery. It is in the realm of what I *didn't* do, rather than in what I *did*, where the influence of Edmundo's perceptive suggestion would be palpable. (I'll skip, for the sake of maintaining a sanitized version of the events, my initial bout of *insensatez* during which I wanted to include that novel, as well as *El asco*, in my dissertation).¹

I don't mean to be fashionably self-deprecating. But I am convinced that learning with Debbie, Cathy, Gerard, and Edmundo included a crucial skill: becoming aware that literature is, among other things, *un laborioso avance a través de la propia estupidez* [a laborious progression through one's own stupidity] -- Rodolfo Walsh dixit--; and that the best thing to do about it is not to take oneself too seriously; to laugh, try to learn, and keep moving on.

¹ So, the absence, and not the presence, of *Insensatez* will (not) be noticeable in the pages that follow. Yet, if there is a single momentary merit or felicitous passage in them, it will be in no small part due to that something that needed to be absent, which Edmundo knew Moya would be able to make me see. This is too subtle, too important, and too badly written to make any sense. With my excuses to the reader, I must say I will be satisfied if these words make Edmundo remember that intervention. And to round up the cryptic section of these notes, I'll mention the Sunday workshops, the risks of *irse de mambo*, and the *New Voices* colloquia—all hermetic endeavors that deserve a dissertation of their own. Information about the latter, however, is available in a few clicks.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 History, Past, Present, and Representation.

Like much of the Southern Cone's cultural production devoted to the aftermath of the dictatorships, and whose authors were young at the time of the events (and, often, though not always, related to the *desaparecidos*), Laura Alcoba's and Albertina Carri's works have been discussed within a framework of reception that has been consolidated fairly recently. It is neither the only one nor the one that has proven to be significantly better (in whichever way one may want to cash out the term) than others. However, given that it has become almost a standard point of reference, it seems appropriate to begin with a brief outline of this view., which will fulfill two functions. First, it will be an initial springboard from which we will easily move towards other features of historical and literary context. Second, since much of the critical corpus is either based on, or refers to this view, an early presentation will have provided us with a minimal background to which we might come back, briefly, when our discussion of the critical reception of these works may require it.

This view, or family of views, fall under the label of cultural production of the “*post-dictatorship generation*” (i.e., the generation that follows that of the *desaparecidos* in the Southern Cone, also known as “the children of the disappeared,” an awkward label, yet useful to distinguish them from the *disappeared children* who were either abducted along with their parents, or born in illegal detention centers, placed in military or pro-military families, and sought after by Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo).

Following the well-known presentation offered by Ana Ros, it will be important to highlight three of the main (if not the three main) conceptual points on which this view or family of views rest:

- a) the reappropriation of Marianne Hirsch's influential concept of “postmemory;”
- b) the view, or family of views, that pose a radical break between the seventies generation and the following ones;
- c) given point b) above (i.e., provided the alleged generational break is accepted), it follows that *post-dictatorship cultural production* must involve some form of (implicit or explicit) struggle to understand, or to reach some “prosthetic” stand-in for understanding the previous generation’s decisions. The outcome of this process ranges from rejection and differentiation – sometimes construed as sheer incomprehension – to mixed or ambivalent negotiations, to acceptance and reconciliation (in some cases, the latter involves some sort of *vindication* of the cause for which the seventies generation gave their lives); and, closely related to this last point, at times even expressing the desire to give continuity to the previous generation’s projects. (Ros 2013, chap. 1-3).

This framework has elicited a significant number of stimulating discussions of Alcoba and Carri --and also, it is worth highlighting, --a *still growing* number of politically and culturally relevant works. In fact, Ana Ros highlights that *Los rubios* gave traction to a vigorous creative and critical movement that hasn’t ceased since Carri’s foundational, initial “trigger” or “ice-melting move,” as she puts it not without humor. For, while *Los rubios* was well-received in film festivals, its initial reception was not quite ice-melting, but rather blood-curling.

Both film and filmmaker were harshly attacked (e.g., Kohan 2004 and, from a more conservative standpoint, Sarlo 2005; but see, for a prompt reply, Page 2005 and Nouizelles

2005). The more virulent attacks came from the more visible and influential strands of the Argentinean Left –particularly, by the so called “*memoria montonera*”

As the name itself suggests, the *memoria montonera* refers -- not exclusively, since former cadres of other armed organizations share its tenets -- to the organization Montoneros, the biggest in Argentina and the Southern Cone, and among the top ones in all of the Americas, to the point of being able to send combat units to Nicaragua. (The effectiveness of this action, as well as the opinion of the Nicaraguan guerrillas about this expression of Latin American solidarity, however, are a matter of contention.)

This idealized version of their role and practices in the seventies includes an intense emphasis on "the memory of the lost ones," in a context of “self-referential fixation” (Vezetti 2009, 137). Needless to say, to honor the memory of the dead is not *per se* objectionable. But, in the *memoria montonera*’s version, it is enhanced and infused by the notion that “the best ones are the ones who died... as if death, especially *death in combat*, were the ultimate *criterion to judge* the value of *any political conduct*” (140; emphasis added).²

Undergirding this last notion, and vertebrating most tenets, as well as the *ethos*, of the *memoria montonera*, is the core belief in the “sublime nature of valor and sacrifice” (Vezetti 2009, 147).³

² Part of the resistance *Los rubios* met from some left-wing quarters obeyed in part to the fact that a very daughter of *desaparecidos* seemed to defile their memory – that is, the normative or “correct” way of articulating their memory. Alcoba’s work was met with a kinder reception, though it would seem that a belated reaction is in the making.

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Though certainly the most visible and prevalent, this is *not* the *only construction of the Montonero past*. Other configurations of *montonerismo* cannot be discussed here, but the mere statement of two of their common features – shared by all, however much they may differ in some respects – can give a gist of their contrast with the *memoria mntonera*. First, they show an eagerness to explore that past, without ever considering it exhausted or closed. Second, they share a more open, dialogical, self-critical and undogmatic attitude, which --without disowning their past--rejects the sacralization of violence and the enshrinement of a fixed, idealized narrative of heroes and martyrs. The indispensable works of Sergio Bufano, Claudia Hilb, and Matilde Ollier are but a few in a long list, whose references are given in this footnote.⁴

In this regard, it is important to highlight two tensions that will hover over the following pages. First, the *memoria montonera* is the configuration of the past with which many militants who fought alongside Carri's and Alcoba's parents feel most identified.

Second, the differences and tensions we perceive among the different memory configurations existed as differences in conception within Montoneros since their very early

articulating their memory. Alcoba's work was met with a kinder reception, though it would seem that a belated reaction is in the making.

⁴ The pioneering work of El Kadri and Schmucler is still a most lucid reflection; Ollier 2009, and Rodeiro are fundamental to understand these issues, as are the very recent Carnevole 2015; Crenzel 2015, and Hilb 2010 and 2015; last but not least, the already mentioned Vezzetti 2002, 2009, and 2015. In particular, his 2009 is an excellent review fo the history and variety of cultural production of armed struggle. Lastly, the journal *Lucha Armada* (2006-2016) – *Armed Struggle* – edited by Sergio Bufano, has collected some of the most important work on these issues, from a variety of contributors and political standpoints and experiences: memories by former combatants; fieldwork; studies from theoretical perspectives ranging from reconfigurations of Marxism to Feminism, etc.

days. This led to fallouts and splits.

However, neither the first splits that Montoneros suffered since its foundation in 1970, nor the ones that followed in 1974, 1976, and 1979, managed to alter the overall direction of the Montoneros leadership. Notably, as early as 1971, one of the founding groups of Montoneros, the *Columna Sabino Navarro*, elaborated a written critical report explaining the reasons for their decision to split. Their analysis and recommendations were prescient—and ignored.

The same occurred with the better-known series of reports that Rodolfo Walsh, intelligence officer of Montoneros, presented throughout 1976 and early 1977 to the Leadership (henceforth, CN, for “Conducción Nacional,” a 12-member committee that was the maximum authority and decision-making center in the organizational structure of Montoneros).

Why was the CN so *unwilling to listen*, so intent on keeping their course?

Pilar Calveiro – former cadre of Montoneros – explains that the organization became *refractory to criticism* mainly due to two reasons. First, because of the growing militarization of the OPM (Spanish acronym for “political-military organization,” as Montoneros decided to call themselves as of 1975). Second, because of an exacerbation (and, one may add, a simplification) of the teleological nature of Marx’s philosophy of history. As Calveiro puts it,

armed struggle became the maximum expression of politics first, and politics *itself* later ... The militarism of Montoneros reproduced the authoritarian logic that they were trying to question ... and [its leadership, as well as an undetermined number of militants] regarded themselves as indestructible, destined to a final triumph that was part of a predetermined historical destiny (18-19).

This conviction about a “predetermined historical destiny” might have seeped into the elaboration of the *memoria montonera*, for it certainly coalesced in an equally rigid narrative that admits of no deviations, as Carri herself suggests:

La historia corre el riesgo de la santificación ... [de] una mitologización del pasado que no nos permite tener una mirada crítica... la necesidad de reconstruir una memoria histórica y clausurar hasta el más mínimo de los misterios, dejándonos sin espacio para la sorpresa o la pasión. Lejos de acercarnos a una postura reflexiva nos expulsa del conflicto verdadero... [impidiendo] una verdadera interpelación [del pasado] (History runs the risk of sanctification... a mythologization of the past that doesn't allow us to have a critical gaze... the need to reconstruct a historical memory and close off the slightest mystery leaves us without space for surprise or passion ... Far from helping us take on a reflective stance, it expels us from the true conflict... [impeding] a true interpellation [of the past, Carri 2007, 17)

Paradoxically, so stringent are the normative parameters of the *memoria montonera*'s narrative, that *their claims to truth* run parallel to, and seem to mirror, those of the *juridical discourse*, as Gabriella Nouizelles dubbed the “web” of conservative views, mostly right-wing, which level charges against memory-based narratives. An oft-repeated critique targets the allegedly tenuous standards of evidence of testimonial and other memory-based accounts or discourses.

It is particularly fitting, then, that none of the works to be discussed should *argue* for any claim in particular, neither in the form of arguments embedded in the narrative, nor in the sense of “thesis novels,” or conventionally “historical fiction.” Instead, they *perform* the *equivalent* of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. Each in its own way, Abad, Alcoba, and Carri seem to accept the challenge of the juridical discourse, up the ante, and attempt to show that no claim could ever meet the artificially high evidentiary standards of the juridical discourse – including those claims advanced by the juridical discourse itself.

A particularly incisive case against the juridical discourse is discussed in Chapter 1, devoted to Abad Faciolince’s *Traiciones de la memoria* (2009), which also presents a singular performance-critique of certain types of memory configuration.⁵ The book is composed of three interrelated “autobiographical stories,” in which illustrations, photos, and other visual material share space with the text proper, or, at times, fills the whole page with a collage-like display of juxtaposed photos, handwritten notes, facsimile copies of notebooks, Department of State memoranda, among other material and symbolic objects. They purportedly establish a “record” or “proof” of every step Abad takes in the pursuit of something (a publication; an engraving) or someone (a publisher; a witness) who might confirm the authenticity of a Borges poem—a poem his father read on a radio program, in the afternoon of an August day in 1987, shortly before a death squad assassinated him on the streets of Medellín.

Chapter 2 is devoted to Carri’s hybrid film *Los rubios* (*The Blondes*, 2003), which seemingly shifts between the documentary and the making of the documentary, appealing to

⁵ While Abad and his work are, strictly speaking, alien to the Argentine disputes about the *memoria montonera*, the case of *Traiciones* is remarkable in that, without falling for clumsy extrapolations or

fictional elements such as the scripted participation of an actress playing the role of Carri. This shift is indicated by the use of color and black and white respectively. When the color/black-and-white code is broken, we are no longer able to distinguish "real" documentary from "fictionalization." Still, many critical treatments of Carri's film lean on the director's off-camera commentary as the main thread or pillar on which to base their interpretive efforts. Despite the richness of many pieces of this sort, I argue that once the code is broken, there is no textual marker that justifies this choice. I further argue that this interpretive move obscures subtly layered formal and thematic threads in which a variety of stances regarding individual and collective memory, responsibility, and identity are presented.

The film ostensibly follows Albertina Carri's search for information about her parents, well-known intellectuals who joined Montoneros – as briefly hinted above, one of the largest guerrilla organizations in Argentina. In 1978, Carri's parents were abducted by the Army. It was one of the few cases in which the “quasi-disappeared” were allowed to contact their families; still several months later, they were disappeared by the same branch of the Armed Forces. Carri was about to turn six years old.

Lastly, Chapter 3 discusses Laura Alcoba's *Manèges: petite histoire argentine* (2007), a hybrid narrative – based on, and making use of, autobiographical material – written in French, Alcoba's language of adoption since she was ten, when she left Argentina to join her mother, exiled in France. If in all three works the overall plot, themes, and threads are clear --both in virtue of their initial textual presentation, and because they are based on well-known, high-profile cases – it is perhaps in Alcoba's narrative where this “clarity” is paramount.

forced analogies, it does an impressive job in addressing those issues—which, despite the Argentine particularities, are also a live issue in other Latin American countries (Bartow 2005).

The narrative structure and plot of *Manèges* can be summarized thus: initially, a fairly straightforward narrative voice alternates between an "adult" Laura Alcoba (in 2006), and a six- and 7-year old Laura (in 1975-76) who lives with her mother and a young couple – Diana Teruggi and Daniel Mariani --in a Montonero safe-house where a rabbit-breeding business is a mere front that hides a clandestine printing press – the press that issued *Evita Montonera*, the official media outlet of the OPM.

Laura and her mother left the safe-house and went into exile shortly before a military raid obliterated the house, the press, and its inhabitants, except for the newborn child of the couple, three-month old Clara Anahí. The search for the child conducted by her grandmother, Isabel “Chicha” Mariani, eventually led to the creation of Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, of which Chicha was co-founder and first President (reelected, her tenure eventually lasted 10 years, during which the now-world-famous DNA bank was established) In this context, the tension between Alcoba’s and Carri’s works on the one hand, and the normative configurations of memory construction – or “memory regimes” advocated by the memoria montonera will have to be part and parcel of our discussion.

1.2 Formal Structure: Centripetal and Centrifugal Conditions. The Walsh Proofs.

“The effect of fiction,” wrote Ricardo Piglia, “depends on a reading capable of restoring the context and deciphering the understatement of the story” [“el efecto de la ficción depende de una lectura capaz de reponer el contexto y descifrar los sobreentendidos de la historia”] (Piglia 2014, 13). This twofold condition is presented in the prologue to the recent, long-overdue edition of Rodolfo Walsh’s collected stories, published as *Cuentos completos* (2014). It is a good point of entry to our discussion of the formal demands of the works to be discussed.

Note that, as stated, Piglia's formulation is suggestive, but too broad or vague: what context? Background information? Isn't that trivially true? In the remainder of the Prologue, Piglia elaborates, and makes it more Walsh-specific. For our purposes, this first, broad version will do.⁶

Still, Abad, Alcoba and Carri are not simply replicating a formal procedure. Consider, for instance, Walsh's "Esa mujer" ("That Woman"). Strictly speaking, here there is no need to "restore the context of the story." There is nothing lacking. It is "complete," as it were. When it is said that one needs to restore its context, what is meant is that the meaning and connotations of the story become immensely richer *if we know* who "that woman" is. But even if we don't know it, the story about an unspecified dispute between two men "por el cadáver extraviado de una mujer" ["about the lost corpse of a woman"] (Piglia, 13), is in and by itself a most remarkable story.

Ironically, and probably intentionally, here it is Piglia who understates the nuances and complexities of the brilliant dialogue, in which Piglia's "two men" engaged in a "dispute" are explicitly identified in the story as a journalist and a general. They are having a discussion in which the former wants the latter to tell him where *that woman* is buried.

Still, Piglia is unquestionably right when he says that until and unless we know who that woman is, "el relato no funciona *políticamente* [the story doesn't work politically]" (Piglia, 13).

⁶ An earlier formulation of the same idea, while still not sufficiently specific, may add to the understanding of his view: "The sense of fiction isn't just linguistic; it depends on the external references of the narrative, and on the extra-verbal situation.... To show that referential truth, without ever naming it, is a key narrative technique" ["El sentido de la ficción no es sólo lingüístico, depende de las referencias externas del relato y de la situación extraverbal. ... Mostrar esa verdad referencial, pero nunca nombrarla, es una técnica narrativa clave en la ficción... (Piglia 2013, 8)].

For all its remarkable qualities, the story changes dramatically if and when we know that *esa mujer* is Eva Perón. And more so, if and when we know the story behind that dialogue: the military stealing the embalmed corpse of Evita; the succession of events that delayed moving the body to some undisclosed cemetery in Europe—delays that involved disputes among the personnel in charge of the body, which included charges of necrophilia; accusations to the effect that a high-ranking officer wanted to keep the body as a way to exert symbolic control over the mass of Peronists—and over Perón himself – as well as way to gain leverage in the internal disputes *within* the Armed Forces.

Still, in “Esa mujer,” the effect of fiction doesn’t entirely depend on the restitution of its historical, factual context; but *its political effect does*; and, again, the story is certainly impoverished in the absence of contextual information. In Abad, Alcoba, and Carri, the lack of certain contextual information *doesn’t merely occlude richer interpretations*. It severely impoverishes interpretation, certainly; but, in some cases, it renders (parts of) the text almost unintelligible. The three texts, however, have what earlier was called a “centripetal” effect – they deploy “nudges” or subtle allusions or suggestions so that the reader restitute the missing context. That’s why, differences aside, Piglia’s formulation of the “requirements” of Walsh’s fiction is helpful. That’s why these texts require,

a) a reader willing to go *beyond* the text, into the world, in search of contextual information — whether it be other texts, testimonies, confrontation of testimonies and/or texts, or any other sources that may enable her to restore – *reponer y restituir* – the needed context. The suggestions are varied: from Abad’s explicit invitation to go online and check a recording of his murdered father reading a Borges poem, to Alcoba’s glaring silences and absences – which may shift abruptly toward brief essayistic fragments or micro-stories in which the “call” for external

information is embedded. Consider, for instance, the following fragment from her brief discussion of her search for the meaning of a term that, she claims, was crucial for the articulation of her narrative; it is perhaps the most *conceptually explicit* plea, and therefore, the one that resonates the most with Piglia's formulation. Alcoba doesn't exactly speak of *reponer el contexto* (restore the context) but suggests that she needed to remember the meaning of a term, because "this term [n.b., *embute*], so often pronounced and heard, inextricably linked to these fragments of Argentine childhood that I make the effort to retrieve and reconstitute, I have never encountered in any other context" ("ce terme [n.b., *embute*] tant de fois prononcé et entendu, indissociablement lié à ces morceaux d'enfance argentine que je m'efforçais de retrouver et de restituer, je ne l'avais jamais rencontré dans un autre contexte," 49).

But, how is the reader to know *when* to look for contextual information? The nudges or suggestions are often very subtle, and the reader's failure to see them is, to certain extent, a measure of the failure of our interpretive practices. Here, the second prong of the twofold "condition" may have a role to play. Both Walsh and our three authors demand, then,

b) a reader *capable of deciphering* the "understatements" of the story, as Piglia puts it. He gives a variety of examples, emphasizing Walsh's use of allusion and elision, of subtle connections between terms, which will resonate even if they are pages apart. In our case, we shall find these and others. More generally, we mean the set of (and interaction among) different formal elements at work in the process of reading – roughly, the formal structure of the text, the operations it allows, suggests, or constrains the reader to follow. What earlier we called the

“centrifugal” impetus or effect of the text, i.e. a demand for some form of intra-textual scrutiny, whether it be tracking specific features, or straightforward exercises of close reading. At the risk of redundancy, let us add that this involves attention to rhetorical strategies, modulations in narrative voice and point of view, iteration of figures or semantically dense terms, syntactical and lexical choices, performative effects, and whichever other formal devices or operations may be at work during the process of reading.

These two requirements may at times work in tandem; and, whether on their own or in tandem, they “work” on the reader at both an individual and a collective level. The individual reader will have to reassess her interpretive approach and capacities, but also, the extra-textual “missing pieces” she will have to search for – the “restitution of context” -- will often require some form and degree of intersubjective activity. Only a careful reading might allow us to spot both “centripetal” markers – nudges for the reader to restore contextual information --- and to be attentive to “centrifugal” effects, textual “sleights of hand,” which, if unnoticed, derail interpretation. And both operations are enhanced if and when these “searches” involved collective discussion.

One such “mixed” strategy involves the use of *juxtaposed texts, combinations of text and image*, and the *use of texts in unorthodox ways* – as *graphs*, so to speak. The former will be found in Abad; the latter, in Alcoba. And in the two Walshian stories that follow.

Walsh's "La aventura de las pruebas de imprenta" ("The Adventure of the Galley Proofs"), in his *Variaciones en rojo* (1953), has the components and unfolds within the standard framework of a typical detective story: a wife returns home, finds her husband dead --a bullet in his head, a pistol by his side --and no other signs of violence. Suicide or disguised homicide? For our purposes, the relevant aspects of the story emerge from the combination of two features:

a) The victim was a galley proof corrector and translator; his unfinished work --some galleys of the last translation he was working on; handwritten corrections --play a central role in the story;

b) The participation of Daniel Hernández --amateur sleuth and Walsh's alter ego -- who, like the victim, is also a corrector --is allowed to assist with the investigation.

It is Daniel who calls attention to the galleys, picks one, examines it, and decides that a certain kind of reading of all the galleys will provide them with the key to solve the crime. He calls the galley he picked up first a "graphic," which is ironically accurate. Although it is a text, it plays both roles.

First, it plays the role of a graphic in the sense of being an illustration of the methodological point he wants to make. That is, the scrutiny of the texts left by the victim will yield the answers they are looking for. Second, the comparison of the different galleys' physical features (e.g., minor typographical differences, handwritten corrections, and so on) will turn the

form and shape of every single letter, whether it be printed or (perhaps more relevant) handwritten, into clues first, and evidence later.

To give a coarse example: a shaky “A” that diverges noticeably from the handwritten, typical “a” of the victim becomes a clue: the distorted letter points at something that may be relevant to the investigation. Again in rather simplistic terms: the shaky “A” becomes evidence of a physical disruption of either the victim or his environment.

Thus, the difference in the drawing of the letter has become a clue first, and evidence later, it makes sense, then, to say that the inserted texts – the galleys – as well as the handwritten text of the victim, play a role *as graphics* that is at least as important as (and, in principle, more important than) the role they play *qua* texts. Yet, a variance makes sense only if measured against a pattern--a pattern slowly emerges or becomes visible to the discerning eye focused on the details of design and drawing of frequently occurring letters--specific vowels, for instance.

The more fine-grained the distinctions the discerning eye can make, the more it will be able to “see” in the galleys—to “read” in the galleys. Yet this discrimination is not in the text, but in the drawing of the letters of the text.

In a way, Daniel will not read the text, but the events inscribed in the design of the drawings of the letters; the events tracked *by* the texts/graphics; the events whose trace is discernible in those graphics, up to the last one – the event that caused the death of the corrector.

Still, they *are* texts, and this fact puts pressure on the possibility of literally reading the

texts of the galleys, beyond the formal scrutiny they will undergo as graphics. The tension or temptation to read them will vary from reader to reader, but it will be there, even when the narrative --the main text, especially in the voice of Daniel --slyly insists on the visual, graphic, formal role of the foreign, inserted pages.

Moreover, the texts of the inserted pages have, on the face of it, nothing to do with the story we're reading. In a way, then, they interrupt our reading. Still, underneath the surface, the disparate texts do begin to connect with one another *-and with the main narrative*. There are five such insertions; one every ten pages or so; they are sufficiently close to one another so as to trigger first, and give traction later, to the interplay among the different texts.

Even if one decided to ignore the texts *qua* texts, it would be difficult *not* to catch a word or a phrase here and there, reading them almost involuntarily. And although Daniel doesn't explicitly use the content of the text to solve the crime, the seemingly disparate texts that appear on the page, juxtaposed, begin to look more like a counterpoint, commentary, or dialogue, than like heterogeneous, mute objects.

The vigorous interpretive movement that ensues is, then, the result of this setup which Walsh prepared for the reader, about which he has Daniel say nothing, with the probable exception of an indirect comment, embedded in the following dialogue excerpt which will be relevant to our reading of Abad's, Alcoba's, and Carri's works:

“You would probably read faster than an experienced proof-reader, because you have no experience.”

The police chief laughed.

“That’s a good one,” he said. “I’d read faster because I’ve no experience? What good is experience for, then? “

“To read slowly.” . . . [Y]ou would read faster, but less efficiently, bypassing numerous errors. (65; emphasis added)⁷

--Probablemente usted leería más rápidamente que un corrector avezado, porque no tiene experiencia.

El comisario se echó a reír.

--Eso sí que está bueno – dijo --. ¿Yo leería más rápidamente porque no tengo experiencia? Entonces, ¿para qué sirve la experiencia?

--*Para leer despacio.* . . . [U]sted leería con más rapidez, pero con menos eficacia, pasando por alto un gran número de errores (65; emphasis added)

Lastly, Walsh’s “Nota al pie” (“Footnote”) presents a variation of this multi-textual configuration. In this case, there will be fewer threads, but sustained for a longer period of time. The story seems to present in the body of the text a straightforward, or at least uninterrupted narrative: that of one Mr. Otero's civil but rather contrived exchange of platitudes with the landlady of León, a translator who worked for Otero's publishing house (“la Casa”) until that very morning, when the landlady found the dead body of his tenant and a suicide letter addressed to Otero.

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, this and all other translations are mine.

Narrated mostly from a “close” third-person point of view, the story follows Otero’s movements and thoughts, his discomfort and hesitation: “no quiere quedarse, no quiere irse, no quiere admitir que se siente traicionado” (“he doesn't want to stay; he doesn't want to go; he doesn't want to admit that he feels betrayed;” 419), for León’s suicide makes him feel as if he *hadn't* been “una especie de padre” (“a kind of father”), and not just a boss or a friend, as they both had admitted to each other “so many times” (“tantas veces;” 420).

A small asterisk takes us to a footnote in italics. Even if we do *not* want to read it, the main text goes on further down the page until the distance between text and footnote makes it almost impossible not to read that line—the opening of Leon’s letter – which goes thus, “Lamento dejar interrumpida la traducción que la—” (“I am sorry to leave unfinished the translation that the—;” 419).

We turn the page and learn that Otero is not interested in the letter, because with a letter neither of them “gains the most miniscule part of what they would have gained talking” (“no gana una ínfima parte de lo que ambos hubieran ganado conversando;” 419).

Now, on this second page, the divide between footnote and main text is more salient -- there are three or four lines of footnote (i.e., the continuation of Leon's letter to Otero). The tension and rivalry between main text and footnote increase; they compete for space on the page --and for the reader’s attention. “*Why, León?*” (“¿*Por qué, León?*” 421) is Otero’s obstinate question to restrain the escalation of León’s footnote -- his voice -- taking over the page.

“One hundred and thirty books translated for the House” (“he traducido para la casa ciento treinta libros;” 146), thinks León after going over his early days at The House, his first breakthroughs, the mastery of the craft, until he reached a moment when he felt he could put his own touch, even make a judgment call at the thorniest junctures of a difficult passage. And from those heights, the fall: the crushing awareness that what was expected of him --the objective to which he must aim --is syntactical correctness and *uniformity*; that his aim as a translator must be *invisibility*. From then on, the long years of increasing deterioration.

With an undetermined combination of frustration, sadness, and resignation, León writes almost in passing that, if *such* was the aim of translation, then it was tantamount to “perpetuating in Spanish the essential lineage of imbeciles” (“perpetuando en castellano el linaje esencial de los imbéciles;” 446). Otero’s thoughts, limited to less than a third of the page now, become restless, and he “suddenly has the dark feeling that everything was aiming at him; against him” (“tiene de pronto la oscura sensación de que todo viene dirigido contra él”); and he knows that “for quite some time now, León’s life had turned him [Otero] into a perplexed witness of his death” (“la vida de León en los últimos tiempos tendía a convertirlo en testigo perplejo de su muerte;” 447).

The main text is now a single line on the top margin, the mirror-image of the first page of the story. And when we turn the page, there is no more main text; or rather, the whole page is finally taken over and turned into a footnote, or the footnote turned into main text. The only

trace, the only two-fold trace of the previous textual configuration, is given by the fact that the text remains in italics. León's delirious or deranged questions, are addressed not so much to Otero, but to "Mr. Appleton," the dictionary.

"One hundred and thirty books," León thinks; "an average of eighty thousand words per book, six letters per word" ("Ciento treinta libros de 80,000 palabras a seis letras por palabra"), all written on the same old typewriter, the same old keyboard, worn out, "every key sunken; every letter on every key erased" ("cada tecla hundida, cada letra borrada;" 446).

The result of the distracted multiplication of averages doesn't yield mere "quantitative" data, but also – in virtue of carefully chosen but inconspicuous words – a glimpse of León's mental but also *physical* breakdown. "Sixty million strikes are too much," he says. "Even for a good Remington. I stare at my fingers in disbelief." ("Sesenta millones de golpes son demasiado; aún para una buena Remington. Me miro los dedos con asombro;" 446).

Two quick observations that anticipate our main discussion. First, the formal possibilities these two stories explore will be pushed further, and quite visibly, by Abad; and, less explicitly but no less effectively, by Alcoba and Carri. Second, Otero is oblivious to, or incapable of seeing León --or himself, for that matter. Would reading the letter have made any difference in Otero's assessment? Walsh leaves the issue undetermined, and, although it would obviously depend on *how* Otero would read the letter, it is reasonable to conjecture that we would probably be in front of the same sort of "misreading" we "see" in the main text.

On first blush, this kind of interrelation of formal structure, (mis)interpretation, and “blindness” to features of texts *and* of human relations – in which some kind and degree of violence are at the core of that interrelation – is already present in classics of the Western canon. Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1960), for instance, might very well fit the bill.

Our intention is not to establish a hasty comparison or homology between Walsh and Nabokov. Yet, as a suggestive juxtaposition, and, mainly, as an instrumentally useful heuristic device, it will be helpful to keep Charles Kinbote in mind as we progress in our discussion.

It is easy to laugh off Kinbote’s delirious “readings” of John Shade’s poem. Likewise, it is deceptively easy to spot Otero’s blindness. Yet, it is disquietingly revealing to notice that the problems to which these characters point – inextricably connected with the formal structure of the narratives – are far from alien *to us*. Indeed, they are far from being entirely charted, let alone solved.⁸

⁸ Consider the use of endnotes in *Pale Fire* vis-à-vis the interplay of main text and footnote in “Nota al pie,” and the interrelation of main text, “galley text,” and handwritten notes in “La aventura...” Of the three, it is in *Pale Fire* where we find more physical distance between the two texts, i.e., Shade’s poem and Kinbote’s exegetical notes. This suggests at least three very different interpretive and physical ways of reading the book. Kinbote emphatically prescribes reading Shade’s poem through the lens of his commentary, without which, he warns us, the poem would be barely intelligible. We can, then, go back and forth between poem and endnote. Yet, given widespread reading habits, it is difficult not to read Shade’s poem in its entirety --on its own -and only then read Kinbote’s set of endnotes, perhaps leafing a line or a stanza of the poem to (try to) make sense of Kinbote’s exegesis. A third possibility is to consider the Shade and Kinbote sections almost as separate books, or as texts that are amenable to a range of connections, but that do not require them. Of course, we don’t have to – perhaps in a stronger sense: we cannot—choose one of these (or other) possibilities over others; but we can explore them. Yet, as Nafisi and White have pointed out, it is ironic (and, one could add, worrisome) that an almost Kinbotean set of prescriptive “preferences” or “arguments” to favor one reading over others should have sprung among

While these problematic issues will hover in the background of our discussion, our explicit use of Kinbote will be that of a rather simplified but effective figure of the "violent reader," who ploughs his or her way through the end of the text, projecting his preconceived interpretive desires onto the textual material. Blind or myopic at best, attached to a set of practices that have little to do with (and little room for) texts that don't fit his scheme, this Kinbote-like construct will serve as shorthand for instances in which readers incur in (some kind or degree of) interpretive violence.

If Kinbote and Otero are figures of violent interpretive practices, Abad Faciolince's narrators evoke – and develop further – other, perhaps subtler forms of interpretive violence, which may be linked not only to Kinbote, but also to his less coarse but close Nabokovian relative from *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert. In turn, Abad's narrators and H.H. will bring into sharper focus (and will speak to, or be spoken to) the child narrators or child perspectives central to Alcoba's and Carri's works.

Pale Fire scholars. One should, at the very least, begin to suspect that neither Otero nor Kinbote are as far from us as we may initially think. Boyd, Rorty, and Castillo discuss this issue, too.

CHAPTER 1

Beyond Oblivion: Abad's *Traiciones de la memoria* (*Memory Betrayals*).

1.1 Recording or Disappearing.

Abad's three-part narrative, or, three "autobiographical stories" takes the formal approach of Walsh's pieces, but develops it much further. The main text is blurred by a constellation of letters, photos, e-mails, and facsimile reproductions of artisanal chapbooks, handwritten journals, drawings, and maps. The process of reading invites crossings in the manner of Walsh's "proof-reading" story, yet, in Abad's case, there are also literal, explicit suggestions, such as when the narrator asks the reader to examine a photo or read the text (in longhand) of a facsimile reproduction (or photo?) of his journal --or when he invites the reader to listen to a recently found recording of his father reading a Borges poem at a radio program, on the very day of his murder.

From the very first sentences, Abad's pessimistic view on his personal memory seems to concede that the standards of evidence of testimonial accounts are far from stringent enough, and that memory is painfully fallible. At the same time, Abad won't make any firm claim about his experiences (or he will counterbalance them, even contradict them, by appeal to other claims or implicit suggestions that are inconsistent with the prior claim, even when this second claim or suggestion isn't sufficiently grounded either). This leaves the narrative in a temporary state of suspension. However, he *does* gather as much "evidence" as he can, in the form of photographs, emails, letters, scrapbooks, and other minutiae— and always tries to put in writing his experiences shortly after the event he wants to record took place.

The first and longest story of the three begins with a self-deprecating statement that seems to submit to the most conservative or skeptical views on memory, yet without mentioning any theoretical or political debate on the issue. In what seems a bittersweet, humorous, hyperbolic fashion, *Traiciones* begins with Abad remarking that his memory – “esa peculiar forma de la brutalidad” [“that peculiar form of brutality”] --is responsible for his inability to be “completely sure of whether I’m reminiscing or inventing” whenever he looks at the past (p. 11). Not only does he seem to give in from the outset --fabrication is the favorite and ideal target of memory critics --but he also formulates the thought in a way reminiscent of recent studies that lend support to the view that memory is, in fact, much less reliable than we tend to believe (Chabris). “Almost always,” Abad writes, “*that* is the past: something that no longer is, and of which all we have left are traces of words” (“algo que ya no es y de lo cual solo nos queda el rastro de las palabras;” p. 12).

Having presented this proviso, the first story, “Un poema en el bolsillo” (“A Poem in the Pocket”) jumps straight into its triggering event: Abad's retrieval of a forgotten memory – the memory of yet another retrieval: that of a handwritten poem lodged in the pockets of a dead man, gunned down minutes earlier.

Now, in light of his introductory proviso on his brutally bad memory, one may legitimately ask *how* he could remember the bloody event with which he began his story, an event that he claims to have forgotten? Abad himself gives us a first, provisional answer, dropping in passing a detail about the murder and the poem in the pocket:

Yo, por ejemplo, no me acuerdo ya del momento en que esta historia empieza para mí. Sé que fue el 25 de agosto de 1987, más o menos a las seis de la tarde, en la calle Argentina de Medellín, pero ya no me acuerdo bien del momento en que metí una mano en el bolsillo de un muerto y encontré un poema. En este caso tengo suerte; apunté en un cuaderno ese momento. Apunté en mi diario, aunque nunca pensé que lo fuera a olvidar, que había encontrado un poema en el bolsillo de mi padre muerto. Ese momento yo ya no lo recuerdo. *Pero aunque no lo recuerde, tengo la prueba, tengo varias pruebas, de que eso sucedió en mi vida*, así ese instante, ahora, esté desterrado de mi memoria. (I, for instance, no longer remember the moment when this story began. I know it was on August 25th, 1987, around 6 pm, on Argentina Street, in Medellín, but I no longer remember well the moment when I put my hand in the pocket of a dead man and found a poem. In this case I'm lucky; I wrote it down on a notebook at once. I wrote it down on my journal, although I never thought I'd ever forget that I had found a poem in the pocket of my dead father. That moment I no longer remember. *But I have proof; I have several proofs that that happened in my life*, even if that instant is now uprooted from my memory; 16-17; my emphasis).

A rather short paragraph in longhand, written on the pages of an old notebook, is *la prueba*, one of the many "*pruebas*" (roughly equivalent to the English "piece of evidence," and, with a different shade of meaning, "proof"). Abad seems to give so much importance to (what he regards as) the probatory value of this journal page, and seems so intent on showing us this is so, that when we turn the page, we see a photographic reproduction of the page in question. Abad has even added a note in longhand --superimposed to the journal photo --indicating the lines in

which he referenced the “poem in the pocket.” The text has been interrupted by an image... of a text. Just as it happened when Walsh’s proofreader story was “interrupted” by the insertion of galley proofs and handwritten corrections, one may wonder whether it might be worth it to explore the “graphic evidence;” i.e., to decipher Abad's handwriting, or turn the page and continue reading the main text.⁹

If a page earlier *memory* was reduced to “traces of words,” Abad goes further when specifying the nature of *forgetting*. He begins to sketch his view on what forgetting is by posing a rhetorical question whose answer will echo throughout the book. “¿Qué queda de la vida,” asks Abad, “si uno no la recuerda ni la escribe? Nada. Hay muchos pedazos de nuestra vida que ya no son nada, por un simple hecho: porque ya no los recordamos.” (“What is left of life when one neither remembers it nor writes it? Nothing. There are many parts of our lives that are nothing, due to a simple fact: we no longer remember them;” 15)

Abad claims that not only his “bad memory,” but memory in general --memory as a human capacity --works in such a way that forgetting something means losing it forever. Yet, what is the precise sense of this loss? Abad seems to be saying that *both* the memory *and* the event “disappear” and become *nada* (which in Spanish means both “nothing” and “nothingness”); that the content of our forgotten memories – persons or events – are annihilated.

Now, the psychological phenomenon of *forgetting* could plausibly be conceived as “losing forever” the *memory* of an event or a person – and in this sense, this “loss” *could* be construed as disappearance; as the obliteration *of the memory* (i.e., of the capacity to bring to consciousness one specific representation of a specific event or person ---or whichever the

⁹ Did he really reference the poem in his journal? With some effort, one can read the line highlighted by Abad, and it turns out that it is, at most, a *paraphrase* of the Borgesian line.

content of the forgotten memory may be). In this sense, we may say something like, “Nothing remains of the event... in our minds or memories” and, perhaps, elide the “where” and say, “Nothing remains of the event.”

But Abad seems, at times, to shift from the above claim --a claim about *psychology* (i.e., about memory and forgetting) --to a claim about *ontology* (i.e., about the existence of entities – objects, living beings, actions, etc. – and their conditions of creation and annihilation). However, this seemingly problematic view is happily bypassed when he subsequently explains that writing can save our memories from being lost forever. Abad *had forgotten*, but then “brought back,” retrieved, *in and through words*, the memory of the moment when he saw and kneeled by his father, gunned down seconds earlier but already dead; and, following a quasi-instinctive drive to feel the body, reached his pockets, and took the sheet of paper that contained the Borges poem – a copy in longhand, written by his father. A very specific memory of a very specific event, which he had forgotten *until he read his journal entry*. Because he wrote it down, *both memory and event* were saved from *disappearing* forever; from becoming *nada*.

Abad’s efforts to prove the authenticity of his memories regarding the poem are motivated, in part, by his openly avowed bad memory (which is made more disquieting if we take at face value his view on the utter irretrievability of forgotten events). But there is a further, more specific, personal reason. The memoir about his father, *El olvido que seremos* (2006) [*Oblivion. A Memoir* (2012)], owes its title to a line of the very poem he found in his father’s pocket. Shortly after its publication, an eccentric figure in the literary *ambient* accused Abad of falsely attributing the poem to Borges to give more luster to his memoir.

Initially, Abad didn’t give much importance to those accusations; he even added that he doesn’t care much for the notion of authorship. Why, then, his change of heart? Why such an

anxiety, such obsession with finding evidence to prove that Borges was indeed the author of the poem found in his father's pocket? “If the inept Colombian justice system cannot find the murderers [n.b. GLL: “authors” of the murders}, I, at least, will find the author of the sonnet or sonnets” (34) he writes. Abad doesn't give any further explanations, and the first impression is that of being exposed to a black-humored *non-sequitur* whose odd effect is in part caused by the combination of lexical choices usually associated with moral outrage, and the blatantly nonsensical reasoning.

However, isn't this too hasty? Could there be a relevant connection between corroborating – proving – the authorship of the *murder*, and corroborating — proving—the authorship of the *poem*? Perhaps, if he left the accusation unclarified, his credibility --and that of the memoir --might be weakened. This, in turn, would make *his word*, as well as *the memory and life of his father*, more vulnerable to attacks: doubts about his credibility, coupled with poor memory, would leave Abad with fewer resources to refute aspersions, to put it mildly.

In this context, Abad's awareness of the problems that his bad memory might lead to became particularly acute when his initial attempts to settle the matter by resorting to “proofs” that his father's handwritten poem was indeed penned by Borges failed miserably simply because *he couldn't remember where or how he got to know that the piece was authentic*. Second, if the poem isn't a Borges original, it would mean that his father was deceived – or betrayed by either himself or others --in the *one thing* Abad regarded as symbolically and ethically uplifting and undefeatable about an event that has little of that. Abad feels it is a consolation of sorts --and something that captures a core feature of his father's character – to know that in the very moment in which he was being murdered, he had a copy, in his own handwriting, of a Borges poem he had just read to a radio audience. As if, in a way, the

juxtaposition of objects and acts – bullets and poem; assassination and collectively engaging with a poem – emphasized the difference between all that the death squads represented, and all that his father represented. The lofty or naïve or clichéd air of these lines takes on quite a different meaning if the reader is cognizant of, or searches for, alternative accounts of the same event, which Abad himself hints at.¹⁰

Traiciones seems to suggest that being deceived about the poem would add another layer of violence – what Hannah Arendt dubbed the violence of the *modern lie* --to the other, more explicit one that was the murder. In Arendt’s view, lying aims not so much at hiding a fact or an action (and making the target of the lie believe something different), but at destroying the fact or action (and replacing it by a false account that would have the same force and “reality” of the obliterated one). Again, this view bears a certain resemblance to that of forgetting *qua* annihilation. (Arendt 1967 and 1971; Caruth 2011; Jay 2009 and 2011).

In light of these considerations, Abad’s odd-sounding “explanation” --“Si la inepta justicia colombiana no puede hallar a los asesinos, al menos yo podré hallar al autor del soneto” [*If the inept Colombian Justice cannot find the murderers, at least I will be able to find the*

¹⁰ The disparity between this formulation and a very similar one found in *Oblivion* is almost a practical joke—or a “memory betrayal”? Something was lost or forgotten or omitted in the move from 2006’s *Oblivion* to 2009’s *Traiciones*: the comforting thought that his father had just read, and still carried with him, a copy of the Borges poem at the very moment when he is gunned down *lacks the literal and metaphorical flipside* present in *Oblivion*, as well as in *Los falsificadores de Borges* (2012), an account of roughly the same events, given by Jaime Correas). According to these accounts, the hit-list on which his own name was clearly written shared room with the poem, in the same pocket, but somehow it dropped out of the picture in *Traiciones*. Readers cognizant of this discrepancy surely appreciate the irony, or the performative contradiction between claiming to be deeply *interested in proving one’s memory reliable*, and allowing such a blatant disparity between two books that are obviously connected to go unchecked.

author of the sonnet"] (34) – seems to make more sense. Very incisively, Catalina Quesada summarizes the issue thus: “To the question of how to narrate history ... and the voluntary *betrayals bewen discourse and reality*,” she writes, referring to the betrayal of the justice system, and perhaps to the false charges against Abad, “one must add ... the *involuntary betrayals* that hide the truth on which justice ought to be based” (218).

Thus, despite Abad’s initial emphasis on the evidentiary value of both his *writing on the journal* and *the photo* reproducing the journal, he soon realizes that this “evidence” --both material (the journal; the photo) and symbolic (language, or his written account of the event) --is more vulnerable and precarious than he initially thought.

Not only the State paraphernalia of the judiciary, but also the inconsistencies Abad finds in the archives and records of papers, journals, and other written “sources” (?) undermine his faith. But even that which we *do* write or “tell” immediately also involves a certain degree of loss.

However, what at first seems an air-tight device to save our memories and experiences soon proves to be less straightforward. “If life is the original, memory is a copy of the original, and our notes, a copy of memory” (“Si la vida es el original, el recuerdo es una copia del original, y el apunte, una copia del recuerdo” (15), writes Abad to encapsulate the inevitable time-gap that separates *event* and *writing of the event* – often mediated by *memory* of the event.

This time-gap, especially in cases like Abad’s strange memory flaws, also involves some loss. Lastly, in the very act of going over the text to make sure we have recorded our memory (of the event) with as little loss or distortion as possible, we engage in an act of recall that is already a “mental” narrative.

And, as such, following Borges, we get further away from the accurate memory.¹¹

Como decía el mismo Borges, y es un hecho supongo que neurológico de la memoria, recordamos las cosas no tal como ocurrieron, sino tal como las relatamos en nuestro último recuerdo, en nuestra última manera de contarlas (As Borges himself used to say -- and this is, I guess, a neurological fact of memory - we remember things not exactly as they happened, but as we narrated them in our last recollection, in our last way of telling them; 149)]

Increasingly anxious with every dead end, Abad follows myriad clues, some of which take him abroad. The reader follows his search, page by page, often stopped by a photo, derailed by an email, propelled by one of Abad's conversations with one of his many interlocutors, or by a poem found on the back of the photo of a book found in a small library... or disoriented by the multiple stimuli coming off the page, just as Abad stops, too, equally disoriented --or so he makes us believe.

Soon, Abad finds himself hearing a string of stories ranging from the plausible but inconclusive, all the way to the surreal or the grotesque: Borges in a New York City bar, in the 70s, dictating poems to one María Panero, whom he had just met and fallen in love with; Borges somehow linked to the editors of an obscure student magazine in a far-away province in Northern Argentina; Borges *modeling* for Guillermo Roux, the acclaimed artist, while a French journalist tries to interview Borges, whose answers are one-liners—line after line of the same

¹¹ Underlying these worries, there is the question of whether there is such thing as a direct transcription of

poem he had already, allegedly, dictated to María Panero.

In this context, Abad resorts to Bea Pina, his hermetic friend, to whom the book is dedicated –whom he describes as playing many roles – confidante, helper, and even “hada madrina” (41), Bea is “an epidemiologist expert in finding strange things” [“una epidemióloga experta en averiguar cosas raras”] (42). Bea Pina sounds, actually, *rara* herself. She is, at times, a very human, very helpful friend. But for the most part, her presence adds yet another layer to the texture and atmosphere of the story --a mix of magic, fairy-tale, supernatural protection, humor, and, somehow, in the mix, something hard to spot but not to feel, a vague but pervasive feeling of threat; “she lives in the middle of Finland, "ella vive en el centro de Finlandia, en la mitad de la nada [n.b., en medio de la nadad], en medio de la nieve y de la niebla" (41-42). Besides the barely disguised paraphrase of the Nazi motto for the Final Solution, there is the return of the, by now, very charged "nada": "in the middle of *nothingness*" though of course the English equivalent would be "in the middle of nowhere."

But Bea herself has, or is, a spectral presence;¹² we only know of her from Abad's comments, and from a few fragments of her emails, mediated by Abad's choice to include them in his text. No photos of her; no records whatsoever of the existence of this woman who plays a key role in Abad's search; in the search conducted by a man obsessed with documenting and “proving” each and every move; each and every source.

(non-verbalized) memory into a written account.

¹² Bea is a nameless, incorporeal presence that, from her first intervention (appearance?) establishes a firm, complex “feel;” her presence is pervasive. Yet it is a presence that echoes Abad's earlier reference to Lichtenstein's knife: a knife without a blade, whose grip is missing, and, again in Abad's words, "an object that can exist only in words, which cannot be shown, but which you can see *in that phrase*" (p. 12). Bea Pina herself seems to be made of words, or of "traces of words."

Let us reiterate, however, that this unsettling, ominous feeling is just one component in the blend of impressions that Bea Pina seems to elicit. It is not that she simply triggers dread. She adds more complexity to the emotional texture of the narrative, formally achieved by the juxtaposition, crossings, and blends of threads of embedded micro-narratives, themes, registers, and genres—it's as if one genre were slightly more prevalent for a short while; as if, for instance, the “feel” of the detective story prevailed or seemed to prevail at a certain moment, only to fade or morph into something like a parody of the autobiographical essay. These shifts are sometimes smooth and almost imperceptible, and others abrupt and jarring, as a sort of Brechtian intervention.

These shifts are brilliantly articulated in a recent study on the mechanisms of hybridization at work in *Traiciones*, which discusses the various strategies and effects achieved by the nimble manipulation and torsion of three canonical genres: short fiction, autobiography, and essay—and a fourth, perhaps most destabilizing one, which is forefronted by the use and “presence of visual documents that link the text to the journalistic genre” [“la presencia de los documentos visuales que vinculan el texto con el género periodístico”] (Dulou 146)

Further, the discussion of *intra*-generic hybridization is particularly important for our purposes. In the case of the *cuento* as genre (short fiction), the critic teases out the nimble combinations or shifts involving the detective story, the fable, the fairy-tale tradition, and the erudite, Borgesian sub-genre of *cuento* --all of which, when combined with intra-generic threads of the essay, the autobiography, and the journalistic genres, yield “moments” in which the reader tackles configurations such as the “short story of detective intrigue, erudite, and scientific” (“cuento de intriga policial, erudita y científica” (146).

This label doesn't refer *necessarily* to a hybrid sort of *cuento*, for each of the components of the said configuration *may* make use of one or more elements of *one or more subgenres* of the four main genres examined by Dolou. Therefore, the above coinage might be construed as “cuento [by now, a placeholder for “narrative of unspecified *nature*] de intriga policial [elements of the *detective story*], erudite [elements of the *scholarly essay* and/or the *Borgesian strand of the short story genre*] y científica [elements of the subgenre “*investigative journalism*”].”¹³

Even granting that Bea has something of a spectral presence, this new occurrence of *nada* in Abad's description of his friend's dwelling place, in addition to the web of associations Abad established earlier, brings back the echo of the chain Nothingness--Oblivion--Murder--Disappearance. Abad's lexical choices, then, keep alluding to the semantic web in which “nada,” “annihilation,” “disappearance,” among others, might seem to refer to the “methodology” of the Southern Cone military regimes.

It is puzzling that, although Colombians *had* first-hand experience with disappearances --Abad himself had a concrete, personal memory involving disappearances in his native

¹³ Now, while these hybridization mechanisms are pregnant with possibilities, they have also elicited forms of misreading in which the text has been *smoothed over or reduced to one (or one governing) genre*. It has been called “collection of essays” and, perhaps more interesting in terms of the seriousness of the Kinbotean dangers, it has been read as a “rigorous investigation” in historiography; or, more specifically, as “an important tool that contributes conceptual and methodological elements ... for the historian,” which might even foster a renewal of the so called “new cultural history.” [“una importante herramienta que aporta elementos metodológicos y conceptuales para ...[el] historiador ... [elementos que podrían contribuir a una renovación de la nueva historia cultural;” Cassiani 175).

Medellín¹⁴ --he seems to track closely the case of Argentina, *without* saying so explicitly, but, instead, carefully planting hints that *allow* readers to make the connection first, and the reasonable, increasingly strong, but inconclusive conjecture that Argentina's *desaparecidos* are, somehow, related to the puzzle of authorship – authorship of his father's murder; of the poem in his pocket.

The cumulative effect of these allusions would be almost irritating (in a black-humored way) if Bea Pina, finally, hadn't brought with her the presence of concrete, Argentine disappearances that might be linked to Abad's search for the authorship of the poem. She sends an email to Abad, with information about the aforementioned María Panero, who is, apparently, the young woman who might have written down the poem upon Borges' dictation.

Bea Pina says that this María Panero is an Argentine who had been in NYC around the time of Borges' talks, and --and here the text is "interrupted" again: the next four pages have no "proper" text; four attachments from Bea Pina's email are "pasted" on those pages: three

¹⁴ Consistent with the comparative absence of (or, rather, with the few but carefully chosen set of references to) Abad's father, *Traiciones* omits that in *El olvido que seremos* (2006) – *Oblivion. A Memoir* (2012) – there is a vivid account of a day when Abad-as-a-young-boy, at home with his father, heard a knock on the door, saw his father open, heard the distraught neighbor explain the paramilitary had disappeared her son; that no one was willing to help. The brief but vivid account ends with the image of the boy, still standing, stunned – the rage of his father when hearing of the widespread, paralyzing fear or cowardice or indifference; the rage rapidly turning into urgent need to leave the house, at once, with his neighbor, to search for—what? A vague, unlikely solution. Everything happened fast; his father gone, with the same courage, the boy thought (or was it, the text suggests, overconfidence – or irresponsible naiveté, or suicidal recklessness?) with which decades later he would walk Calle Chile, then turn into Argentina, then stop, abruptly, cutoff by the squad that swiftly but calmly and professionally, riddled him with bullets at point-blank range.

declassified US Department of State memos from the US Embassy in Buenos Aires, and a letter from Panero's family pleading for her.

There's no paraphrase of the memos. The change of register and lexicon, the cold distance with which these documents are usually written, and the story the memos tell --neither gore nor details; just the description of an "erroneous" or "mistaken" disappearance --abduction, torture, long negotiations, disputes between "hardliners" and "moderates" within the Armed Forces (another military lie: simply a power-struggle; the "hard-liners" vs "moderates" was a macabre fiction), Panero's family sending letters to the *junta*, and, finally, her release --make the experience of reading those memos quite jarring.

Are the memos reliable? A *prior* question: are they real or forged? Earlier, Abad claimed his journal had "proofs" of his acquaintance with the Borges poem – he had quoted it! Or, almost -- a close scrutiny of the photographic reproduction of the page in question, and a detailed reading, only show a few lines that *might* allude to, among many things, the putative Borges poem. It is neither a quotation nor a clearly paraphrastic passage.

Is Abad placing in front of us a big warning clue to the effect that we should not take his word at face value? Is he putting into question the word of the survivor/victim/witness? Or is he "reading" too much into his journal entry, without malice, simply because he *knew* the poem, and therefore, against that familiar background, something that Abad sees as a clear reference to the poem strike us as bearing a tenuous resemblance to something vaguely Borgesian?

Perhaps because "no one likes to be lied to" ("a nadie le gusta que le mientan"), Abad persists. And at his point, so do we, tempted to find out whether any of these accounts is real.. The memos are, indeed, veridical.¹⁵ But they are only a fragment of the story.¹⁶

¹⁵ They can be retrieved from the Declassification Project at the NSA/Washington University website.

As Abad begins to question the truthfulness of certain interlocutors and sources, we begin to question some of Abad's unaccountable oddities. Following one of the many leads, he strikes conversation with a fellow Borges-phile (who will soon prove to be one of the three-fold Ariadne's thread of Abad's search), and, later, when writing to Bea Pina about the news of his trip, he mentions that one of his new friend's favorite stories, or, in Abad's opinion, "his real favorite, is "El Evangelio según San Mateo," or something like that; I didn't remember it" ("*uno de sus cuentos, su preferido. "El Evangelio según San Mateo," o algo así; yo no lo recordaba;*" 118). This statement sounds, once again, off-putting and almost nonsensical --as if Abad were laughing at our expense.

It is abundantly clear that he knows the work of Borges very well; and in some respects, perhaps *too* well: he figured out a wrong date given by a witness because she mentioned that Borges' cat, Beppo, was meowing around. Abad catches the mistake immediately: Beppo had

Moreover, Telam (Telecommunications Office of the Government of Argentina), and other organizations have the records of the criminal cases that took place during the Dirty War, and Panero is one of them. Survivors from the illegal detention centers giving testimony in the 2012 trials concerning the systematic plan to abduct and "relocate" the newborns of "subversives" declared under oath having met Panero, briefly.

¹⁶ At some point in the process of researching online whether the Panero case is veridical or a mere fabrication, one learns that the squads were after María Panero, but they mistakenly caught her sister, who had the bad luck of being an "M" --Susana. M. Panero. Soon enough the sisters met in the torture chambers; Susana was released fairly quickly, but María wasn't. After long, tense negotiations, she was offered the "right of option," i.e., to either leave the country as an exile or deportee, or to stay under better detention conditions by "making her legal" -- issuing the necessary paperwork to forge a legal detention that would, ipso facto, *make it* legal, and, as such, a little bit less vulnerable—legal detainees had, in different degrees, access to lawyers and a precarious structure that might secure their survival. Yet, no one was exempt from "fugue attempts" -- cold-blooded executions.

died long before the date provided by the witness. How not to be mystified, then, when we hear Abad botching the title of one of Borges' well-known stories of his later period, "El Evangelio según Marcos"? And then again, is it worth interrupting the reading and checking out the short story? Could it give us another clue that we may find illuminating? Or will it be yet another piece of information that points at something undefinable that we know could help, but whose meaning we will grasp once it's too late?

A quick paraphrase of the story fits in a five-sentence footnote.¹⁷ It is, among other things, one of the most impressive narrative exemplars of misreading—an extreme case of failure in our interpretive and dialogical practices. What to make of Marcos? And, what to make of the illiterate family? This "nudge" – the potential clue of Abad's "forgotten" story --is actually worth following. In this respect, *Traiciones* ranges from subtle hints to explicit invitations. For instance, when Abad finds a recording of the radio program in which his father gave that last reading of the Borges poem, he invites the reader to check it out on a website whose URL he provides.

In the turmoil of succeeding tips and trips, Abad loses the "original", i.e., the sheet of paper, crumpled and with stains of dried blood, on which his father had copied the poem, in longhand, on the day of his murder? Being so valuable to Abad --to the point of considering it "evidence" that "proves" he was truly was by his father's side --how could he lose it? Yet lose it

¹⁷ Marcos leaves the city and goes to the *pampas* to preach. One family shows enough interest to receive him in their home, where he teaches them to read and interpret the Bible. One afternoon, months later, he hears clinging sounds of tools and wood, and almost at once realizes that he had misconstrued --misread, failed to *see*, failed to *hear* --what was really going on. Now he does hear, quite clearly, the metallic sound of the hammer with which the head of the family has just finished building the cross. With fervor and gratitude, the family will follow the teachings of the Gospels. Marcos knows, before the children

he did. Or so he claims. Foreseeing the reader's doubts, he adds, "Me dirán que eso no puede pasar, que uno no pierde ni arroja a la basura algo así, un documento tan íntimo, un papel tan importante" [You'll say that that can't happen; that one just doesn't lose or throws away such a personal document, such important sheet of paper] (21).

Indeed, when handling things dear to us, when doing things that by their very nature require a certain degree of concentration and focus, it is reasonable to think that one *would* be attentive –indeed, *more* attentive than usual. Abad sounds defensive --how could he have had such a lapse of attention? Did the “original” ever exist?

Following a clue given by the least likely source – a mythomaniac --Abad arrives in Mendoza, an Argentinean province in the Northwest, where he meets Jaime Correas, former editor of a long-extinct university magazine. His trip and meeting with Correas is, as will happen throughout the book, "proven" by the insertion of photos, texts of Correas' old literary magazines... and a long email to Bea Pina (87) telling her about his findings.

Correas turns out to be, first of all, a real person; or at least, a Mendoza website features a Jaime Correas who looks very much like the one that appears in Abad's photos. And he is, in fact, the Correas who published *Los falsificadores de Borges* (2012), *his* version of the events whose narrative account Abad gives us in *Traiciones*.

Correas virtually solves the mystery that had obsessed Abad for months. In a nutshell, he tells Abad that Borges dictated a handful of poems to three different amanuenses, in three different locations. The next two pages feature photos of the old magazines with the Borges poems; then, we are back to Abad's email to Bea Pina.

open the door and the Passion begins, that he will die on the cross that very day.

Then, eight consecutive pages reproduce Borges' chapbook in full, edited and published by Correas. On the next page, two blank pages: the left one, however, has a reproduction (a photo?) of a blank page, which seems to be a reproduction of *that very same page*.

While it's not unreasonable to suppose that readers would stop for a moment to ponder about this strange, unexpected *mise en abyme* of sorts, the suppositions one may make in this regard may well be as numerous as the readers who face the blank pages in question. But we do, at some point, turn the page, and, finally, we see a good-old-fashioned text, with no interruptions or distractions of any kind--three pages of uninterrupted reading, and, on the fourth, only text, too, but a most disorienting opening:

“As you know, our project was to write this story in four hands” (“Como sabes, el proyecto era escribir esta historia a cuatro manos;” 113).

Has Abad switched points of view? Previously, he had asked questions --or wondered about certain issues --and briefly addressed the reader, indirectly, without using the second-person. The abrupt change in point of view is jarring; and the story to be written "in four hands," which we are supposed to be acquainted with ("*As you know...*") is a complete mystery.

Then, it dawns on us that what we are reading isn't the "main text" but the same email Abad sent to Bea Pina from Mendoza --the one we had started to read a few pages earlier, in which we learned of Correas' publication of the Borges poems, the Cortázar book. For almost 100 pages, Abad's memory appeared to be much weaker than "normal." (?). Some of his alleged lapses were likely to sound peculiar --even implausible. And yet, now, a few pages of text and a few pages of photos suffice to make us go through a similar experience – a frustrating lapse of memory that, on the face of it, is equally, if not more, implausible.

Much of the work *Traiciones* does is achieved through the nimble use of these performative loops: the reading of the text *causes* the reader to *experience* what the narrative (until then) seemed to be merely *saying* and, at most, trying to *show*.

Bluntly put, this *specific* kind of performativity isn't about the text *doing* what it *says*, but *doing to the reader* what it says and does. In turn, the effectiveness of these performative loops owes much to the interplay and shifts between main narrative, email, and image. Still, as seen in the example above, it doesn't take a highly sophisticated device, but merely a few combinations, to give us a rather unsettling first-hand, almost physical experience of the fragility of memory.

Chastising Abad for his singularly poor memory first, and for having lost the "original" poem later, or beginning to question the veracity of his words --it all appears now as expressions of ignorance on our part--of a certain deficiency in our self-interpretation (i.e., we think *we* would *not* have lost the poem, but we also thought we didn't have such a poor memory ourselves), and, *a fortiori*, in the interpretation of the actions, words, and mishaps of others. Is it so easy to become some version of Walsh's Otero, Nabokov's Kinbote, or Abad's narrator in *Basura*? Or is it Abad who is "*playing us*" by dint of an ingenious arrangement of pages? Still, isn't this last question an Otero-sounding attempt at exculpating ourselves? After all, whatever premeditated page-arrangement there may be, it is still the case that it took just a few pages for us to lose our bearings.

Even the context to understand the "four-handed book" is given just a few pages earlier, though not before subjecting us to another performative loop that is activated thus: "I told him I preferred that each wrote his book on his own, and that, if we wanted, we could publish them together, one bound upwards, the other downwards, in a single volume" ("Yo le dije que prefería que cada uno escribiera su libro, y que si queríamos lo publicáramos juntos, por dos lados,

anverso y reverso, de un mismo ejemplar,;" 113), we read, and, despite a vague air of familiarity, we can't quite make out who the interlocutors are.

The account goes on, and reaches a dead end – in terms of our understanding of the text – and a climax – in terms of the performative loop --when we read this passage:

Me dijo que otras personas en quienes confiaba le habían dicho que el libro iba bien así. Yo le dije que las personas en quienes yo confiaba me habían dicho que el libro así iba mal y que la historia no se entendía, se volvía morosa (He/She told me that other people whom he/she trusted had told him/her that the book was going well as is. I told him/her that people whom I trust had told me that the book was not going well as is, and that the story was not quite comprehensible; that it was becoming sluggish; 113-14).

This last sentence both *describes* and *creates* what we as readers are experiencing. We don't quite understand, and whatever story this is, it has begun to feel sluggish... Yet, as we read the last clause, and we recall that it's an email from Abad to Bea Pina, we realize that the fourth-hand book, whose story wasn't altogether intelligible and was becoming sluggish, is no other than the book we are reading. That email was sent during the process of writing the book we are reading; i.e., it was integrated into the book itself, and Abad is telling Bea about a conversation he'd had with Jaime Correas, during which they discussed different options with a view to writing an account of the meandering paths that led to corroborating the authenticity of the poems.

As it happened, the copies of the magazines provided by Jaime Correas in Mendoza, as well as his account of the way the poems were written and published, convinced Abad that he was at the end of his search. Borges, very blind by then, had to dictate his brief poems or short prose pieces to occasional amanuensis. In a period of frequent travels and a relatively intense social life, those poems found a written outlet when Borges met with Dominique Rey, a French writer who was preparing a book on Borges, and Franca Beer, wife of Argentine artist Guillermo Roux.

Correas put Abad in touch with Beer and Rey, though by then Abad didn't feel he had to meet them *in order to corroborate* their accounts. He already believes them and has a general idea of the sequence of events that led to the writing of the poems. And yet, he does feel that he has to meet them, for very different reasons:

Tenía que hablar cuanto antes y oír de su propia boca el mismo relato, o alguno parecido al que Jaime y Coco me habían hecho. Quizás [oír] las variaciones de ese mismo relato...porque una memoria solamente es confiable cuando es imperfecta, y ... una aproximación a la precaria verdad humana se construye solamente con la suma de los recuerdos imprecisos, unidos a la resta de los distintos olvidos El relato sustituye a la memoria y se transforma en una forma de olvido. Sin embargo, tiene que haber elementos de memoria precisa. Hay detalles nuevos, en todo caso, en relación al relato del libro. (I had to speak with them as soon as possible, and listen to them tell me the same narrative, or one that resembled that of Jaime and Coco. Perhaps [listen to] variations of that same narrative... because memory is reliable only when it's imperfect ... an approach to the precarious human truth is built only with the addition of inaccurate memories joining the

subtraction of the various instances of forgetting... the narrative replaces the memory and becomes a form of oblivion. However, there must be elements of precise memory. There are new details, in any case, in connection to the narrative of the book; 149)

Indeed, when he next visits the Roux/Beer couple, their account matched the version according to which Borges had dictated those poems to different amanuenses in different places. Abad *did* notice, however, some variations and inconsistencies that, ultimately, did not alter the basic facts – again, the “brute facts” or “brute elementary data,” *pace* Arendt. .

Roux mentioned in passing that he made some quick sketches of Borges, in pencil, while he was revising the poems with Beer, and that he had given copies of the sketches to J. D. Rey, the third and last amanuensis, who published a few poems in his magazine with Roux's sketches on the cover. The artist asks Abad whether he would like to take a look at the originals, and soon he's back from the next room with a big envelope that reads, “Borges Originals.”

Remembering that Rey had told him, with some pride, that he had in Paris the Roux originals, Abad asks the artist whether he's certain that *those* are the originals. He is. Abad insists. Roux smiles, looks for an eraser, and chooses an inconspicuous spot on a corner of the sketches: drawn in pencil, he knows they will give in easily at the first gentle contact with the eraser.

Stunned, Roux and Beer see the sketches unaltered, immune to the action of the eraser. They could have sworn they had kept the originals. Rey could have sworn otherwise. Roux takes a pencil, and using *the copy* as a model, in a few minutes he sketches an almost identical drawing, “gives it to me, and says, There you go. Now it's an original. Have it. It's a present” (“me la entrega y me dice: “Ahora es un original. Se lo regalo;” 178)

1.2 Originals and Copies. Identities and Characters. Seeing and Judging.

The tremendous ease with which *original and copy collapse into each other* raises disquieting questions, and seems to put even more pressure on the multifaceted nature of archival documentation.

A particularly interesting example is that of the US memos. After creating an “environment” in which the level of trust on, and skepticism about, Abad’s text—among others - - *Traiciones* has managed to make us doubt the authenticity of US Department of State memoranda, which, ironically, shows us how the Argentine military regime forged documents at will, and in so doing, literally *created* legal and factual conditions, events and even *persons* – *in the legal sense* – *as much as they literally disappeared them.*

The problem of “original/copy” – and “authentic/inauthentic;” “genuinely *X*” or “falsely *X*” --- is reconfigured in the second story. Abad goes back to his years as an exile, in Italy, immediately after the murder of his father.

Penniless, Abad resorts to the aid of Amnesty International, but, in time, jaded and angered by a combination of factors, he decides to go on his own. Helpful as the Amnesty entourage was, he couldn’t help feeling he was being exhibited as an exotic specimen from a land of murderers and massacres to appease the conscience of well-meaning Europeans, reinforcing the Eurocentric, victim-centered view on human rights and humanitarianism.

Some scenes take on the tone, imagery and flavor of the grotesque. And, we find passages that, in the same tone, push the (perceived) mockery that the critics of Carri saw in *Los rubios*.

Passages like the following are closer to the irreverence and more frontal challenges of works that came out after *Los rubios* and *Manèges* , (e.g., the texts of Mariana Eva Perez and

Ángela Urondo Raboy), even if they *do* have a family resemblance, and, probably, a mutually fruitful influence. On top of his many other penuries, Abad cringes when he finds himself, as per the directions of Amnesty's event organizers, among Argentine and Chilean exiles:

los exiliados latinoamericanos, con esa mirada triste ese aire miserable esas ganas morbosas de ser compadecidos, esas historias interminables ... de los milicos y los desaparecidos... Esos eran casi todos argentinos y chilenos, llevaban decenios de exilio... haciendo constante alarde de sus horribles recuerdos de tortura y mostrando las cicatrices en los dedos [y a veces, en los actos y ceremonias]me sentaban *Y a veces, en los actos y ceremonias*] me sentaban al lado de un compañero chileno o argentino que inevitablemente me abrazaba y lloraba. (the Latin American exiles, that sad face that miserable air that morbid desire to be pitied, those never-ending stories . . . of the military and the *desaparecidos*. Those were, almost all of them, Argentines and Chileans; they had decades in exile ... boasting about their horrible memories of torture, and showing scars on their fingers. [And sometimes, at this or that event] they'd sit me next to an Argentinean or Chilean *compañero* who inevitably hugged me and cried; 212)

When he decides to stay away from Amnesty as much as possible, and begins to look for jobs, however, he finds that the attitude of the well-meaning ladies who visited the "South American exhibit" was but one version in a spectrum that included, for instance, the recoiling of an interlocutor upon learning that he, Abad, was Colombian, "despite" his light-skinned complexion.

These attitudinal and micro-behavioral changes (e.g., subtle changes in tone of voice, posture, and other forms of body language) are not always registered by our conscious, deliberative “screens” -- regardless of our position as *objects* or *perpetrators* of these sub-agential interactions (Frankfurt 2007; Saul 2015) or Charles Taylor’s “sub-violent” attitudes—and “sub-violent hatred (Taylor 2011).

Still, these “micro-inequities” (Brennan 2014) or low-intensity “-ism” forms of discrimination (i.e., non-overt expressions of sexism, racism, etc.)¹⁸ *do* have a range of harmful effects that are related to, and sometimes overlap with, the effects of systematic, explicit psychological abuse; of social isolation (in “liberty”) and solitary confinement (in prison).

In this context, Abad denounces the attribution of global character traits—if he was Colombian, he *had* to be a bloodthirsty narco. And he gives a seemingly pedestrian example:

Por cómo se tarda Fulano en contar el dinero para pagar la cuenta, le atribuimos una personalidad, un fantasma de avaro; por cómo nos mira o no nos mira Zutana, le damos su fantasma de coqueta, de santurrón, de madre, de puta, de pura, de calculadora, de buena, de falsa buena, de rica, de tonta, de peligrosa, etc. (Because of how much time

¹⁸ From Sarah Ahmed to Susan James, Angela Smith to Charles Taylor, Sarah Brennan to David Velleman, research programs embedded in theoretical frameworks ranging from queer studies to cognitive science to social and affective neuroscience converge on the study of phenomena that share relevantly similar features, whether they be called “sub-violent attitudes” (Taylor 2011), Spinoza-inspired “passivity” (Ahmed 2010, for the Deleuzian Spinoza variety) or “passionate perceptions” (James 2012 for the analytically-informed Spinozist variety); “testimonial and hermeneutic injustice” (Fricker 2012); “micro-inequities” (Brennan 2014 and 2016) or, at a more consciously explicit level, indictments displaying varying degrees of symbolic and institutional violence achieved by “semantic displacements” (Carnevale 2016)

John is taking to count the money to pay the bill, we attribute to him a personality, a ghost of miserly; because of the way in which Mary looks or does not look at us, we give her, in turn, her ghost of coquettish; of puritanically or hypocritically saintly; of mother, whore, calculating, good, posing as good, rich, dumb, dangerous, etc.; 260).

The reader of course agrees, and keeps on reading. *Unless* there is something off, not quite right, in the example. Let us reread it; let us go over Abad's assignation of characters traits to Fulano (*male*) and Zutana (*female*).

The one attribute projected onto Fulano is certainly negative – *stingy*. Many of the attributes projected onto Zutana are also negative, but “buena,” for instance, is, well, tautologically positive. If Zutana is good, i.e., a good person, our judgment of her ought to be positive.

Now, a closer scrutiny might allow us to argue that the attribution of character traits projected onto Fulano (*male*) can be slightly modified, and our judgment of him (or of that trait) will be correlatively modified as well. *All we know* is that he's taking his time to count the money. If we *assume* (and *project* onto him) that he's *stingy*, there must be an intermediate piece of information that should give us some reason to call him stingy, to judge stinginess negatively or, if the intermediate piece of information is different, there is room to change the attribution, whether in kind or degree.

Let's suppose we learn he's counting the money very slowly because, due to a miscalculation, he insisted on paying everybody's bill, only to find he is short of money. We might have to drop the attribution of stinginess, and, perhaps, replace it by “careless,” “absent-minded” – even negligent or prodigal. Still, we may still consider he has “stingy” impulses

(which, say, tend to “occur” when he has overspent). We might, then, recalibrate the attribute, without necessarily rejecting it altogether. But we *would quite likely* change the evaluative judgement. Depending on the kind and degree of stinginess – for instance, if he has very infrequent and “mildly stingy” outbursts – we would have to qualify, even if we maintain, the attribute. More importantly, we would have to change our judgment—a censoring or condemnatory judgment wouldn’t be justified.

Now, of the attributes projected onto Zutana, which ones admit of this kind of modification? “False,” “dangerous,” “impure” ... In none of these cases does the valence change: at most, we might say that Zutana is *less ‘false’* (in the sense of “hypocritical”) than we might have thought; less “calculating” or “dangerous” – but our negative evaluative (perhaps moral) judgment will only diminish in degree. Dangerous she is, and condemnation she deserves. We may need to recalibrate the kind and degree of condemnation or censoring attitude or action to an “appropriate” level. But the kind, the quality – the evaluative *negative* judgment—remains. And so does the censoring attitude. “Dangerous” or “false” cannot be escaped. On the other end of the spectrum, let us consider “pure.”

Even in a non-moral sense, there is no such thing as *purer than*. By definition, there is no such thing as degrees of purity. One may speak loosely or metaphorically of more, or less, pure than (e.g., refined alcohol being purer than...). But, strictly speaking, something is pure, or is not, and if the latter is the case, what we have is degrees of *impurity*. A drop of water in a gallon of alcohol makes the alcohol not pure; perhaps it's irrelevantly impure – that’s why we speak (loosely) of such things as “99.99% pure.” But is it pure alcohol? It cannot be. It is a solution of 00.01 % water, and 99.99% of alcohol. But pure it is not.

. Now, when we extrapolate this "attribute" to a person, the same rigidity remains, but made *much worse due to the strong evaluative component that "purity" as an attribute of character carries with it*. Regardless of the normative context – ethical, legal, religious – the slightest "impurity" would *ipso facto* deserve some sort of negative judgment and, probably, of censoring or condemnation. One is either pure, or else, *ipso facto*, impure in some way or another, and to some degree or another.

And then again, just like in "dangerous" (more, or less, dangerous, but always deserving of a normatively negative judgment), once we "fall" from purity into impurity, there is no way out. The ramifications of this conceptual-normative system are well known (e.g., possible associations with the notions of contamination and/or sickness; of sinfulness or inherently evil natures, etc.).

Abad's casual example of how lamentable global attributions of character are may turn out to be, if read carefully, much more problematic – and revealing of a much deeper, and much more deeply ingrained, problem.

Individuals or groups that fall within this kind of "second-nature" attribution system are harmed in a variety of ways. Unsurprisingly, women have been, and still are, one such group. Children – again, perhaps unsurprisingly – are another such group.

Commonplace as these statements may be, in the next two chapters we will see how both groups – blended in the figure of the female child – can be harmed in a variety of rather different, perhaps more unfamiliar or subtler ways.

1.3 The Proofs of Abad. Disappearing Links: Evidence, Truth, Memory.

The search for links that may secure a reliable connection between event and evidence -- on the basis of which we accept to believe the truth of a statement that affirms the reality of the event in question ---has failed systematically: neither photos nor tokens such as books, journals, tickets, or emails give the kind of warrant that the juridical discourse demands of testimonial accounts. The memos can be forged; the recording can be doctored to sound like Abad Gomez's voice. The photos, which Abad naively thought would provide incontrovertible evidence, are, in the end, images whose bearing on, and connection with, a particular action or person is far from self-evident.

First, the *reductio* becomes clearest when we realize that not even advocates of the juridical discourse could say anything with a minimum of confidence in their utterance's chances of meeting their very own standards of truth. That is to say, either the bar has been raised too high when it comes to the juridical discourse's assessment of testimonial accounts, or their standards of truth, as they are, cannot be met even by their most zealous advocates.

Second, it shows that memory and memory-dependent claims and activities (e.g., testimonial accounts) are not "mirrors", or photo-or video-like images, nor linguistic correlates or any other sort of token of that general class, stored in our minds and amenable to be shown and then put back as if it were any run-of-the-mill physical object.

And yet, this doesn't lead to a skeptical rejection of *all* accounts of memory, but, rather, to the acknowledgment that a realistic, reliable view of memory will have to accept discrepancies, areas of confusion, forgotten aspects or features of the recalled event --in sum, a degree of precariousness and imperfection --which can only be ameliorated if we assume a

humbler position and are fully aware of our precarious epistemic position.

Third and last, it showed Abad that memory, with all its imperfections, can be faithful to central "facts" --what Arendt called "brutal elementary data."

To sum up, we have begun to argue that our epistemic positions in general, and our mnemonic capacities in particular are more modest than we tend to think; that we have no airtight protection against the possibility to inflict harm on others, even if and when we do so (especially when we do so) unwittingly; lastly, that the link between belief, evidence, and event is not and cannot be as accurate, or as well-the juridical discourse makes it out to be.

CHAPTER 2: Whose Voices? Whose Memories? Memory, History, and Identity in

Albertina Carri's *Los rubios* (2003)

2.1 The Problem: Form, Authority, and Interpretation.

Almost fifteen years after its release, Albertina Carri's *Los rubios* (*The Blondes*, 2003), might still be regarded as “the single most controversial Argentine film in years, if not decades” (Anderman 107). Of course, *Los rubios* was not an *ex nihilo* creation, as Anderman’s own overview shows us, by focusing on the hallmarks and general characteristics of the cinematic production of the last 50 years—roughly, from the 1960s through the first decade of this century. Also, diachronically, we can see how Carri’s work was not unrelated to that of other children of the disappeared. María Inés Roque’s *Papá Iván* (2000), and Andrés Habbeger’s *(h)istorias cotidianas* (2000), are, as it were, close relatives of *Los rubios* – as close and as far and different from one another as relatives can be, that is.

The reading of Carri's film advanced in this chapter, then, will leave out an explicit and sustained dialogue with its predecessors, though it will engage with them indirectly, by addressing some of the more recalcitrant and “controversial” *topoi* of the film. At the same time, it will follow, broadly, the tracks of the previous chapter. Roughly, I argue that, if in *Traiciones* the critique of interpretive practices rests on certain ways in which the text engages *us* in a kind of violent, quasi-Kinbotean reading, in *Los rubios* a different but complementary and equally violent kind of Kinbotean torsion occludes interpretive possibilities.

Again, just like Kinbote, who “reads in each new work the same ghostly presence of his own story” (Castillo 1985, 55), we, readers and interpreters, tend to construe the film as either an

attack on, or a vindication of, whichever issues we may favor or loath. In turn, these operations can be analytically divided in the two main groups already presented earlier:

a) *intra-textual or centrifugally oriented strategies* that deprive us of anchoring points, and which therefore prevent us from making warranted, or text-supported choices of any of the many threads and narrative devices that compete for our attention; and

b) *extra-textual or centripetal effects* resulting from the formal structure of the film, which *requires* --as did the structure of Walsh's "Esa mujer" and of Abad's *Traiciones* -- that its "nudges" to the reader be heeded, i.e., that *it is on the reader* to seek contextual information beyond the film proper, without which interpretation will be either impoverished or even quite likely to go astray.

Conversely, and only by way of illustration, we shall present a few discussions of *Los rubios* that focus on allegedly weak points and aspects of the film, most of which are the direct result of failing to see or heed the text's formal demands. In this context, we shall see how this interpretive blindness obscures subtly layered formal and thematic threads in which a variety of stances regarding individual and collective memory, responsibility, and identity are presented (even if *as open, unsettled, tentative lines of inquiry*).

They involve current discussions about the interpretation of the recent past, but also problems of present-day, post-dictatorial societies: from gender issues to normalized forms of violence, to alternative forms of intersubjective, collective processes of memory-construction that escape the current binary, polarized framework of discussion. The latter addresses both the problematic juridical discourse and the equally problematic aspects of the *memoria montonera*, but it goes beyond them.

Two concrete cases – the silencing of women; the unwitting disregard or blindness to the figure of the child as subject of, but also as agent of, violence -should illustrate the gravity of the situation.

2.2 Missing Anchoring Points and *Not See(k)ing Contextual Information*

Since its release, one of the thorniest features of Carri's film has been the alleged oscillation between the *documentary* and the *making* of the documentary and, straddling both, the resort to fictional elements, such as the scripted participation of an actress playing the role of Carri. The "documentary" part of the film ostensibly follows Carri's search for information about her parents, Ana María Caruso and Roberto Carri, well-known intellectuals who joined Montoneros in the early 7ties. They were captured by the military in early 1977, held in the "Sheraton" (a police station used as a CCD – Spanish acronym for “clandestine detention center” in La Matanza, a *partido* (county) in the outskirts of Buenos Aires), and eventually disappeared by the Army in late 1979 or early 1980.

The complex shifts between the "documentary" and the "fictionalized" story about the *making* of the documentary contest this seemingly straightforward "plot." Let us review Gabriela Nouzeilles' classic presentation of the problem:

The passage between the fictional and non-fictional Albertinas [*n.b., i.e., which entails the passage between the fictional and non-fictional strata of the film*] corresponds in the movie to the alternation of the use of colour and a movie camera for the fictional one, and the use of black and white and a video camera for the 'real' one – a distinction that, given

the frequent slipping of one level into the other, soon becomes hazy. Far from being the exaggerated symptom of narcissistic self-absorption, the multiplication of Albertinas seeks to throw into disarray previously held notions of fixity of meaning and documentary truth. (Nouzeilles 25)

Now, *how* to cash out this "disarray" of "meaning and documentary truth" has been a major point of contention. The initial agreement on the "haziness" of the distinction between fictionalization and documentary soon gives way to a range of sometimes compatible, sometimes conflicting views about the kind, degree, and intensity of this "haziness" --and of its ensuing consequences.

This variety of views could be roughly divided in three main groups. First, readings according to which Carri's film shows the exhaustion of the documentary genre. Intentionally or not, this "exhaustion" also targets the notion of *documentary truth* and its broader sociopolitical underpinnings,—or so the argument goes. The first and main casualty, allegedly, is the set of assumptions that undergird debates centered on the politics of memory (Kohan 2004, Garibotto and Gomez 2006; Garibotto 2011). A second group of interpretive approaches has deemed the film as innovative on both formal and political grounds, often framing their analysis in terms of Carri's pitting the *testimonial* documentary against her own, original version of "*performative* documentary," in which traditional forms of memory and identity construction are contested (Page 2005; Noriega 2009)

This latter aspect, however, varies widely, ranging from readings that discuss Carri's challenge against the unwritten but forceful prescriptions of influential (and, arguably, most visible) views on how to deal with the legacy of the dictatorship -and, therefore, on how to construct a personal and collective narrative memory of the 1970s --to readings that reject the

very possibility of attempting to launch any sort of memory project (Noriega 2009; Ros 2012). Lastly, the consolidation of studies self-identified as focusing on "post dictatorship cultural production," about which a brief overview was given in the Introduction, tends to regard these works chiefly as a generational struggle or confrontation (and assessment of) the previous generation's sociopolitical projects. This assessment yields, on this view, possibilities that range from sheer incomprehension to reconciliation (and even a continuation of sorts) of the previous generation's projects— in most cases, those of their own disappeared parents (Ros 2013).

A common assumption of these approaches is that Carri's film lends itself to the identification of filmic/textual "anchoring points" (i.e., textual support) to buttress the articulation of any one interpretation.

In what follows, I argue that, if we take seriously what Nouizelles called "haziness" (or, to put it more strongly, "breakdown") of the codes that distinguish "documentary" from "fictionalization" --a point on which most critics agree --it follows that we no longer have anchoring points from which (on which we may take foothold) to articulate any given reading.¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, given the documentary-like appearance of the film, the voiceover --Carri's commentary in off (i.e., off-screen, or "off-camera) – is a fairly widespread pillar on which a variety of readings rest.

Although it would seem reasonable to use the director's off-camera commentary as the main thread or guide on which to base one's interpretation of the film, and even conceding that a good number of critical pieces of this sort *do* offer insightful commentary, there are reasons that

¹⁹ Just as Abad found himself increasingly aware of the impossibility of linking an alleged piece of evidence with an alleged fact, we should become aware of the same such impossibility in *Los rubios*. Once the color/black-and-white code is broken, we are no longer able to distinguish "real" documentary

override the temptation to hold on to the voiceover. Or at the very least; that should make us reconfigure whichever interpretation we might advance, based on Carri's voiceover or otherwise.

The voiceover is not the only springboard of interpretation. Other treatments of *Los rubios lean* on a variety of formal elements or threads to articulate the interpretation --usually, a main element that vertebrates the reading (e.g., quite often, Carri's voiceover, admittedly) and ancillary ones, which may take more prominence at times (e.g., the de-contextualization *effect* created by the absence of standard biographical markers, such as photos of Carri's parents).

Yet, rich as much of the critical output may be, these unwarranted choices are often used to derive or infer quasi-political statements, viewpoints, or straightforward judgments on the themes and "methods" purportedly presented in the film. The critical corpus on *Los rubios* is too vast to even attempt a review of the variety of "families" of interpretive proposals that sprang from the above move. Merely by way of partial illustration of the range of conflicting interpretations let us mention Kohan 2004, who argues that Carri depoliticizes the disappearances; Nouizelles 2005, that the surfeit of information paradoxically yields neither knowledge nor answers to Carri's questions; Noriega 2009, that there is an insurmountable gap between the two generations, which forecloses all possibilities of understanding.

Although recent critical developments dig deeper and take stock of the complexity of *Los rubios* (and, in so doing, they attempt to dodge paths that, sometimes unintentionally, land us on dead-ends or gridlocks), the "price" they pay is still too high: Ocampo 2013 is probably one of the most insightful discussions of the non-binary structure of Carri's film, but his reading leaves all autobiographical issues as well as all extra-and para-textual variables outside the frame of discussion. Ros 2013 argues that there is a fairly distinct, relatively nuanced, non-Manichean

evaluation of the previous generation's political projects. Yet, her discussion is grounded on questionable assumptions that eventually lead her astray, as will be discussed in the conclusion.

In turn, Piedras 2013 and 2014, persuasively poses ethical challenges about the way in which the film --and its crew-- address the neighbors. Yet his critique depends on an assumption that cannot be taken for granted, i.e., that the "interviews" with the neighbors are "real" and not "fictionalized;" that is, not "scripted" or performed with the knowledge and consent of the "interviewees." Again, once we are unable to tell what is scripted and what is not; what is "fictional" and what isn't, we have to change our deeply ingrained interpretive assumptions. Having said that, it would be interesting to put his discussion in dialogue with Carri 2007, which discusses, in fact, the question of the film's treatment of the neighbors.

Just as in *Traiciones* we find textual crossings among different media -handwritten pages from Abad's journal, photographs, maps, and facsimile reproductions of US Department memos - -in *Los rubios* there is a variety of texts that interrupt the conventional flow of the film, sometimes covering the whole screen. Also, there are scenes in which Carri/Couceyro jots down notes that we, the audience, *might* get to make out *on occasion*, and photos that we very often do *not* get to make out, let alone make sense of.

We are given no explanations. For instance, the photos, or fragments of photos, in which we see children and adults who (one might guess) are Carri's parents, are visibly altered or expurgated, so that we don't get to see their faces.

Along these lines, Moira O'Keeffe makes a similar but stronger (more skeptical) point, which, until recently, was shared by a significant number of critical discussions of *Los rubios*; "Couceyro looks through photos, but the identities and contexts of the images are never made clear, and no stories or memories emerge from the exercise" (528).

Strictly speaking, O’Keeffe is right. However, rather than a conclusion of the discussion, this puzzling scenario should be its starting point. Bearing in mind the two-fold condition that these works propose (i.e., in this case, the need for extra-textual information; a need that becomes clear if we see in Couceryo’s photo-shuffling not just a barren “exercise” – which, in these conditions, it is – but also, as does Daniel Hernández in “La aventura...” as an opportunity to read the very same object in a different way, that is, as a nudge to go beyond the film, since it would seem quite clear that, in the absence of contextual information, we would have to accept, with resignation, that all we can do is watch Couceryo’s opaque movements; instead, more information might allow us *not necessarily* to “put the pieces together,” as if it were a puzzle that could be complete(d); but *to begin* a discussion that, as far as the photos go, cannot yet take off.

The texts present, perhaps, a clearer call for an active interpreter. Since most of them are unsourced (or better still, *vaguely* sourced), and assuming, *prima facie*, that we are dealing with a documentary, or at the very least with a film that has *some* autobiographical components--these gaps could reasonably be construed as the same kind of beyond-the-text calls; an invitation that, as the film progresses, becomes an increasingly strong suggestion. Ultimately, *not* following this suggestion proves interpretively impoverishing if not straightforwardly detrimental. Or so I shall argue in the next two sections.

2.3 The Status of the Voiceover: Editorializing Comments in *Los Rubios*.

Most "editorializing" scenes (i.e., scenes in which Carri makes seemingly judgment-like, direct comments about the putative main themes of the film) take place in tandem with a textual-

crossing token --be it a text, an image, or a camera-panned construction of a different scene or *quasi-scene* --whose hierarchical place *vis-a-vis* the voiceover *varies* or is *undetermined*, In the preceding paragraph we mentioned Walsh's Daniel and the challenges of his story. Let us add those of the suicide letter-*cum*-footnote in Walsh's second story. And, *upping the ante in terms of the demands imposed on the reader*, let us bear in mind the performative loops produced by the myriad emails, documents, and textual as well as image reproductions that impinge on the main text during our reading of *Traiciones*.

Now, in *Los rubios*, the usually brief but influential "editorializing" or "recap" comments (sometimes almost miniature speeches), delivered by Carri in "off," often include "factual" assessments of her search, conclusions about her recent findings, and direct reflections and questions about her quest (i.e., getting to learn more about her parents in the aftermath of their still "present" disappearance). However, the point of contention is *what* to make of them, or *how* to determine their status and role in the narrative system of the film, in which markers to distinguish fictionalization from "factual" documentary are no longer available. Is it justified, or even helpful, to take these seemingly assertive comments as grounding or anchoring points?

As anticipated, my claim is that the answer to these questions will be in the negative. Let us start with a relatively clear example of how problematic it could be to take these editorializing comments at face value:

Vivo en un país lleno de fisuras. Lo que fue el centro clandestino donde mis padres fueron secuestrados es hoy una comisaría. La generación de mis padres, los que sobrevivieron a una época terrible, reclama ser protagonistas de una historia que no les pertenece. Los que vinieron después, como Paula L. o mi hermana, se quedaron en el

medio, heridos, construyendo sus vidas desde imágenes insoportables. (I live in a country full of fissures. The clandestine detention center where my parents were held is now a police station. The generation of my parents, the survivors of a terrible time, demand that they be given a leading role in a story/history that doesn't belong to them. Those who came later, like Paula L. or my sister, were stranded in the middle, damaged, constructing their lives out of unbearable images; 1:09)

If the first clause (“Vivo en un país lleno de fisuras”) makes such a strong claim – it does, and it also sets the tone of the whole passage; the tone, but not the logic -the one that immediately follows *ought* to offer some sort of *support* for it; alternatively, it might *qualify*, *expand*, or *develop it* further. At the very least, it should make a claim consistent with such a strong opening statement. However, the next claim *neither suggests nor entails the idea of fissure* or break, but, quite the contrary, it expresses a perfectly logical, however perverse, *continuity* between CCDs and police stations. That is, it unequivocally *contradicts* the first statement.

A CCD “is now a police station:” and, in police stations, since the 1930s, “criminals” were often tortured. The transition from “police station/torture center” for *delincuentes* (criminals) to “CCD/torture center” for “subversives,” to --in Carri's 2003 present --regular (?) “police station” doesn't seem to be much of a fissure or break.²⁰

²⁰ The fact that this “police station” operates now under a democratic system doesn't necessarily indicate a break, or even a significant alteration, for certain practices have not changed much, if at all, in those “spaces.” As Pilar Calveiro --whom Carri references in *Cartografía de una película* -has incisively (and bravely) argued, Argentine society passively accepted, or failed to see, or stopped seeing, that

Sometimes Carri's voiceover comments are embedded in --or immediately follow the presentation of --testimonial accounts given by relatives, friends, and former cadres of the OPM whose positions within the organization led them to interact with, and befriend, Carri's parents. A closer look at these will help to articulate our point more clearly—and in so doing a further issue will emerge.

The discussion that follows, then, aims to fulfill two functions. First, it should help to buttress our point (i.e., that the comments of Voiceover Carri tend to have a strong and unjustified influence on the interpretation of *Los rubios*). Second, it should allow us to argue that a widespread critical view *on the way in which Carri* presents and uses (and, ultimately, judges) testimonial accounts is based on voiceover comments, and *not* on an analysis and discussion of the testimonial accounts themselves (whether taken on their own, or in the context of the variety of elements at work in the narratological structure of the film).

2.4 Testimonial Accounts, Voiceover Commentary, and Interpretive Authority.

The interpretation of the role assigned to witnesses and testimony in *Los rubios* has been largely influenced by the physical --spatial and sonic --format in which they are presented. Often, a variety of layers of mediation is interposed between the witness (or interviewee or *testimoniante*) and the viewer: taped interviews reaching the audience through TV sets that, in virtue of the camera angle, are often *in* the background, or as background of some other indoors

delincuentes were routinely humiliated and tortured in regular police stations. The *picana* was an everyday occurrence. The distance from the *police-torturing-criminal* scenario, to a *police-torturing-subversive* scenario, then, was increasingly shorter. (Calveiro 2001)

scene. At times, also, the TV sets are positioned in such a way that the screens – and therefore the faces of the interviewees – are not accessible to the viewers. No interviewee is identified by name, and sometimes their words are difficult to make out.

Certainly, *many* of the testimonies in the film share some, or all, of these characteristics. The first impression, then, is at the very least puzzling. Moreover, the testimonial series of the film opens with relatively inane “discussions” among friends of the family. One, for instance, focuses on the conflicting accounts given by two family friends who discuss whether Carri’s mother was “*gritona*” (short-tempered and easily led to yell). This soon turns to, or connects with, some general commentary on the political attitudes of Carri’s parents within the context and dynamics of the organization.

However, other testimonial interventions, which are far from inane, and far from being overly broad or general, don’t seem to have been taken into consideration when assessing Carri’s use of testimony. It is no coincidence that most critics follow, at times to the point of paraphrasing, the “conclusions” drawn by “Voiceover Carri.”

It is also telling that her comments seem to refer to, and highlight, the aforementioned testimonies, *and not others*. She seems to use them as part of the “evidence” that will *purportedly* confirm her in the idea that the fragmentary memories of family, friends, and militants won’t be of much use for her to reconstruct or gain *some* knowledge of the life and character of her parents, as she claims in the following passage:

La familia, cuando puede sortear el dolor de la ausencia, recuerda de una manera en que mamá y papá se convierten en dos personas excepcionales, lindas, inteligentes. Los amigos de mis padres estructuran el recuerdo de forma tal que todo se convierte en un

análisis político. Me gustaría filmar a mi sobrino de 6 años diciendo que cuando sepa quienes mataron a los papás de su mamá va a ir a matarlos, pero mi hermana no me deja. Tengo que pensar en algo, algo que sea película. Lo único que tengo es mi recuerdo difuso y contaminado por todas estas versiones. Creo que cualquier intento que haga de acercarme a la verdad voy a estar alejándome. (When they can dodge the pain of the absence, the family remembers in such a way that Mom and Dad become two exceptional people, beautiful, intelligent people. Their friends structure their memories in such way that everything turn into political analysis. I'd like to film my 6-year old nephew saying that when he learns who killed the parents of his mother, he will go kill them himself, but my sister doesn't let me. I have to think of something – something that be film. The only thing I have is my diffuse memory, polluted by all these other versions. I feel that any attempt to get closer to the truth will actually take me farther away;" *circa* 34: 45).²¹

The passage insists on the "contamination" or "pollution" of her memories, and the idealized – fossilized – approach to memory of family and former political comrades. But, does this assessment match the testimonies we are presented with? Besides the minor inconsistency about

²¹ Not without some irony, it is in one of these clear examples of the unwarranted interpretation-guiding role of editorializing comments where we find a sentence, almost in passing, which seems to show that not all (or not every sentence in) editorializing comments erase, smooth over and preclude other interpretive possibilities. Still, this and other astute interventions that should "block" the main interpretive claim tend to go unnoticed for reasons that will be discussed in the next section. With very few exceptions, the lone but powerful sentence in the middle (i.e., the plain statement of "fact;" namely, the report of what Carri's nephew said) has gone unnoticed. It is the only comment that doesn't seem to have an evaluative component, and yet it is revealing and --as I'll argue shortly --crucial to one of the politically charged performative effects of *Los rubios*.

the yelling threshold of Ana María Caruso, does the audience have access to any other testimonial contributions that might fall outside the pronouncement of Voiceover Carri?

It has been observed that, during the testimony of an unidentified friend of the family, Carri/Couceyro, is giving her back to the TV set from which the voice of the witness comes (Noriega 78). Few, however, mention that she turns her head toward the screen when she hears someone say that her father often cheated when playing soccer. “Que me eligiera Robertito para jugar al futbol o al volley tenía sus ventajas: me evitaba pelearme porque él se peleaba con todos; llevábamos varios puntos de ventaja, porque él los robaba” (“Being chosen to play in Robertito’s team had its perks: I never had to argue or fight, because he fought with everybody; we were always several points ahead—he used to “steal” them.”)

Carri/Couceyro smiles, but almost immediately, her face takes on a serious, tense expression. She doesn't say anything. The range of thoughts that might have crossed her mind is a matter of sheer speculation, but, at a minimum, this scene ought to trigger the question of what it would feel like to have almost no memories of one’s father, and hear someone say that he used to cheat --and fail to know to what extent or in what contexts that "cheating" used to take place.

There are at least two further instances in which the voices are clearly audible, and even a few shots in which the camera is trained at short-range, with the movie screen almost completely "filled" or "occupied" by the TV screen.²² About ten minutes after the "cheating Roberto Carri" testimony, we hear and see a friend of Carri’s whose tone of voice, body language, facial expressions, and gaze are far from reduced to, or reducible to, "political analysis," even when, on the face of it, politics occupies a central role in his testimony. Yet, what is moving without being

²² This double mediation seems to have been yet another source of irritation, But is this necessarily an affront? Can’t it merely be a reminder of the necessarily mediated nature of testimony?

melodramatic is the subtle difference between "political analysis" and the impact of political frameworks and choices on relationships that fall within the "private sphere."

No, nunca nos peleamos... Claro, Roberto estaba clandestino... sé que no hizo ningún esfuerzo porque [*sic*] nos viéramos. En ese sentido, era intolerante, como lo era la gente en ese momento. No sé si no se podía no ser intolerante. En última instancia estabas jugándote la vida, así que es comprensible. Pero en esa época se cortaba y se cortaba. Si había una diferencia política, bueno, nunca más hablabas ni nada, habían pasado a ser tus enemigos. Nunca lo viví a Roberto como tal, y sé que nunca me vivió como su enemigo, pero que ya no había nada que decirnos, eso era así directamente. (No, we never fought [or: there was never a fallout] ... Sure, Roberto was underground then.... I know he made no effort to see each other (*sic*). In that sense, he was intolerant, as everybody was back then. I don't know whether one could *not* be intolerant. Ultimately, your life was at stake, so it's understandable. But back then, if you broke with someone—you broke. If there was a political difference, well, you just never talked anymore; they'd become your enemies. I never "lived" [i.e., felt] Roberto as such, and I know he never "lived" me as his enemy. Pero that we no longer had anything to say to each other, that was a fact;" 24:00 emphasis mine).

The way in which members of Montoneros negotiated the tensions between "private sphere" relationships with non-members of the organization varied. Sometimes, even silent "concessions" that run against the organization's prescriptive framework made (some) militants much more attuned to social interactions with micro-communities *outside* those of one's own cell or "ambit." (Vezzetti 96-112, 131-196; Ollier, 15-108).

The very fact that a former friend of Roberto Carri could feel that there was an implicit “agreement” involving a “break” in the prevailing mores (i.e. the implicit mandate to recategorize one’s friends as enemies if they didn’t opt in favor of armed struggle) is revealing as much as it is intriguing. In this respect, the relevance of Matilde Ollier’s theoretical and fieldwork-based treatment of this and related issues concerning the everyday life of rank-and-file members of Montoneros and other armed organizations cannot be emphasized enough.

One last example should shed light on instances of testimonial uses in *Los rubios* that are remarkable. A friend recalls the burdens and humor of “a family of five” in which the parents of three girls are cadres of Montoneros—a life that involved carrying the specific paraphernalia that each of those disparate and demanding roles required: fierros, (firearms, in the jargon), *panales* (diapers) *estaba todo mezclado!*”).

Almost in the same breath – or perhaps this is an illusion of the editing – the same speaker --Lila Pastoriza²³ --says in a more serious, reflective tone – the camera trained on her, in a relatively undisturbed shot, “*En determinada etapa yo creo que Ana y Roberto lo vivieron como una apuesta... En otra... en la última etapa,*” she hesitates, “*ya no sé cómo lo vivieron; ya no era tanto el desafío; yo creo que era un círculo del cual ya no se podía salir* (33:22).

Cut. The last sentence lingers on --a circle from which there was no way out. The cut and switch to another brief fragment (and then to Carri writing on her notebook) gives the impression that *that* hadn't been her last sentence. Still, whether the viewer is acquainted with the context and reference of such a sentence, the tone and the image itself chosen to describe the situation are quite eloquent. Carri avoids anything that might slide towards a direct, potentially

²³ Unidentified in *Los rubios*, but recognizable from several other works, Pastoriza is identified explicitly in Carri 2007

melodramatic approach to the issue; and here, again, she puts elision and edition to good use. Interestingly, the elided part *does* and *does not* seem to require more elucidation. On the one hand, Pastoriza – and Carri’s edition – capture the core of the issue. It gives, as it were, an emotional sense of completion. On the other hand, one may legitimately ask, “*What was that ‘circle’ from which there was no way out?*” Perhaps, the emotional sense of completion is but a subtle excuse to avoid doing the work required to learn *what* the “circle” that led to the disappearance of Carri’s parents *means*.

Be that as it may, this fragment is an extremely well-captured instance of Carri's excellent use of testimony²⁴ (i.e., more precisely, of testimony-related production, such as documentary film), which has been obscured by the other, more iconoclastic presentations of testimony – *and by her voiceover comments*.

2.5 Identity and Memory in *Los rubios*: Voiceover Carri, or Ladybug “Takes”?

"Lo único que tengo es mi recuerdo difuso y contaminado por todas estas versiones. Creo que cualquier intento que haga de acercarme a la verdad voy a estar alejándome (34: 45) These last lines of the voiceover commentary quoted early in the last section are but one of the many instances in which Voiceover Carri *claims* to be frustrated, anxious, skeptical, and, at times, even fearful of "depersonalization," all rooted in utterances to the effect that she isn't sure (or is unable to distinguish) *which memories* are hers, and *which* her sisters'.

²⁴ Far from mocking or degrading testimonial work, Carri is establishing that she is interested in a different project, which *may* make use of testimony – and even testimony at its best --even if her use of testimony is embedded in a different project.

In this context, the above passage suggests skepticism about a) the fidelity of personal memory; b) the likelihood of reaching some “truth” through first-personal, memory-based approaches, as well as through third-personal testimonies (i.e., the memories of friends and family of Carri’s parents).

This twofold claim is often accepted as an interpretive key of *Los rubios*. However different the interpretations of this putative feature of the film may be, the very starting point (i.e., Carri has no possible access to any sort of knowledge of her parents, let alone from memory-and testimony-related attempts) is limited, and, in a sense, reductive: it picks out Voiceover Carris statements, which may or may not be taken at face value; and it does not take into account scenes in which there are subtle suggestions that transcend the equally reductive claim to the effect that testimonies either idealize her parents, or turn them into agents moved by, and moving within, the political space of their times. Again, Nouizelles captures the thrust of Carri’s desire for “truth.”

What *Los rubios* attempts to find out is who the Carris really were. [Since any piece of information may hold the key to what is forever lost] all angles may be relevant.... What were they like? ... How did they behave?... Nothing is left out. From the political to the cultural, from the social to the personal, the film keeps collecting and presenting data that may or may not prove useful in reconstructing the *authentic* Carris (Nouizelles 269; emphasis added).

Now, while this formulation makes explicit one of Voiceover Carri’s underlying assumptions of her quest for knowledge about her parents (i.e., that whatever “truth” about her parents she might

discover will only be valuable or relevant if it is “authentic”), it is also the case that many other threads and elements of the film reject the very idea of authenticity understood as the expression of a supposedly deep, essential “core,” or identity – again, something like “who the Carris really were” – in which the authentic-inauthentic distinction is an implicit but strong criterion. If *that* is the sort of “truth” Carri is after, her probabilities of success are certainly very slim, if they exist at all. But then again, this is a view on truth and authenticity that the film, as a whole, hardly appears to endorse. Let us take a closer look at a scene that – we shall argue – radically questions the notion of authenticity.

As we hear Carri’s voice questioning her parents’ choices and wondering about their (absence’s) connection with her identity, the image alternates between a still, motionless, reflective-looking Carri, and Couceyro, who is, instead, going in circles around a pole and yelling in an unequivocally artificial, contrived way -- a quasi-Brechtian parallel scene that seems to go against the dramatism of Carri’s words and voice performance:

Me cuesta entender la elección de mamá. ¿Por qué no se fue del país?, me pregunto una y otra vez. O a veces me pregunto por qué me dejó aquí en el mundo de los vivos... ¿Dónde están las almas de los muertos? ¿Comparten sitio todos los muertos, o los asesinados transitan otros lugares? ¿Las almas de los muertos están en los que venimos después, en los que intentamos recordarlos? (I find it hard to understand Mom’s choice. Why didn’t she leave the country? I ask myself again and again. Sometimes I wonder why she left me here in the world of the living. Where are the souls of the dead? Do all the dead share space, or those who were murdered go to other places? Are the souls of the dead in those who come after them, in those of us who try to remember them? 1:04)

Now, Carri's delivery isn't *too* obviously parodic. One could think that it is, in fact, a self-referential, yet non-parodic moment, whether the way it is performed is of one's liking or not.

However, even conceding that what may sound like a cliché to some may very well be acceptable to others, there is some reasonable (even if not conclusive) evidence to speak of a delivery that, if not parodic, at the very least suggests that it ought not to be taken at face value – but as, perhaps, a conscious, "clichéd use" of the cliché. Roughly put, some of these editorializing comments are chiefly and conspicuously "run-of-the-mill", standard questions that were, even back in 2003, already commonplace, if not any less relevant, among the children of the disappeared.

In the context of Carri's highly original and sophisticated film, there is little reason to believe that she (or her fictional self) should pose questions that, while legitimate and deserving of respect, can hardly be conceived of as "discoveries" or "conclusions" of (any of the) Albertinas in the film. At most, they might be regarded as quasi-distorted "past stages" in one's -- Albertina's? -- development of the elaboration of the unusual, singularly painful kind of loss that is at stake.

With these caveats in place, let us, for the sake of argument, or as shorthand, refer to them as "parody" or "parodic features."

There is a further issue: it is unclear whether the target of the parody is the "genre" -- so to speak -- of the "voiceover speeches," or the original "speaker," or -- as one may plausibly argue in light of the cumulative nudges to the interpreter -- the implicit addressee; namely, the interpreter/reader/audience. Be that as it may, Couceyro's simultaneous scream could be plausibly construed, in this context (and also, perhaps, parodying the easy correlations of commercial cinema), the "visceral" expression of Carri's pain.

As a result, what should be most unreflective and "genuine" -- a most purely expressive of grief -- becomes an almost grotesque performance of a fake scream, mirroring and supposedly enhancing Carri's speech.

The scream is contrived, yet it doesn't simply create a distancing effect a la Brecht, but, in an odd way, it is at the same time uncomfortable and (almost) funny in its denial and denouncement of itself -- of itself as "authentic" scream -- and, in virtue of their connection, perhaps also as rejection or impugnation of Carri's reflections. Even if one felt Carri's speech genuine, it seems quite clear that the textual crossing is preventing the audience from falling into an easy identification with Carri's speech. However, as we begin to settle comfortably, at a distance, and enjoy this contrast, we notice something has shifted -- something has happened to the scream. No settling, then, on this interpretation of the scene, for Couceyro's yelling has gradually shifted -- imperceptibly, until it hits us, but only once the shift has been completed: it is slightly disorienting to realize that now her yelling sounds "real" (i.e., not fake). Carri's voice recedes, and Couceyro's scream begins to feel almost piercing.

So, is there some truth or authenticity to the scream? And, should that "truth" be extended to the speech? Paradoxically, the most "real" is what we know to be "unreal:" we know that Couceyro is, after all, acting; she simply changed roles: from a grotesque yelling, to a "believable" yelling: both equally "unreal" performances of an actress. And still... what about Carri's comments?

In a rather schematic fashion, we can say that if we are attentive to the interplay of the "scene within the scene," or the textual-crossing between Couceyro's and Carri's split scenes, we might entertain at least five scenarios (without being able to settle on any one of them); scenarios that, in rough outline, could be put thus:

i. the whole scene is an enactment of the phoniness of the editorializing scenes; as we initially thought, as measured and sober as Carri's speech might want to be, it cannot address those issues in that seemingly reflective manner without missing the mark; and, for those spectators who might fall for it, the loud "footnote" -- Couceyro's grotesque yelling -- functions as a rectification or at the very least a questioning of Carri's part in the scene;

ii. in a *Traicion*-like move, we simply fell for one of the movie's performative traps: we took the good performance of an actress for an "authentic" scream. That is, a "true" expression of grief, when she was simply mimicking it; she is acting. Worse, less than a minute earlier the yelling sounded unequivocally contrived. Again, a gradual shift blinds us to the change, as in Abad's long email to Bea Pina, and we are easily deceived, if only for a moment;

iii. there may be some truth to some visual aspects of that scene. Perhaps, one may wonder, Carri's non-verbal facial expression, at times, (and not her comments) might convey something "true" about her recap of her recent findings?

iv. the relationship between performance, authenticity, and truth is seriously questioned. The shift in the yelling; its grief-conveying quality, may show that there could be some truth to some (unidentifiable?) aspect of the scene. The fact that it is embedded in an acting performance -- rather, that it is a performance -- might show at the same time, paradoxically, that whatever "truth" we may have sensed in the scene was not actually in the scene; it might have been, instead, that the scene gestured at some truth that is not, and cannot be, captured by direct speech

-- no direct speech summing up conclusions or even complaining about the unintelligibility of the decision of Carri's parents to stay in the country captures that elusive truth that was, perhaps, the cause of the alternating truth-sounding and phony-sounding layers.

v. performance may be part and parcel of every act and every utterance. The combination of Couceyro's long scream (with its changing tones and qualities) with Carri's speech may have been a further enactment of the fact that every act and utterance inevitably involves an element of performance. This scene, after all, is embedded in a film in which the audience does not know what is scripted and what isn't; in which the distinction between the construction of the film sequences and the "film proper" broke down soon after the code for this and other distinctions were established.

Some of the above scenarios are, if taken in isolation and not as interpretive lines of the scene, almost trite, commonplace knowledge. That there are some elements of performance in social interactions is almost a platitude. The interesting questions are what are exactly those elements, how should we characterize them, what is the scope of the performance elements, and - - further -- in what instances they count as just parts of social life, and when do they begin to slide toward some sort of deceit or any other objectionable terrain.

Having said that, to reject all performance as expressive of some form of deceit or wrongdoing, and to search instead for a "pure," utterly "genuine" ideal of authenticity is as naive as it is pernicious.

At the very least, this scene should make us wonder what is authenticity, either in a work of art or in one's life. Yet, as intimated earlier, no interpretive trajectory remains settled --

including the above, conjectural one. For, embedded between two arguably commonplace questions, Carri's register and tone shifts, moving farther away from the general, broad, well-known rhetorical questions, and zooms in on a more specific statement: "y cuando llego a esta pregunta me revuelve la ira... y recuerdo, o eso creo, a Roberto, mi padre, y su ira o su labor incansable..." ("and when I reach that question, anger sickens me... and I remember, or so I think, I remember Roberto, my father, and his anger and his tireless work")

Our point is not to argue that this last clause is "literary better" than the passage in which it is embedded, but that there is a difference between the "zooming in" onto a comparatively specific, embodied, ire-laden utterance, and the much broader, general, and (perhaps) inane statements that precede and follow the said clause. For, "recuerdo, o eso creo, a Roberto, mi padre, y su ira o su labor incansable," is followed by "hasta la muerte" ("until his death"). That is, "recuerdo, o eso creo, a Roberto, mi padre, y su ira o su labor incansable, hasta la muerte" ("I remember, or so I think, I remember Roberto, my father, and his anger and his tireless work until his death")

In a 2003 Latin America, the intertextual connection with Che Guevara's dictum – "hasta la muerte" referencing "hasta la victoria siempre" -- has lost its force, to say the least. Yet, this doesn't mean there is necessarily a mocking element. It could be construed in a variety of ways. Still, it's hard to conceive of any one of them not being commonplace, if not stale.

Moreover, the subsequent questions oscillate rapidly and blur the (relative) "specificity" of Carri's commentary and the clichéd or overly-used, weakened rhetorical constructions. Granted, while these may express the standpoint of a youth or even a child, they are formulated in a rhetorical clothing that clashes with what (for the sake of argument) we referred to as clichéd expressions.

If lines like the already cited, “¿Dónde están las almas de los muertos? ¿Comparten sitio todos los muertos, o los asesinados transitan otros lugares?” (“Where are the souls of the dead?” “Do all the dead share space, or those who were murdered go to other places?”) may be regarded as clichéd, it is not so easy to do so with the ones that immediately follow: “Las almas de los muertos, ¿están en los que venimos después, en los que intentamos recordarlos? Y ese recuerdo, ¿Cuánto tiene de preservación y cuánto de capricho?” (“Are the souls of the dead in those who come after them, in those of us who try to remember them? And that memory, how much does it have of preservation, and how much of whim? 1:04). Clichéd? Incisive? Uncomfortably oscillating between the two, or even, perhaps, among these and other possibilities? Uncomfortable is, probably, the only characterization one may reasonably give.

It would seem, then, that all talk of “authenticity” (“the authentic Carris”) is, at the very least, put into question. And even if one wanted to bracket the issue (i.e., the sense in which the film uses the terms “truth,” “authenticity,” “knowledge,” and the like, applied to her parents), it would *still* be the case that Carri *does* get acquainted with pieces of information that she seemed to be ignorant of. Take Couceyro/Carri’s reaction when hearing that her father used to cheat when playing soccer. This comment seems to catch her attention, from which we might infer that she didn’t know what is now being (to some extent) revealed. Perhaps more importantly, the testimonies discussed above – not only that one about Roberto Carri the soccer player, but the ones about Roberto Carri dealing with the tensions between extra-OPM friendships and intra-OPM demands, or Pastoriza’s comments about a life in which *fierros* (weapons) and diapers coexisted in the same time and space, to her grimmer impressions about the shift in the attitude of Carri’s parents towards the risks of armed struggle -- speak to aspects of their personalities that, even discounting the drawback of possible “memory betrayals,” are hardly irrelevant.

A clarification is in order: the above considerations *should not* be regarded as claiming that the film allows us to state, conclusively, that Carri does get to learn new things about her parents. But they *should* be understood as claiming that *this possibility is indeed advanced in the film*, and not rejected, as Voiceover Carri and many critical treatments of the film appear to state. This possibility is advanced, however, within the context of what would seem a deep questioning of the authentic-inauthentic distinction.

Should we stop at this seemingly aporetic “conclusion”? In what follows, the discussion of a scene that could be regarded in some sense as “mirroring” the one just discussed (i.e., Voiceover Carri and Couceyro screaming) should incline us to respond in the negative. The film *doesn't* “settle the issue” by merely unsettling it and offering an aporia. On what grounds could we say so?

The following scene, in which *a different conception of truth, memory, and identity* – and, perhaps, of authenticity as well -- *seems to come to the fore*, goes against the aforementioned skepticism expressed by Voiceover Carri. It is the “Vaquita de San Antonio” (Ladybug) scene – or, rather, sequence of takes-- during which Carri discusses with Couceyro how to deliver the lines of *a specific childhood memory of Carri's*, followed by the delivery given by the actress.

Two threads run simultaneously, at times intersecting, at times blending into one: a "direct narrative" or first-order thread in the delivery of Carri's lines; an indirect, meta-narrative, or second-order thread in the form of Carri's discussion with Couceyro.

In this scene (made of a series of scenes or “takes”, actually), two threads run simultaneously, at times intersecting, at times blending into one: a "direct narrative" or first-order thread in the delivery of Carri's lines; an indirect, meta-narrative, or second-order thread in the

form of Carri's discussion with Couceyro. "*Entrevista vaquita de San Antonio toma 1*" ("Ladybug Interview Take One;" 1:12), then, opens with what in a conventional documentary would be a "behind-the-scenes" discussion between director and actress.

The scripted text of the scene begins with "Odio..." ["I hate..."] and a list of things Carri loathes or used to loathe as a child, with an emphasis on the typical "birthday wishes." The list ends with, "Y odio sobre todo las velitas." ("And what I hate the most is birthday candles").

Couceyro gives a first pass. Immediate cut. Shift toward the second-order thread: Carri gives her directions: "Go faster, as if you were listing, enumerating ... whatever may begin to come – more or less... but it's cool, an enumeration... and if you begin to feel like you're forgetting, it's cool that you do make a pause" ("más rápido, como enumerar... así, lo que se te vaya... más o menos... pero está bueno una enumeración... y si te vas olvidando está bueno que hagas una pausa"; 1:12)."

Let us note that "Lo que se te vaya—" ("Whatever may begin to come—" strongly suggests an elided "ocurriendo" ("come to mind"). That is, "Whatever may begin to come to mind" ("Lo que se te vaya ocurriendo"). There follows a scene or concatenation of scenes in which mediation, critical distance, and, perhaps, a subdued, subtle emotional proximity, are interweaved, or shifting rapidly: we listen to Couceyro's/Carri's list of things she hates, but on the screen there's a close-up of Carri's profile, stooped over her camera, shooting intently; and for the first time in the whole film she looks relaxed – extremely focused yet relaxed – and as Couceyro progresses, Carri smiles, very briefly. (1:13).

Odio tener que pedir un deseo al soplar las velitas para mi cumpleaños, porque siempre desee que vuelva mamá, que vuelva papá, y que vuelvan pronto. En realidad el deseo

siempre fue uno, pero lo estructuraba en tres partes para que tenga más fuerza. [*“I hate having to make a wish when I blow the candles on my birthdays, because I’ve always wished, ‘Let Mom come back; let Dad come back; and let them come back soon.’”* Actually, the wish was always one, but I used to structure it in three parts so that it was stronger.”]

Pause. Carri's profile still looking through the camera. Almost a smile still there, and a whisper, *“Buenísimo; corte.”* [*“Great; cut.”*] A briefest pause, and Carri is back in her role of director -- not necessarily aloof (actually, not aloof at all), but certainly "outside" that one brief, affect-laden moment. *“I wouldn’t repeat the word ‘hate’;”* (*“No repetiría la palabra ‘odio’”*) says Carri looking at Couceyro, “because it’s very strong, and to say it again would sound a bit too --” (*“porque es muy fuerte, y volver a decirlo suena demasiado—”*)

Cut. Rapid succession of performances, variations (both in tone and text) of the “Vaquitas de San Antonio” lines, in black and white, until the final take, in color, has Couceyro looking at the camera -- at us -- in what would conventionally be regarded as the "final take.”

And yet, watching only the "final" version would have obscured the richness of the other performances. Why should this matter? Because one could conjecture that the series of filmic takes captures *different aspects* of Carri's recollection or remembered experience of the same event—or, perhaps, of different aspects of the infinitely nuanced palette of emotions she must have experienced during the long days and long nights of waiting.

One could object that there is no reason to affirm the scenes have anything to do with Carri’s “actual” experience. Granted. In fact, that is part of our argument.

Still, *they are possible, and plausible, articulations of the memory of a child (Carri or not] waiting for her disappeared parents.*

Moreover, they show that the lack of clear distinction between “authentic” and “inauthentic” is not as problematic as it might initially appear to be. Let us expand on this claim.

The performance of Ladybug, in its repetition and variations, *does* call attention to itself (even granting that ‘we can’t tell what performance is and what’s ‘real’, or authentic). Yet, this doesn't in itself warrant the "conclusion" that there is nothing but empty self-referentiality.

Scripted or not, Ladybug is one of the scenes in which Carri is most involved and in which (in the film) most work is being put. Furthermore, even if we accept for the sake of argument that there is such a thing as a one and only *authentic* performance, we would be hard pressed to decide *which* of the many performances is "more authentic" or “more genuine" or "better" in whichever way one might want to understand these terms.

Isn't it possible that one may find *the whole series* as more valuable than *any one take*, in the sense that no single take can capture the complexity of the memory in question? Also, why should we assume that “authenticity” or "sincerity" *wouldn't* require *some work* to be expressed as faithfully as possible? (Again, *assuming* there is such thing as a “more authentic” correlate).

From a different angle, if we regard drafts of writers, studies of papers, variations of a musical piece (even rehearsals) as valuable (and we don't question their ‘authenticity’), why question this series of performances? Why not think of them as "different takes" of a musical piece, or studies for (of) a (possibly finished) painting?

In sum, if we stick to the lens of performance understood exclusively *qua* deceit, we miss the highest and highly original expression of a most painful childhood memory – whether “real” or not; whether Carri's or not.

Even bracketing these issues, it is still the case that the putative recollection is conveyed without falling prey to melodrama or cliché, and yet revealing a complex, multi-layered cluster of affective and quasi-cognitive mnemonic attitudes.

In a similar vein, Gustavo Noriega affirms that this sequence -- or, rather, this sequence's "multiplication of visual textures" ["multiplicación de las texturas visuales"] - allows us "to *feel* the emotion [of Carri's memory] without it [n.b., the emotion] flooding us" ("sentir la emoción sin que ésta nos inunde;"50)

Although Noriega might be going a bit too far (can we *feel her emotions?*), he goes on, and succinctly captures one of the main achievements of this scene. Carri "puts into scene the childhood pain ... and looks for the best way of expressing it," while "avoiding ... emotional blackmailing" (50). Thus, what is crucial is "what Albertina *does* with that pain," which is, certainly, "something different from mere victimization" ["pone en escena el dolor infantil ... buscando la mejor forma posible de expresarlo ... eludiendo ... el chantaje emocional ... [lo importante es] lo que Albertina *hace* con ese dolor ... algo distinto a la mera victimización"] (50).

Now, we would like to suggest that there is an equally important, though much less discussed, point. All of the above (i.e., the satisfying, ground-breaking expression of Carri's recollection; the series of filmic takes that illuminate different modulations of the memory, as well as its explicit but not overdone affective charge) is, at least in part, *the result of the discussion Carri has with Couceyro*. Put less strongly, all of the above shows the influence of the *intersubjective elaboration* that resulted from Carri's discussion with Couceyro.

Notice that Carri's directions to Couceyro do not silence her -- Couceyro is not a mere mimetic device, but a *co-creator* of the performance. Recall that Carri encourages Couceyro to

improvise with “lo que se te vaya ocurriendo;” Couceyro doesn’t have to limit her enumeration to the specific *memory-tokens* of Carri’s. Part of the success of the scene is this porous, fertile reelaboration – we see Carri being surprised by some of Couceyro’s contributions, for instance.

All this might be mildly de-emphasized, though it shouldn’t be obscured, by the fact that Carri gives Couceyro feedback and suggests that she make certain changes (e.g., “I wouldn’t repeat the word *odio*...”). Yet, the fact remains that they discuss the scene; that Carri herself encourages Couceyro not to feel constrained by her memory tokens; and that there is, as mentioned, even an element of improvisation (both in tone and lexical choice) in *a scene that purportedly conveys Carri’s personal memories*.

It would seem as if Carri’s anxieties about truth, memory, and identity were no longer a source of concern. Recall her worries about not having memories she could *truly* call her own, but merely a reconstruction based on the recollection of her sisters. Whatever happened to these worries; to her skepticism about truth (“the more I try to reach truth, the farther away I am”); to the identity-threatening “contamination” of different versions?

Perhaps the key questions should, instead, be: *Whose* worries are these? And, *what conceptions* of truth, memory, and identity *are the object of those worries?*

The contrast between *Voiceover Carri* (i.e., the Albertina Carri that takes shape in the editorializing comments) and the Albertina Carri we see in the *Ladybug Scene* couldn’t be starker. Ladybug should be an abhorrence if regarded from the perspective of Voiceover Carri. Conversely, the Ladybug scene presents an Albertina Carri utterly satisfied when enacting a personal memory of her childhood in an articulation that rests on a view on memory that would be unpalatable to Voiceover Carri.

Our main claims should begin, then, to look plausible. At the very least, by now it should be apparent that Voiceover Carri and her narrative *clash* with other versions of Carri and her search. This, in turn, should be sufficient to give plausibility to the three points we set out to defend. First, that *Carri's editorializing comments are no reliable guide* or pillar on which to anchor interpretation. Second, that *favoring Voiceover Carri* is not only an unreliable interpretive move, but *an unwarranted* one that obscures other, richer interpretive possibilities. Third, that there is no privileged “anchoring point” to adjudicate interpretive issues.

In what follows, we aim to argue that the above points are sufficient to weaken *both* the juridical discourse *and* the more extreme and intransigent versions of the post-memory discourses on which the *memoria montonera* rests. In so doing, we shall argue for the fourth and last point we aim to defend: that *Los rubios* presents a “centripetal” requirement—a demand to look for contextual information without which the film *qua* textual artifact, as well as the interpreter, is left severely wanting. Moreover, without meeting this demand, the very legitimacy of Carri *qua* interlocutor can be undermined by appeal to putative “truths” about the status of the child in general, and of the child’s mnemonic capacities in particular.

2.6 Context Restitution and Interpretation. Blindspots and Silencing.

Earlier, we argued that Voiceover Carri seems to endorse a notion of *authenticity* that is, at the very least, in need of support, if not straightforwardly obsolete. Likewise, Voiceover Carri’s worries make sense only on the assumption that she endorses *an atomistic view of memory and identity*, which seems to work under the model of property. More specifically, it seems to work *under the model of private ownership*, whereby memory tokens are indexed to a

specific, clearly defined person, whose “memory storage” forms an interrelated collection of items that are partly or wholly constitutive of that person’s identity. Let us think, for instance, of John Locke’s influential view on personal identity.

The Ladybug scene, instead, seems to suggest a notion of memory closer to an intersubjective, activity-based undertaking in which specific narratives are tentative stepping stones (not always “purely” ours) rather than stable configurations in dispute. From Ladybug, it should follow that the borders between personal and collective memory aren’t so stark; that they have a strong deliberative component and should therefore be more open to revision and discussion--- certainly much more than any sort of atomistic view in which agents own something like “pure” or undiluted memory-tokens, insulated from diachronic and synchronic social forces.

And yet, to claim that Ladybug Carri is the “real” (or “authentic” or “genuine”) view advanced by *Los rubios* would be as unwarranted a move as the one made by the manifold critical readings that rest on Voiceover Carri *qua privileged* guiding thread. Sympathetic as one may be toward Ladybug Carri, the code remains broken.

Perhaps the clearest “reminder” that this is so (and, therefore, that *we cannot take any one feature* -- be it thematic, formal, or plot-related -- *as fully authoritative or interpretation-guiding*) is the much-discussed *DNA scene*.

As is well-known, a relatively simple blood test can determine the kinship between people, or between people and human remains. It has been instrumental in establishing the identity of Dirty War bodies that haven’t (yet) fully and literally disappeared -- and, by extension, the identification of the relatives.

In the so-called “DNA scene,” we see, first, how Couceyro/Carri goes through the first phase of the test that confirmed the match between her DNA and that of her parents. A close-up of the sudden red droplet appearing on Couceyro’s finger highlights the “inverted” code: color film should be for Carri, not for Couceyro’s fictional scenes. Almost immediately, the same scene, only in black and white, shows us the “real” Albertina Carri, instead of Couceyro. Did Carri undergo the DNA test – *there and then*? Obviously, the match – and the test – took place years ago. Perhaps Carri went ahead with the test anyway, for the film? Either way, it is a representation. We are not seeing anything that could have a firmer grip on standard truth-markers – whether “documentary” or otherwise.

The Ladybug scene is, in this respect, no different. Could we draw an interpretive trajectory on its basis, and flesh out, for instance, the implications of the potential views on identity and memory that Ladybug suggests? Certainly. Would we have better textual support to claim that it is a superior ground for interpretation? We would not.

If regarded *not only* in the context of the *fact-evidence-memory-truth* link (or lack thereof), but also in the context of the problems inherent to the “*original/copy*” distinction (both addressed, as will be remembered, towards the end of the previous chapter), it could be argued that *the DNA scene puts even more pressure* on these issues. And then again, just as in *Abad*, one may be tempted to ask whether this pressure leads us to skepticism.

From the outset, it was highlighted that all three works are based on high-profile, well-known facts, such as the disappearance of Carri’s parents. To some extent, then, one could rule out radical skepticism.

Still, this could leave us with little to do. That there is a “real” link between these works and historical facts is true; but this claim could be trivially true, if, for instance, we fail to show that the nature of this link is worth fleshing out. Let us tackle a more specific issue.

We argued above that, contrary to what is said in the editorializing comments and the critical readings that are grounded on them, Carri’s search was *not* barren; that she could (whether on or off-camera) get acquainted with some aspects and facts about her parents, which she didn’t know prior to her search. But, *could she?* Is this claim consistent with the outright questioning of the “reality” of any and every scene of *Los rubios* once the color/black-and-white code is broken? Shouldn’t the extreme DNA scene give us pause?

If we cannot know what is fictionalized and what is not; if the texts and quotations that “interrupt” the film are unsourced, or vaguely sourced; if the letters and photos that are shown to us have been tinkered with in such a way that, as said earlier with O’Keeffe, neither the identities nor the contexts of the images are accessible to us, *Can we legitimately say that we are minimally equipped to offer even the most tentative reading of the film?*

Here, if not earlier, the effects of these interpretive hurdles (should) exert pressure and unleash the film’s “centripetal” impetus, which (should) make us search *beyond* the film proper. We might, and probably should, *reframe our assessment* and consider the possibility of reading these gaps as *a call for the interpreter to act*; or, in Elena Lopez Riera’s stronger words, as “an invitation, almost an *obligation*, to participate” (48)

In other words, before drawing skeptical or otherwise restrictive conclusions, there *is* a remaining line of inquiry. The one thing we *do* know is that Carri’s parents were, indeed, disappeared.

Following the Panero line presented in *Traiciones*, perhaps we could, or even should, look for a potentially missing piece that might yield relevant contextual information. Even though the internet could be a starting point, the film itself gives us tips. When Carri and her crew visit the "Sheraton" -- the CCD-turned-police-station where Carri's parents were held captive—we can clearly hear a whisper, “Hide the *Nunca más!*”

Thus, we are fairly easily led to the well-known report on Argentina's *desaparecidos*, a document that *does* feature some of the letters and photos whose absence from *Los rubios* was lamented by some critics. Ironically, the letters that Carri so jealously guarded in her film are accessible in a book that in the eighties became, almost obscenely, a fashionable best-seller.

The actual beginning of *Los rubios*, then, could be *double-dated: 1978 and 1985*. The former is the year during which Carri's parents exchanged letters with their daughters; the latter, the year of publication of *Nunca más*.

The report lists all 364 CCDs by their names (chosen with macabre humor by the military), followed by a brief description, geographical location, and military command (e.g., “Sheraton,” First Army Corps via Artillery Group Ciudadela). There follows a brief description of the system of letter-exchanges handled by one “Raul” (a pseudonym). Ana María Caruso's letters include comments about their situation, domestic recommendations, reading suggestions – a strength that is almost unthinkable under their living conditions. And, although Roberto Carri could be the strong man who fought his way through a soccer match, or initiate a hunger strike at the CCD so that hunger became *his* choice, *it is Ana María – Carri's mother -- who makes a calm, dispassionate presentation of the extreme options and possibilities the military brutally discussed in front of them.*

Caruso's letters, in turn, offer *clues* and *names* that open new lines of inquiry (e.g., the reference to H. G. Oesterheld). Now, once we readjust the lens and go back to the film in search of "centripetal nudges," it is not too difficult to spot them – and to realize that they were there; that we "saw" or "heard" them; and that we didn't pay the attention they deserved. Consider, for instance, the already discussed testimony of Lila Pastoriza: she says "los fierros" for "firearms." Semantic displacements and jargon are both points of entry and points of departure that allow us to connect film and world.

At the beginning of this chapter we mentioned the texts that "interrupt" the flow of images. Most of them are unsourced or, at most, *vaguely* sourced, yet they present themselves as (conventionally or *prima facie*) "truthful" references. The military dicta; some poetry lines; the titles of books we *do* get to make out -- these are but a few clues, some of which rapidly yield information that helps us recalibrate different aspects of the film.

For instance, the title of one of the books doesn't correspond to the quotation that is read out loud – arguably adding one more reason to argue that Carri doesn't state, but puts into scene a playful rejection of the idea of the survivor/victim as unquestionably truthful, while confirming the need for "confirmation;" the requirement that the viewer *join her search*.²⁵ Interestingly, one of the books is penned by Carri's father. This thread was followed in a revealing study that presents a parallelism between the "search and research" that Carri's father did for that book, and Carri's own "search and research" for *Los Rubios* (Ocampo 2013).

²⁵ Some poetry lines are by Francisco "Paco" Urondo, key poet of the sixties and seventies and prominent *montonero*, whose connection with Carri's father can be tracked to the newspaper *Noticias*, funded by Montoneros. The trajectories of Urondo and Carri's parents, in turn, shed light on some of the film's scenes – Urondo was also "trapped" and disappeared during the dictatorship.

In yet another unexpected move -- which might, however, be analogous to the gesture of wearing the blond wigs, i.e., pushing and reappropriating an initially unwelcome event -- Carri first *withholds* personal and family information (in the film), and four years later she makes it public (in the book). Yet this "publicity" is far from typical. *Los rubios: Cartografía de una película* (2007), a book roughly organized in the manner of a film-production booklet (the Table of Contents includes these labels: *Introduction, Pre-Production, Shooting, Post-Production, Interviews, Letters, and Launching*), includes an annotated draft of the script (which, however, is *not* exactly accurate: again, *Carri's actions militate against a naïve reliance on the voice of the author*), photos, facsimile copies of letters in a *Traicioneros*-like format, material that didn't make it to the final cut, and background information (such as the names of the interviewees, along with transcripts -- including a section called, "Discarded interviews")

All this material operates almost as a slingshot toward the film itself, and yet, it also points outside the film; or, rather, *as a circular, feedback loop, further continued in others' writings about the film*; hence Carri's comment: "La peli sigue escribiéndose " (The flick keeps writing itself"). Note that Carri says *writing itself*, and not *filming* itself -- It's almost *as if film and book formed part of the same work of art*.

One instance of this feedback loop is found in the implicit responses that Carri's book gives to objections to *Los rubios* – interestingly, even to objections that were made years after the publication of her book. For our purposes, what Carri says about the *memory of children* deserves special attention.

We mentioned that Carri's and Alcoba's works have been criticized on the grounds that their childhood memories are problematic. Even a sympathetic reading like Gustavo Noriega's, which has been referred to already, *assumes* that such criticism is valid.

It is worth following his train of thought, for it encapsulates two core assumptions shared by the many objections mounted on the impugnation of the child as a fitting speaker--and it does so from a mostly sympathetic standpoint.

“The flick is merciless with the neighbors,” writes Noriega; “*with everyone -- save the children* [“*la peli es impiadosa con los vecinos del barrio; con todos, salvo con los niños*”]; and he mentions, in this respect, a scene in which “the little ones speak of death ... with *ingenuidad* [n.b., “naiveté” or “innocence”] not deprived of malice” [“*los chiquititos hablan de la muerte... con ingenuidad, no desprovista de malicia.*”] (39; emphasis added).

In the scene in question, Couceiro is chatting with *los chicos del barrio* in a casual, comfortable manner, yet the subject of the conversation is, mostly, *violent* or *deprivation-related* deaths that took place in the *barrio*. Interestingly, there is a cut to Carri's comments about how she learned -- how she was told -- about her parents' murder/disappearance, which meshes with, and goes back, to the initial scene, when we hear the voices of the children discussing the way in which several neighbors died: one, heart attack; another, liver disease; a third one jumped in front of a train – or was he the one who shot himself? Discussion ensues. Soon, it dissolves in general laughter, when one of the kids says the man killed himself “because he couldn’t stand [name of a woman] anymore” [“Porque no soportaba más a [Fulanita de Tal”]] (min.40).

One is left wondering what kind of malice is that, which on the one hand leads the children to make black-humored jokes about a recent suicide, and on the other, allows them to retain the naiveté that “saves them” from Carri’s critical gaze. It must be, it cannot but be, something very *different* from “adult” or “real” malice.

How could we make sense of this difference? Noriega sees no problem here, as he goes on to link the naiveté of the children – the *alleged* naiveté of the children – with a feature that, he feels, pervades the whole film. The children are just an instance of a this more general issue.

With a forgiving tone, the critic affirms that, for all its merits, for all its incisiveness, *Los rubios* is marked by a certain naiveté. The whole film, in fact, cannot escape suffering from “ingenuidad política,” which is, as Noriega explains, a sort of “*incomprensión infantil que se arrastra hasta el presente*” (“childish incomprehension that drags itself through the present;” 50).

What present? Again, Noriega is forthcoming: ““ through the present, reaching the woman Albertina who shoots *Los rubios* as expression of her estrangement” (“hasta el presente, hasta la Albertina mujer que filma *Los rubios* como expresión de su extrañeza”), cashed out as a “*total incomprehension of the irretrievable world of the parents*” (“incomprensión total del mundo irrecuperable de los padres,” 50).

To conceive of the *child under the figure of innocence and purity* would render children *unable to understand* whatever falls within their protected scope; and, in many versions of this view, they are equally unable to act or behave wrongly—or in any other “impure” fashion. Implausible as it may sound, knowledge of wrongdoing is supposed to be a necessary condition for acting wrongly. “*Without that knowledge, they cannot do, or intend to do, anything wrong*” (Brenan and Erpp 2015, 3).

And “*malice*” would be one such feature. Hence Noriega’s claim. Implicitly, he is suggesting that the child *cannot really* comprehend the phenomena or events she is talking about. This incapacity is but a manifestation of the child’s purity “in mind and deed.” The attribution of malice is, at best, shorthand for something that *resembles* “real” malice; but that *is not*, for it

doesn't share its less savory aspects, protected by, and embedded in, a cherubic purity or naiveté that doesn't allow the child to see – to understand – what malice *really* is.

Noriega is no anomaly in projecting from the illusory “empty” purity of childhood experiences – deprived of understanding, and therefore unreliable *qua* witness or speaker of whichever experiences or memories she may have. Whatever they experienced during childhood is blurred by that lack of knowledge. Hence Noriega's brutal claim to the effect that Carri's political naiveté is some sort of “condition” she has *dragged* since, and from, her childhood.

Samantha Brennan and Jenn Erpp have recently discussed the more prevalent (mis)conceptions of childhood in the Americas, and the way they work in different contexts. The “innocence” or “purity” of the child depends on *ignorance*—ignorance of wrongdoing, or evil, or sin, or whatever normative concept one may favor. Conversely, *knowledge* of wrongdoing, or evil, or sin, obliterates the state of purity or innocence. But, as long as our children remain “protected” from it, they will remain innocent, and, therefore, good. Now, there remains a problem here. The question of whether we can *be* or do *X* without *knowing* what *X* is (i.e., without being able to conceptualize or grasp *X* in some relevant sense, whether fully verbal or not) *doesn't present itself* to the believer. “*Without that knowledge, they cannot do, or intend to do, anything wrong*” (Brennan and Erpp 2015, 3).

Although, empirically, this notion flies against all evidence, one begins to understand how, or why, Noriega may fail to see anything but innocent children in the Couceyro scene, which escapes, of course, Carri's judgment. Neither does the possibility of there being *degrees* of *X*; e.g., *threshold* or *liminal* areas. This is not to say that they can explain away everything. *Purity*, indeed, is fragile. As we have seen in Abad's example about the global attribution of character traits, the “pure” woman is trapped: either she *is* pure, or, if she is not, she is *ipso facto*

at fault -- impure *to some degree* (i.e., sinful, wrongful, etc.). That is to say, there *may* be degrees *within* one category (e.g., purity), but *not among different* categories (from those available to women, that is). Likewise, if purity is attached to, or is a property of childhood, there won't be significant transitions between the child and the adult.

The child and her experience are "saved," and immune to judgment, at the price of being deprived of agency. Therefore, even if Carri, and, by extension, her generation, *does* remember events from her childhood, both *she and her memories are unreliable*: the infant's ignorance doesn't allow her to have a minimally accurate comprehension of her experience—at best, she will have access to a distorted or flawed understanding of her experience, which will lead to an equally distorted or flawed memory of her experience. Neither the *child* nor *the adult retrieving the child's memory* of this or that experience, can escape the impugnation to which their own childhood purity condemns them.

But Noriega takes a further step when he adds – and here the apologetic proviso is with which the sentence opens is quite telling -- that "[m]ás allá de las cualidades personales que pueda tener Albertina Carri... hay un dato biográfico [*que justifica el juicio respecto de su incapacidad infantil*] Cuando sus padres fueron secuestrados, Carri tenía tres años. Demasiado joven para recordar" ("beyond the personal qualities Albertina may have . . . there is a biographical fact [which justifies the judgment about her incapacity while being a child] When her parents were kidnapped, Carri was three years old. Too young to remember;" 50).

Now, he has added an *impugnation of the child as capable of remembering at all*. While there *is* a legitimate question regarding the stages in memory development (e.g., at what age is an infant capable of forming memories?), Noriega's statement is, at the very least, partial. For, although Carri hadn't turned 4 years old when her parents were taken away, he is omitting the

fact that they were in touch for a full year before they were disappeared forever. Personal differences aside, many people report having memories of events that took place when they were within that age range.

We said in passing that there are other figurations of the child, which may or may not coexist with this one. Let us resume this discussion once we've seen the kind of testimonial injustice of which Alcoba is victim.

Is this a totally satisfactory answer? No. But, as Carri herself put it,

[the generation of my parents often tell me] “you were in kindergarten.” Yes, I was, but something happened there. Mine is a possible memory, and I don't have to bow my head reverentially to those who were my parents or to their generation.” (“*vos estabas en jardín de infantes*” *Sí, estaba en jardín pero ahí algo pasó; la mía es una memoria posible y no tengo por qué hacer reverencias literales a los que fueron mis padres o a su generación*” (Carri 2007, 111).

Lastly, Noriega appeals to a widespread objection that attempts to render the actors of the seventies immune to judgment – the alleged “*quiebre generacional*” (“generational break) which “*cercena toda posibilidad de comunicación*” (“severs all possibility of communication;” 48). The idea of a *generational break* is a common feature of a family of views, whose different strands cash out that break in different terms, and explain it by appeal to different reasons. *But all are adamant about the existence of such powerful break that putatively prevents mutual understanding.*

Some argue that the sheer obliteration of most left-of-center political actors also obliterated the *mores* and *habitus* (understood, roughly, in Bourdieu's sense) that informed their project and *modus vivendi* (Casullo 2004). Others, that the seventies had an *ontologically unique status*, which was given by the shared acceptance of a regulative ideal (or, more often than not, a teleologically defined "reality-in-the-making"), i.e., the Revolution (Caletti 2006).

With the loss or annihilation of this crucial component of the "world" of the seventies, gone were the possibilities attempts to comprehend them. Again, for one reason or another, understanding is inaccessible to those who *no lo vivieron* ("didn't live it").

Weak as these arguments are, they still have some purchase among (many) former cadres of the armed organizations, *but also among a number of academics*. The idea that the Revolution was inevitable, and that it was, moreover, around the corner -- *a la vuelta de la esquina* – was *not* part of the ontological fabric of the universe, which, somehow, ceased to exist; it wasn't either something along the lines of, let us say, a Foucaultian *episteme*, or a Khunian paradigm, or any other conceptual scheme we must share in order to make sense of ourselves and the world, and from whose "outside" we cannot speak. This is even more serious when the onus is on the advocate of such bizarre views.

Before leaving the subject, let us remember that the proletarianization projects also rest on similar assumptions. The discussion is long and not always exciting (for a concise presentation, Vezzetti 2002 and 2009). The former cadres or current intellectuals who reject the idea of any contact between our generation and theirs, seem to treat the idea of the Revolution as an ineradicable part of *their* experience, yet *now inaccessible* due to epistemological or ontological reasons, which are, often little or poorly explained.

Yet, they all share the following point: *the Argentine's seventies cannot be comprehended in any meaningful way by anybody who didn't "live through them."*

This amounts to much more than an argument to the effect that *the direct witness or political actor* has a *privileged epistemic access* to the (understanding of the) events. The claim is that there is *no epistemic access at all* for those who were not in direct contact with the time and events in question. And more so in the case of – *children*.

Let us note that there is a *double* silencing of the child. First, silencing *qua* inability to see and hear – inability to “read” – the situation of the children as portrayed in the “chatting scene” – the scene in which the children talk with Couceyro about the violent deaths in the neighborhood. These children, who, according to *Los rubios*, live in the same borough where Carri's parents attempted to “blend with the masses,” as the CN of Montoneros recommended (i.e., a putative process of “proletarianization” that would be achieved by moving to working-class *barrios*); these children, then, “real” children of the proletariat, can hardly be said to be there *by chance*. The methodology of disappearance was, *pace* Walsh, *one side of a twofold operation*; the other “side” (and part of) the disappearance machinery was “planned misery” [“*miseria planificada*”] for generations to come.

Failing to see, to hear the voices of these children-- children whose futures are doomed – could be construed, then, as part of the process of disappearance. Pushing Pilar Calveiro's conclusions about the *poder desaparecedor* and its mutations, this blindness may be part of the *illusion* of “disappearing the disappearing power”—whereas, instead, it could well be *just a different way of replicating the process*, i.e., failing to see (unwittingly but *prima facie* culpably, i.e., negligently) the forms in which the disappearing project of the military regime lingers on.

The figure of the child as “pure” or “innocent” or “saved” is but one of the ways in which this blindness manifests itself.

Second, the silencing of the child focuses on the child as speaker, construed along the lines of the above discussion of Noriega’s view on *Los rubios* and politics. That is, a view on Carri’s film – and Carri as a person – *qua* locus of “total incomprehension,” i.e., an impugnation of the child as legitimate speaker and interlocutor. This silencing will be present, with a different modulation, in Alcoba’s *Manèges* , to which we now turn.

CHAPTER 3: *But Who's the Girl?* Laura Alcoba's *Manèges: petite histoire argentine* (2007)

3.1 Who's Speaking? Free Indirect Discourse and Speaker-Utterance Attributions.

With *La danse de l'araignée* (2017), Laura Alcoba closes the series begun a decade ago with her opera prima, *Manèges : petite histoire argentine* (2007) --*La casa de los conejos* (2008); *The Rabbit House* (2008) – and followed by *Le bleu des abeilles* (2013) --*El azul de las abejas* (2014). *Manèges* was an immediate critical and commercial success in its French and Spanish versions. In some quarters, it is regarded as firmly established in "the landscape of the memory of the dictatorship" (Ducrozet 2014). Critical interest grew significantly in the last few years, and the "landscape" became less uniform. Although passionate endorsements and equally passionate rejections sprang from its very publication, they were very much in the minority. Conversely, in the last two years or so, along with nuanced discussions from a variety of perspectives, there has been a resurgence of critical works that present either a blanket rejection or endorsement of Alcoba's book.

As suggested in the Introduction to this thesis, this polarization seems to follow an analogous general climate in public and private discussions about the politics of memory that have taken place for the last fifteen years. The same slim volume, within the same time-frame (2014-2016), has been judged to be a pro-dictatorship pamphlet by some readers, and dismissed as *propaganda montonera* by others.

At this point in the overall argumentation that concludes with this chapter, it will hardly come as a surprise to see the approach and orientation of the following discussion aiming in a different direction – even if, in so doing, it implicitly rejects the claim that *Manèges* endorses

specific political views. Instead, this chapter presents and fleshes out three ways in which Alcoba's work challenges our interpretive practices.

First, *Manèges'* nimble use of free indirect discourse, conversational implicatures and other rhetorical, pragmatic, and performative devices, prevents us from making speaker-utterance attributions (i.e., matching a given utterance to a specific speaker) in crucial dialogue scenes. If we have no textual support to match a given utterance with a given speaker, and, in addition, all speakers are equally likely to have proffered the utterance, we have no way to adjudicate the issue.

Needless to say, *who* the speaker is makes a crucial difference in the sense and connotations of the utterance, the dialogue, and often the entire scene, unsettling our whole interpretive landscape. While we cannot settle on any one interpretation, I argue that the scenarios *Manèges* suggests are worth exploring, and that, in fact, the impossibility of reaching interpretive closure is conducive – or should be conducive, if my argument is sound --to forms of interpretive discussion that are likely to break the tendency toward polarization prevalent in textual and political accounts of Argentina's recent past.

Second, the reading process demanded by *Manèges* involves the triggering of "performative loops" analogous to the ones discussed in Abad's *Traiciones*. While the latter targeted, for the most part, our *memory*, the former aims at our capacity to make judgments, a tendency that, as is well-known, is bound to be exacerbated when contentious issues are under discussion. In an opposite direction – what was earlier dubbed centripetal effects --the narrative voice “suggests” that the reader go beyond the text in a variety of ways.

If the first two points involve the identification or perception of textual features and cognitive-affective abilities that may unwittingly go amok, the third and last point focuses on

two specific *themes* that have been touched upon when discussing *Traiciones* and *Los rubios*. Namely, the figures of the child and the woman.

The narrative is based on relatively straightforward and well-known events: in late 1975 Laura Alcoba's mother moved with her 7-year old daughter to a small house in the outskirts of La Plata, Buenos Aires, Argentina, where they lived until mid-1976 with a young couple --Diana Teruggi and Daniel Mariani--who belonged to the same guerrilla cell of Montoneros that was in charge of printing *Evita Montonera*, the official media outlet of the organization. The *Evita* aimed at (and, on the leadership's view, was crucial for) the OPM's cadres, i.e., it was not aimed at a general audience. Its contents included official communiqués regarding ever-stricter rules and procedures; concrete orders for all cells as to how to approach and deal with the rapidly changing fighting conditions; directives and advice on how to move in the (also rapidly changing) territorial divides or zones --"safer" areas, vulnerable spaces, territories heavily infiltrated and dominated by the enemy, etc.; updates on the latest developments in the military and political fronts, and vignettes depicting specific combats or highlighting the actions of specific *militantes*.

The "front" for the printing press was a make-believe, minimally functional, small business purportedly specialized in rabbit-breeding and rabbit-based dishes. The services included home-delivery, which along with the few real food-orders they managed to get, was actually used to deliver, first and foremost, stacks of *Evitas* to key distribution points in a rusty Citroen van driven by the young couple.

Despite a seemingly auspicious beginning, soon things deteriorated. As paramilitary squads first, and military forces later—after the March 24 coup—began to close in, tensions mounted, and Alcoba's mother engaged in protracted negotiations that eventually played out in

her favor: by mid-1976 she was allowed to leave the rabbit house with her daughter, with a view to going into exile. The young Laura sorely lamented saying goodbye to Diana, with whom she had forged a close relationship.

A few months later, her mother reached Paris, while Laura lived with her grandparents keeping as low a profile as she could until her new "official" passport arrived. Only then could she fly safely to France, and be reunited with her mother – two years later. What Laura doesn't know when she meets her mother again is that the house of rabbits – along with Diana and six other militants who were in the house – was obliterated during one of the largest-scale, most brutal military crackdowns launched by the regime. Diana's husband, Daniel, wasn't in the rabbit house, but was murdered soon thereafter in another safe-house.

Their months-old daughter, Clara Anahí, was the only survivor, and, as per military orders, was taken unharmed, and "placed" in a military or pro-military family --a destiny shared by over 500 children of *desaparecidos*. Isabel "Chicha" Mariani, mother of Daniel and mother-in-law of Diana, has been searching for Clara Anahí since then, eventually co-founding and presiding Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo for a decade.

To this day, Clara Anahí hasn't been found.

Formally, *Manèges* appears to be equally straightforward. There are a few exceptions: three short texts (a *Prologue-Letter* and an *Epilogue-Letter*, both of which bear the typical markers of *authorial texts*, and both addressed to Diana; and an author-penned middle chapter briefly describing a particular aspect of Alcoba's research.). Also, there is a passage from Poe's "The Purloined Letter" inserted or, rather, quoted, in the Letter-Epilogue, and the graph of a crossword puzzle drawn by Laura in the second half of the book.

The main text is, otherwise, a seemingly simple narrative; a conventional, smooth textual surface (divided in equally conventional chapters), narrated in first person by a 6-year old --soon a 7-year old, i.e., Laura-*qua*-child, who is, however, fairly intellectually precocious. This overall and widespread feature is apparent from the very opening of the book, when Laura explains:

Si nous avons quitté notre appartement, c'est parce que maintenant les Montoneros devient se cacher. C'est nécessaire parce qu'il y a des personnes que sont devenues très dangereuses : ce sont les hommes des commandos de l'AAA, la Alianza Anticomunista Argentina, qui enlèvent les militants comme mes parents et les tuent ou les font disparaître. Alors il faut que nous nous mettions à 'labri, que nous nous cachions et aussi que nous répliquions. Ma mère m'expliqué que ça s'appelle « vivre dans la clandestinité » « Maintenant nous allons vivre dans la clandestinité. ("If we've had to leave our apartment it's because, from now on, the Montoneros have to hide. It's necessary, because there are some people who have become very dangerous: men from the commandos of the AAA, the Argentine Anti-communist Alliance, who "pick up" [*n.b.*, *kidnap*] militants like my parents, and kill them or make them disappear. So we have to move to less exposed places, safe places to protect ourselves; to lay low and try to go unnoticed; and also to retaliate My mother explains that this is called "going underground." [*n.b.*, *pasar a la clandestinidad*] (7).²⁶

²⁶ "*Pasar a la clandestinidad*" was the more widespread expression; shortly afterwards, "*vivir en la clandestinidad*" was also used --and that's what Alcoba writes in the French original, "*vivre dans la clandestinite*" --yet to refer to the condition and characteristics of *haber pasado a la clandestinidad*, i.e.,

Laura's mother highlights that it's very important not to say anything to anyone. To bring the point home, she tells her about a boy whose parents had forgotten to explain to him "*to what extent it is important to be silent*" ("a quel point il est important de se taire;" 9). The police raided the place, and the boy, quite unaware of the consequences of his actions, pointed at the hiding place where his parents hid compromising material. This landed them in jail. The text goes on:

Mais pour moi, c'est différent. Je suis grande, je n'ai que sept ans mais tout le monde dit que je parle et raisonne déjà comme une grande personne. Ça les fait rire que je connaisse le nom de Firmenich, le chef des Montoneros, et même les paroles de la marche des Jeunesses péronistes par cœur. Moi, on m'a tout expliqué. J'ai compris et j'obéirai (But my case is different. I'm a grown up; I'm only seven but everybody says I already talk and reason like a grown-up. It makes them laugh that I know the name of Firmenich, the chief of Montoneros, and that I know by heart the lyrics of the Peronist Youth march. They've explained everything to me. I've understood, and I will obey; 18)

The above, as well as other exchanges, are not given directly, in dialogue form, but by appeal to free indirect discourse (or a relevantly similar variation of it), which undoes standard ways of linking speakers and utterances. As said above, the nimble use of this device, often in the form of a "natural" shift, leaves us with neither *explicit markers* (e.g., dialogue tags, inverted

of having gone underground; of having crossed a threshold that involves living, or, more bluntly, surviving, in that space that suspended, or cancelled, almost all "normal" forms of social interaction] (7).

commas, indentation, etc.) nor *implicit* ones (e.g., conversational implicatures). As anticipated above, even critical pieces that focus on the use of narrative voice (including Karen Saban's excellent discussion [Saban 2012; 2013], which *does* make an incursion into Alcoba's use of free indirect discourse, as do shorter but incisive pieces such as Daona's and Peller's) don't draw the full implications of its operation in *Manèges*, i.e., for our purposes, mainly a) its effects on speaker-utterance attributions (e.g., their dislodging and suspension); and b) the way in which *Manèges* artfully leads readers to miss or fail to see this operation.

Let us see how this occurs in the above passages. It seems we are before an unequivocal, straightforward dialogue, *even if* rendered in good, old-fashioned, "reported speech," which gives a faster pace and agility to the prose passage. And yet, the smoothness with which the text moves from that form of indirect reporting to free indirect discourse (or a relevantly similar variation of it) makes it difficult to realize that the standard markers of speaker-utterance attributions are no longer there. As a result, we may likely go on reading, unwittingly projecting *one* of the many possible and plausible sets of speaker-utterance attributions that are offered by the text, but which are simultaneously withheld. For, despite the suggestive variety of possible matchings between utterances and speakers, there is *no textual indication or support whatsoever* that would give us reasons to choose one over the others.²⁷ Therefore, if we *do* keep reading and making specific attributions --regardless of whether we do so intentionally or not; inadvertently or not; unconsciously or not --*we shall be exerting violence on the text*. That is, we shall be making *arbitrary* choices, on the basis of which we articulate a given interpretation of the scene.

²⁷ Another reason why this absence of textual markers may go unnoticed, of course, is that the identification of those markers has become almost second-nature, and we don't usually (or consciously)

For instance, if we reread the above-quoted passages (especially the one beginning, "*But my case...*"), we should notice that there are *at least* four interpretive possibilities. It *could* very well be what her mother said to Laura after telling her the rather grim story of the boy who unwittingly led his family to jail. After all, it is reasonable that a mother should want to appease her 7-year old, and give her some reassurance after telling her such a story. Grammatically, all we have to do is replace the possessive "my" with "your," and we have what could be a typical phrase to reassure a child: "But *your* case is completely different; *you're* a grownup now."

Still, the mother could have just told her the story, quick and to the point, and then remained silent. If this were the case, the whole scene changes: the mother is leaving Laura alone to gather strength on her own. That is, we would have to conclude that 7-year old Laura is cheering herself up, silently talking to herself, after a smooth transition from her mother's words to her own thoughts: "I'm 7 years old now, and everybody says that I speak and think like an adult." In this scenario, Laura, would be next to her mother, but left alone, in a situation in which they could be gunned down at any moment.

Third, part of the sentence could have been uttered by her mother, and part by Laura. Alternatively, part of it could have been an utterance, and part of it, a thought of Laura's. Fourth, the passage could be construed as *a repetition or recasting of her mother's words*, perhaps *told to her daughter in past circumstances*, and *retrieved now* by Laura in order to cope with the unwelcome news and the more unwelcome silence. There remain other possibilities. For our purposes, though, these should suffice.

interrupt or even slow down the reading pace to make these matchings, let alone stop and reread to confirm whether we've made the right ones.

In sum, we have no way to decide which of the above possibilities is the case --*we cannot settle on any set* of speaker-utterance attributions, and therefore, on any one interpretation. This operation becomes increasingly important in the increasingly politically-laden scenes.

There is a related aspect of Laura's speech that is worth noticing. As seen above, Laura picks up issues of "adult conversations" (e.g., the Peronist Youth march; the snippet of information about the chain of command within the OPM— the name of the first commander of the OPM's *Conducción Nacional* – henceforth, CN -- Mario Eduardo Firmenich). Laura "will obey," as she said, because she's "a grownup:" and she'll do so, she adds, "even if they come to hurt me . . . even if they bore little nails through my knees. Really, I have understood to what extent it is important to keep silent" ("[m]ême si on venait à me faire mal. . . . Même si on me plantait de tout petits clous dans les genoux. Moi, j'ai compris à quel point il est important de se taire;" 18).

Evidently, Laura picks up adult speech *not always in a smooth way*, but, at times, as incrustations or clashes with her child-like speech. Torture described as driving "little nails" or "small nails" ("*petits clous*") into her knees sounds more like a child trying to translate or grapple with the unpalatable, almost incomprehensible reality of torture, into the worldview of a child.

This uneasy linguistic blend may suggest, without stating it explicitly, that Laura may be struggling to put together and make sense of, on the one hand, the harsh realities of the adult world towards which she's being pushed, and, on the other hand, the safety of her childhood world. The tone of the narrative, then, shifts among the following:

a) sense of vague danger accompanied by an equally vague notion that she has a duty to fulfill;

b) a sense of game-playing; and

c) a sense of simple normalcy, of being just like everybody else living their everyday life.

The actual unfolding of the above scenarios isn't as clear-cut as this brief schematic sketch might suggest, and, moreover, at times it would seem that the shift becomes a blend of sorts, or an oscillation that blurs the borders of these three scenarios. Furthermore, Laura develops rudimentary (and, sometimes, quite elaborate) defense mechanisms that are connected with these scenarios --and with the needs of the guerrilla cell. When the "feel" of childlike play prevails, Laura sometimes resorts to *literal* playing, though, more often than not, she has to *negotiate* her (stereotypically "infant-specific") *desires* with her increasingly habitual chores - soon-to-be *duties* --that her living situation demands. Soon thereafter they meet the young couple with whom they'll share the small house that hides the printing press: a 24-year old Diana Teruggi, whose pregnancy is not very noticeable yet, and her husband Daniel Mariani. Laura is immediately fascinated by Diana, and they will become very close.

In what follows, I discuss one scene in which the mechanism of speaker-utterance attributions exemplified above becomes very relevant. If successful, this discussion will make a good case for the view here advocated, and help as well to show the points where the polarized interpretations are wanting.

3.2 Between Interpretation and Naming: Disappearance *qua* Social Isolation

Laura sits by the door in the late afternoons and watches passersby. In time, she notices and enjoys the brief but everyday presence of a neighbor, coming home from work. Laura's new acquaintance is in her mid-to late twenties --a bit too "old" for a 7-year old, but not for Laura,

accustomed by now to spending most of her time among adults; and a bit too young for the young woman, who is nevertheless taken by Laura's loquaciousness and inquisitive mind. Eventually their little chats grow into an invitation to have tea. Laura is thrilled. The blend of Laura's "adult woman" roles with her typically childlike fascination when trying on her neighbor's shoes, for instance, makes the brief description of their tea-party both a vivid illustration of the complexity of Laura's position, and a respite from the sense of danger that besieges the narrative. Or so it seems. For, the next day, Laura's mother storms into the kitchen, screaming at her, demanding that she explain what happened with their neighbor. Diana calms both mother and daughter down, and tells Laura that the neighbor had asked them what was wrong with "that poor girl," who went about saying she had no last name. Laura is confused and doesn't seem to remember. Diana patiently helps her to reconstruct the scene:

J'ai juste dit mon prénom car je sais que c'est la partie de mon nom que je vais garder. Ensuite, je crois qu'elle m'a demandé : Et ton nom de famille? Sincèrement, je ne me souviens plus de la suite. J'ai dû paniquer, car je sais très bien que ma mère est recherchée et que nous attendons qu'on nous donne un nouveau nom et de faux papiers. Est-ce que moi aussi je suis recherchée ? D'une certaine manière oui, sans doute, mais je sais bien que je suis là par hasard.

(I only said my first name because I know that's the only part of my name that I will be able to keep. I'm allowed to keep. I think she asked me, And what's your last name? And, really, I don't remember anything of what happened afterwards. I must have panicked, because I know very well that my mother is being chased, and that we're waiting for our new last name and false papers. Are they looking for me as well? In a

way, yes, no doubt about it; but I also know very well that if I'm here, it's entirely by chance; 72).

At the beginning of this kitchen scene it was clear who the speakers were, and who was saying what (the author used dialogue tags), but, as Laura withdraws, and we reach the quoted passage, we don't even know whether this is still the report of the dialogue (and, if so, we don't know who the interlocutors are), or Laura's thoughts, or simply the continuation of the narrative.

The passage reads well; we get a clear idea of the overall situation. Furthermore, the smooth interweaving of what *could have been* her mother's words, *or* Diana's, *or* Laura's – or even Laura's thoughts, and no longer a report of the dialogue --easily makes readers *fail to notice* the problematic issue of speaker-utterance attributions. The more widespread view is that the passage is, at most, a blend or combination of the two narrators, i.e., *Laura-qua-child*, and *Laura-qua-adult* narrator --the latter smoothly and imperceptibly insinuating herself into the narrative of the child.²⁸ From this starting point, readings differ vastly as to the kind, degree, effects, and evaluation of this interplay between the two narrators. At their most extreme, some of these readings construe this scene as Laura's decision to side with the cause of her mother – and that of Montoneros (Ros). Others draw the opposite conclusion (Santos 2014 and 2015).

Yet, if there is no way to determine who the narrator is, both of the above groups of (admittedly, very roughly sketched) readings lose their footing. The following discussion (mainly focused on the fourth sentence and on the much-discussed statement about "chance")

²⁸ In some, Adult Laura comments on aspects of, or on events experienced by, her younger *self*. Peller 2012 argues that Adult Laura is leaving traces of the way she regards this long-past event, thus showing some compassion towards some of the less-than-welcome experiences her younger self went through,

aims to argue for this crucial point, which, if sound, undoes the polarized interpretations, and suggests a broader, deeper critique than the ones these interpretations seem to read in *Manèges*.

Let us start with the fourth sentence, "*I know very well that my mother is being chased*" (there was an arrest warrant, her picture on the papers, etc.). It could, as most accounts affirm, be Laura's utterance. But it could also be an unspoken thought of hers. Furthermore, there are many ways of "transposing" the above passage in dialogue form, and in the case of this statement, all we'd have to do is change two pronouns, and then it'd fit perfectly well in a dialogue *where it is the mother* who says, "*You [instead of "I"] know very well that I'm being chased [instead of "my mother"]*"

If we ascribe the utterance, then, to Laura's mother, and we bear in mind that we *know* the basic outline of the scene (i.e., her mother stormed into the kitchen in anger), then it's quite likely --not certain, but *very likely* --that the utterance was part of, or was relevantly related to, a rather violent, perhaps guilt-inducing, *reproach*: "*You know very well that I'm being chased!*" which would have, in turn, conversational implicatures related to reproach (e.g., "*If you knew, How could you do such a thing!*") However, the very same utterance would take on a very different meaning *if attributed to Diana*. Coming from Diana's lips, the utterance could be either a much milder reproach, or even the opposite of a reproach: *a defense* of Laura.

This possibility gains even more plausibility if we not only switch the attribution of the utterance (i.e., if we shift from the mother to Diana), but we also change the *addressee*: it is perfectly consistent to read the passage as if that utterance were proffered by Diana, and yet *not addressing Laura*, but her mother, in which case it could be construed as a plea in defense of the girl: "*I know very well that you're being chased...*" would then be the free indirect discourse

rendering of, "*She [Laura] knows very well that....*" which Diana could have said to *Laura's mother*, making the case that the blunder was not a result of Laura's silliness or forgetfulness or irresponsibility, but, on the contrary, of a deep awareness about, and concern for, her mother's situation. And it might have been this awareness and concern what made Laura freeze instead of coming up with some explanation.

This interpretation could be further strengthened if we take a small further step and attribute the preceding clause ("I must have panicked") to Diana again. This is indeed plausible, given the proximity of the two clauses ("I must have panicked, because I know very well that my mother is being chased"), and, perhaps more importantly, *given the likelihood that it be an adult, and not a 7-year old, the one speaking of "panic attacks."*

Yet this doesn't mean that Diana is a "better" candidate than the other adults: it favors the suggestion that *any* adult might be a better candidate than 7-year old Laura --her mother; Laura-*qua*-adult narrator... and *still*, we shouldn't forget that young Laura's precociousness doesn't allow us to rule out that it might have been she who uttered the stereotypically Argentine middle-class psychologizing conjecture about panic attacks.

The underdetermined possibilities notwithstanding, we could --and, insofar as we want to make sense of the scene, we must (hypothetically and temporarily) "fix" one or more speaker-utterance attributions, yet only under the hermeneutical proviso that this pairing or set of pairings is no more legitimate than others, i.e., only under the proviso that these pairings allow us to explore interpretive possibilities on which we cannot settle; scenarios, so to speak, through which we engage with the situation the characters face.

For the sake of simplicity, let us go back to the first instance discussed above; and, for the sake of argument, let us "fix" the interpretation --more modestly: the attribution --of that first

clause as an utterance proffered by Laura's mother; lastly, let us assume that it was indeed the "correct" attribution, i.e., that it was, without a doubt, a furious reproach to Laura. Even though we could legitimately grapple with a variety of questions that might come up in this light (e.g., how would Laura feel, or what does this outburst allow us to infer about her mother's character, and/or about her relationship with Laura; or what is the connection between these questions and the broader context of military repression), we wouldn't be able to answer them in more than a very tentative fashion. We could judge her mother harshly, but *how harshly*? Do we have enough information to settle this issue?

These questions depend, in part, on the way or ways in which we flesh out this very general interpretive starting point (i.e., the claim, taken as the "right" attribution, that reads, "*You know there's I'm being chased me*' is an angry reproach that Laura's mother directs at her daughter"). And the way we flesh out this statement is likely to vary, depending on the *subsequent* pairings between speakers and utterances.²⁹ "*Are they looking for me as well?*" asks Laura a sentence or two later. The answer to this question, widely assumed to be uttered or thought by Laura herself, could very well be attributed to her mother. Again, all we'd have to do is switch a few pronouns (i.e., from "In some sense, yes, no doubt about it, but *I* know very well, too, that if *I*'m here, it's just a matter of chance" to "In some sense, yes, no doubt about it, but *you* know very well, too, that if *you* are here, it's just a matter of chance"), and, at once, we'd be able

²⁹ In other words, the various speaker-utterance attributions, even if taken one at a time, will change the meaning of *other clauses* (and of their respective speaker-utterance matchings) with which they form a *web*. That is, they could reconfigure, in whole or in part, the conversational implicatures of *specific exchanges*, but also of *whole sets of exchanges*, for, even within *whole sets*, each *speaker-utterance pairing* is a link in the thread or web of utterances that form a conversation.

to construe these two lines as a mother-daughter exchange in which the mother attempts to temper, or make up for, her violent outburst. How to interpret "chance" here is an open question, but it could certainly be construed as part of the overall reassuring answer, e.g., roughly, in ways that would convey that Laura is *not* to blame, and that they are *not* really after her; that she is, simply, a "non-combatant" daughter of a montonero cadre.

Then, the picture of the abusive mother would have to be modified --not necessarily ruled out, but at the very least reconsidered or tempered. Consequently, even if we construe "*I know that my mother is being chased*," as an indirect rendering of an angry utterance proffered by Laura's mother, the interpretation that might begin to take shape is halted or reshaped or suspended.

More generally, even if we fix the first clause by indexing it to a given speaker, subsequent speaker-utterance attributions (and/or their being unsettled, and therefore subject to change) would likely make us reassess the meaning of the "fixed" utterance.

However, we need not draw skeptical conclusions. We can explore different possibilities by fixing some speaker-utterance attributions and not others. Moreover, we could start in a very simple way, by fixing, *ex hypothesi*, all or *most* of all subsequent instances of unstable or indeterminate speaker-utterance attributions. The combinatory possibilities are innumerable, and they all open up interesting, concrete interpretive paths that yield different scenarios, different psychological and intersubjective scenarios, *within* the same scene, episode, or chain of episodes.³⁰

³⁰ A caveat: it is *not* possible to settle on any one interpretation, but *this doesn't mean* that we can simply read *anything* we want *into the episode*, for the "brute elementary data" (*pace* Arendt), or basic "facts" are indisputable, and impose constraints on their interpretation. In the scene at hand: Laura said she had no

The text, then, *demands* that we entertain a wide range of possibilities, *excluding* the possibility of adjudicating among them. Now, the widespread critical tendency is the opposite. As said above, most critical accounts tend to fix speaker-utterance attributions *arbitrarily*, and to regard them, at best, as the central or most important ones; and, at worst, as the only possible ones.

Not only does this tendency exert violence on the text (for there is no textual support to favor one interpretation over others --let us emphasize: not just over *one other*, for, as we hope to have shown, what's at stake is not an issue of ambiguity between *two* interpretations); not only does it impoverish the interpretive suggestions of the text; worse, it also contributes to reinforce the dichotomic, irreconcilable, gridlocked "stalemate" among different accounts of Argentina's ties vis-à-vis political violence.

If what has been argued so far is accepted, we would have to accept too that Alcoba's text shows us not only that our interpretive practices exert violence on, and distort, the text, but also that -- regarding the events in question -- it is certainly too soon to judge (i.e., to draw normative conclusions). Moreover, it is too soon even to think that we have a minimally or sufficiently elaborate descriptive view (i.e., a minimally "thick" and nuanced descriptive view of the events in question). If the few but very different interpretive possibilities sketched above are plausible -- and let us emphasize that they all refer to *one* event involving *three* people in *one* single (his)story of *one* single thread of Argentina's Dirty War ---then, a much more complex picture of the seventies begins to emerge in the interpretive horizon of *Manèges*; a picture that doesn't allow for, or that shows the inadequacy of, dichotomized, polarized views.

last name; her mother stormed into the kitchen in anger, and an argument ensued. These "hard facts" set parameters *allow us to rule out* certain interpretations.

3.3 Memory, Sociality, Agency: Self and Judgment in (Reading) *Manèges*

It is quite telling that Laura appears to have forgotten --erased, pace Abad? -the whole episode in which she told her neighbor that she had no last name (including the belated realization that her answer was far from convincing). It wasn't until the reconstruction she engaged in with the help of Diana that she managed to remember (not without *lacunae* and uncertainties) the main features of the episode. This suggests, on first blush, a view on memory not quite identical with, but resembling that of, the intersubjective views discussed in regard to *Traiciones* and *Los rubios*.

Again, as in Carri and Abad, we find a variation of the notion that the reconstruction of a fragile memory can hardly be elaborated in the isolation or solipsistic space of a Cartesian cogito, nor in the restrictive confines of (many) liberal conceptions of the self, according to which one's memories are conceived of, as it were, under the model of --or from the standpoint and standards of --ownership in general, and *property ownership* in particular. If this is so, *my* memories are not altogether "mine" if they are in whatever ways "mixed" with *yours*, for, if that happens, my memories lose their (and *ipso facto* my) uniqueness as an individual (property of my)self.

Instead, as in Abad and Carri --memory (both collective and personal), as well as identity and other related notions (e.g., agency, autonomy, etc.), is presented mostly *qua* intersubjective activity. The flipside, however, is that when intersubjective activity is restricted, reduced, or subjected to detrimental circumstances --as is the case of the process the guerrilla cell is undergoing --the effects on one's identity and related features is much more pronounced. And this is, it would seem, the situation Laura finds herself in.

The mounting pressures and the increasing isolation, in addition to Laura's cunning and eagerness to be part of her little community's "world," gradually lead the guerrillas to give Laura more space in their activities. They oscillate between treating her almost as another member of the cell, and refocusing on the fact that she is, after all, a 7-year old. That is, they oscillate between attributing to Laura character traits and abilities of an adult (along with their attendant agential features) and recalibrating these attributions to those of a child.

By the same token, Laura wavered between prolonged moments in which what predominated in her was the desire to be, and behave like, an adult—in part, driven by the desire, and even anxiety, of Laura (and in this she displays a feature common to Argentine middle-class children) to please her mother—and moments in which she became dimly aware that there was something amiss in her almost-impossible attempt to fit an impossibly stretched-out set of shifting roles.³¹

A case in point is that of the relationship Laura establishes with an external *militante*. Besides the members of the guerrilla cell, two "external" cadres visited the house to build the *embute*: "the Worker, and "the Engineer."

Laura begins to spend time at the working zone, intrigued by the construction, and is pleased with the conversation she begins to have with the Engineer, while he supervises the remodeling of the house. During one of their encounters, he tells her that his design and architectural plans for this *embute* were inspired by Poe's "The Purloined Letter," which captures Laura's imagination.

³¹ In these moments, she felt outbursts of childlike "cravings" for playing games and partaking in activities conventionally associated to her coevals. Diana, who would give birth in a few months, often indulged her, playing with her, but also giving her school-like lessons.

The imminence of the Engineer's arrival energizes Laura. "Each time the Engineer comes to the house to work, I rush to the construction area" ("Chaque fois que l'Ingénieur vient travailler a la maison, je me précipite sur le chantier," 60) she says, , as if the distances within the small house of rabbits justified or even *allowed* one to "rush" or run anywhere. The actual house is small; the *patio* where the "construction area" was located, even smaller; the false wall that hid the *embute* before the brutal military crackdown obliterated the area no longer exists, but there is a line of bricks or *traces of bricks* that survived the attack, which gives an idea of the approximate dimensions of each of the "areas" Laura inhabited. One would be hard-pressed to speak of "amplitude" in such reduced spaces, *let alone "rush" or run toward the "working zone."* Laura's spatial perception, then, is likely influenced by her emotions, feelings, and expectations.

Captivated by the mechanism of the *embute*, she has now something to look forward to – a sense of possibility that opens up and gives amplitude to the house, which seems to swell up or shrink with the ebbs and tides of Laura's perceptual and emotional states.

When the Engineer finishes the *embute* and shows his work to Laura, he is euphoric; his work is impeccable; he praises and thanks Poe's story again, and then explains to Laura how even the remote-control system that opens and closes the doors --two loose wires --would be absolutely hidden by being absolutely exposed; that is to say, hidden in broad daylight: resting on a visible corner, as if left there by dint of negligence or clumsiness.

"Everything's working perfectly well," he says. "Soon I'll stop coming, and you won't see me again" ("Tout fonctionne à la perfection . Bientôt, tu ne me verras plus."). Laura is taken aback, and rests her gaze on his face.

Se tournant vers moi tandis qu'il teste une nouvelle fois le dispositif d'ouverture et de fermeture de la porte d'*el embute*, il prononce ces mots avec un grand sourire qui illumine son visage tout entier. Je n'avais jamais remarqué à quel point il était beau. Ses cheveux sont très foncés, presque noirs, mais sa peau est claire, laiteuse. Quant à ses yeux, je ne saurais dire de quelle couleur ils sont exactement. Gris-bleu, gris-vert ? C'est que la couleur de ses yeux change selon le temps qu'il fait, selon la lumière aussi, et puis, je crois, selon son intention à lui, selon l'éclat qu'il veut bien leur donner ... il est bien plus grand et élancé, me semble-t-il. Je me sens si petite à côté de lui... (60)

Laura stalls, her back pressed against the last false wall of the house that hides the *embute*, and plays with her hair. Then she musters courage and says, "It's awesome, this thing you've done. Maybe you could build another *embute*, a smaller one, in the house? I don't know... In the living-room, or in my bedroom, for instance » ("C'est génial, ce que tu as fait...Tu pourrais peut-être faire un autre *embute*, plus petit, dans la Maison. Je ne sais pas... Dans le salon, ou dans ma chambre, par exemple ;60).

The Engineer laughs heartily, and explains he has to go work elsewhere. Embarrassed, Laura retreats to her room. Note the inverted, or disarrayed, chronology:

"*Je me sens vraiment ridicule de lui avoir demandé ça. Je crois même que lorsque j'ai entendu son éclat de rire, j'ai rougi,*" is a commentary that entails some distance in time, and not the immediacy that the sentence-order suggests. Only after that reflection does she « return » « return » to the *patio*, about to retreat to her room, where she will wonder « I think I blushed as soon as I heard him laugh" (61).

She rummages through her clothes and moves things around, pretending to be busy, but she tells herself, "I've wanted to play the adult, the militante, the housewife, but I know well that I'm small, wholly small, incredibly small" ("J'ai voulu jouer à l'adulte, à la militante, à la maitresse de maison, mais je sais bien que je suis petite, toute petite, incroyablement petite même. " (61)

Regrettably, other than a bowdlerized observation to the effect that Laura feels "*un cierto enamoramiento*" ("a sort of crush" Daona 2013); or that the text is humorously suggesting a fake erotic attraction to argue that her interest in the Engineer operates merely as a deviation from, or rejection of, concerns about the relevance of the Montoneros cause (Santos 2015),³² the clear *markers of a sexualized child* - more so: of a sexualized *girl-child* -- have been *for the most part gone unnoticed, ignored, or smoothed over*.

Interestingly, her being "petite," or, rather, that condition of "smallness," of which Laura speaks, is quite semantically dense: at times it seems she refers to being a *child* ; other times, to a sheer matter of size, and *not* age or any normatively related notions of adequacy or inadequacy, propriety or impropriety. Other times, instead, she does seem to refer to inadequacy, but not of a moral, but a physical and (perhaps) psychological sort, unrelated to her age or considerations regarding her status as a child, but, rather, as an inadequacy that doesn't allow her to fulfill her desires: she wants to help Diana kill the rabbit that will be their dinner, and she blames her being *petite* again. However, "petite" is often attached to the very objects of her desire: recall that she

³² Santos 2015 ingeniously remarks that "il prononce cet mots" includes the word *embute*, which, the critic observes shrewdly and humorously, involves, if we imagine or mimic the pronunciation of the word, a movement of the lips looking as if they were giving a invisible kiss.

referred to the *embute* as "cette petite piece secrete" (57);" [this small secret room]; she asks the Engineer to build "un autre *embute*, plus petite... dans ma chambre" (61).

In this connection, Sarah Ahmed's view on *space, orientation, and desire* could be a lens through which we may have an initial grip on these issues: "If orientation is a matter of how we reside in space," Ahmed writes, "then *sexual* orientation might also be a matter of residence; of *how* we inhabit spaces as well as '*who*' or '*what*' we inhabit spaces with" (Ahmed 2006, p. 1). This attempt to rethink the "sexualization of space, as well as the spatiality of sexual desire" may be judged, the theorist says not without playful yet serious irony, "odd, bent, and twisted" (and so much so, let us add, in the case of the more widespread, normative views of infancy). Ahmed hastens to add that the role of spatial proximity with other bodies doesn't exhaust the analysis, nor other, grimmer possibilities that are, in some cases, a cause, and in others, an effect, of disorientation, which affects the spatial and affective (and sexualized) relations among people and objects.

Also, if, as seen above, losing her last name accentuates what could be called a "pre-disappearance process," (i.e., an increasing process of social isolation), it is also the case that *restrictions in* (or, conversely, *expansions of*) her agential attributions accentuate the tensions involved in the constitution of Laura's *sense of self*. Socially transmitted in linguistic and non-linguistic forms, these agential attributions include *naming* certain traits or abilities (as well as actions or concepts tied to those traits or abilities), and/or *ascribing* them to this or that person *without explicit naming* (e.g., expressed in commands or requests based on the assumption that one *has* the requisite ability to perform them).

Bracketing the factual or fictional status of (some or all) scenes in *Manèges*, the uneasy balance between attributions that become agency-enhancing, and those that are agency-thwarting

– amply documented by varied ongoing research programs (Ahmed 2006 and 2010; Susan James 2015; Velleman 2009 and 2013) --is vividly incarnated in *Laura-qua-girl*, and perhaps in *Laura-qua-adult* as well.

But this isn't the whole story, for, in addition to the external pressures --the externally imposed isolation --there is a well-documented phenomenon that in a way *intersects* with, or, in the complex constellation of factors at play, *worsens*, the effects of external isolation; namely, the attempt made by most *militantes* to pull in the opposite direction: to intensify and strengthen the social bonds among members of the same cell, and the tendency to weaken those with non-members, as was mentioned briefly with regard to the testimony of Roberto Carri's unidentified friend in *Los rubios* (Vezetti 2002 and 2009; Ollier 2009).

Once the Engineer is done and stops coming to the house, Laura's social life is virtually reduced to her interactions with Diana, very sporadic meetings of all the cell members -- five or six people -- and brief conversations with her mother, who works non-stop in the depth of the printing press, so close and yet so far from her daughter.

News of the military's crackdowns on houses and *embutes*, murders and disappearances, turns the house of rabbits into a fragile hiding place. The unmentioned thought that theirs might be the next safe house to fall turns everyday contacts and sounds from the external world into ominous, possibly mortally dangerous signs. Only Diana and Laura are in the house when the door knocks, and “Diana too was in fear” (“Diana aussi a eu peur” (116), we read, not fully aware yet of the reasons why the text should emphasize Diana's fear.

In any case, , Diana walks slowly toward the door. Laura is terrified, and *her reaction brings to mind the brief passage by Ahmed, though showing a different nuance; it lends itself, in fact, to a variety of approaches*. Suffice it, for now, just to highlight her *simultaneous desire to*

hide (and survive); and the seemingly contradictory desire to adjust her movements to the rhythm of Diana's, and to blend or fade into her until she disappears:

accrochée à sa robe, des deux mains, me cachant derrière elle, marchant au même rythme que Diana. Je ne sais pas si c'est était pour être encore plus près d'elle. J'aurais peut-être voulu qu'elle me prenne dans ses bras. Je crois que j'aurais voulu surtout coller à son mouvement à elle, m'y fondre au point de disparaître. (Weaved into her robe, holding tight with my hands, I hid behind her, walking at her same pace. I don't know whether I did so to be even closer to her. I wanted, perhaps, that she take me in her arms. I think I would've wanted, more than anything, to adjust to her movement and let go, dissolving in until I disappeared; 117).

Again, an abrupt shift. When Laura recognized the voice of the blond neighbor of the thousand shoes, she breathed again. *Would Laura want to come over for a cup of tea?*

But let us go back to the kitchen scene, triggered, precisely, by the previous tea-party with the neighbor: Laura's feeling of vulnerability first, and panic soon thereafter, when she was asked her last name, would seem to show that she *is* aware --in however inchoate a way, i.e., at an emotional level, at least -of the state of suspension she is in. If and when her new (counterfeit) papers arrive, she will be able to have a name. Until then, she will remain in a state of uncertainty regarding something as deeply attached to one's sense of identity as one's very name.

Being asked her name and being unable to answer such a simple question was a painful confirmation of her *suspended status* in the world of the living. Granted, a name is a convention, but one that not only children, but also adults, find of importance for their sense of identity. It's

not by chance --no pun intended --that, upon being hurled into any of the more than 300 illegal detention centers that were active during the military regime, the first thing military personnel used to do to the newcomer --the soon-to-be disappeared --was to deprive her of her name, and replace it with a number.

If a paradigmatic scene that shows the operation of free indirect discourse revolves around *hiding* Laura's *last name*, another scene revealing of yet another strategy central to *Manèges* revolves around unwittingly *displaying* her last name. Laura is wearing a sweater that has, in embroidered, small letters, the name of her uncle—that is, her father's *last name* --which would easily give them away. One of the cell members begins to chastise Laura for being so negligent. In the previous pages, the narrative had consistently and gradually built up and configured a Laura fairly well adjusted to her role of the careful, adult guerrilla, so when the man begins to chastise her, we are disposed to "take sides" --to "side" with him --and reproach Laura, until (one would hope) we "catch ourselves:" we realize or "remember" that we are siding with an adult who is verbally abusing a 7-year old. Presumably, we shift from siding with the adult abusing Laura, to reframing our interpretation, and, at the very least, to wonder about the appropriateness of attributing such responsibility to a 7-year old. We may go further and "side" with the girl, while, correlatively, censoring her abuser.

The kind and degree of reader's endorsement or "siding" with one character or the other is very likely to be variable. Yet, it need not be a strong empathetic reaction, whereby the reader vicariously experiences a (variable) array of affective engagements. As Angela Smith and Jennifer Saul have forcefully argued, the mere (and even transitory) *absence* of attitudinal stances (e.g., cognitive or affective discomfort or dissonance) that we would consider an appropriate way of being "attuned" to events (e.g, our relative—again, even if transitory—

“indifference” to the scene of brutal verbal abuse) constitutes sufficient grounds for questioning in our capacity to judge and evaluate actions (Smith 2004 and 2006; Saul 2015).³³

Are we, or have we been, vicariously complicit in a scape-goating process? From the safety of our abrupt shift --siding with Laura, against the man --we may hasten to deny it; or we may acknowledge a minimal degree of "distraction." If Laura --wholeheartedly, it would seem -- blames herself and believes she is entirely responsible for putting the whole guerrilla cell in danger, we, as readers, may conceive of ourselves as witnesses, or even bystanders. Yet this is a subject position that doesn't entail being free from responsibility, as the “distraction” in which *Manèges* made us slip shows. Again, a minimally honest assessment reveals that, if only for a shortest instant, we were impassive or mildly supportive of a scapegoating process that targeted a 7-year old.

It might be *something more* (or less) than a scape-goating process. The five or six people who live in the safe-house --the house of rabbits --are all under pressure, barely able to meet the

³³ We caught ourselves siding with the adult, and going ahead with scape-goating Laura. But, is this so serious? Wasn't it a mild, harmless shift in a readers' attitudinal "orientation," which is rapidly corrected and doesn't lead to harmful behavior? Sara Ahmed, Harry Frankfurt, Angela Smith, and David Velleman are but a few scholars who would question this claim. From very different starting points and theoretical commitments, they redefine the space and range of effects of "activity" (i.e., not full-fledged action, and yet an attitudinal stance that transpires and has a variety of positive or negative valences) and "passivity," the latter conceived of not as "quietism" or "suffering" or "immobility," but --in the versions I find most persuasive --as a stance based on "I cannot *rise* to the occasion," says Laura ("*No estoy a la altura* [de las circunstancias]"), or --in the original French, there is a non-humorous pun that conveys *both Laura's taking responsibility* (i.e., a result of her victimization?) *and the acknowledgment --perhaps elliptical -- that she is just a child*: “Je ne suis pas à l’hateur.” The "original French," is, perhaps, a bit of a misnomer, given the interplay between Alcoba's French and her Spanish "translation," which is yet another instance of hybrid suspension or in-between languages.

minimum requirements of a life that wouldn't look suspicious, while trying not to leave the house, because being outside always entails the risk of being stopped by the police, the military, or the paramilitary cracking down on guerrillas or suspected guerrillas. Could the adults, then, be checking every detail? Shouldn't Laura --so precocious and smart in so many respects --take care of something so (purportedly) obvious like not letting her last name be shown?

The episode, then, might be *not just* an instance of scape-goating. Granted, on the face of it, it'd seem to fall squarely under scape-goating, but upon reflection it might be regarded as a blurry zone in which *scapegoating* and impossible *double-binds* intersect. In turn, the reader's judgment (or the judgment we pass on the reader?) also breaks down, and cannot fit the neat distinctions of the grid made by the concepts of perpetrator, victim, witness, bystander, and the related concepts of gray zone, double-bind, scapegoating. In this failure, the text is implicating us in a way that puts pressure on our conceptualization of the events we are reading about, as much as on our conceptualization of ourselves as interpreters.

In a way, *Manèges* --and, from different angles, *Los rubios* and *Traiciones* as well --respond to the need for a more nuanced, fine-grained elaboration of categories that have begun to be used, more often than not, as facile end-points, when they should be starting points to begin to grapple with these issues; conversation starters, and not conversation-stoppers. It would seem that placing Laura in the broad category of *victim*, and the Engineer in the broad category of *perpetrator* (or, let us say, in the slightly more nuanced but still insufficient category of forced perpetrator, or victim-turned perpetrator); our understanding and judgment of the events were close to being satisfactory.

If this is our conclusion, one would be hard-pressed not to wonder whether "reasoning" pieces of this kind are the expression of intellectual laziness, compassion-and/or evil-fatigue, or

fascination with the roles of victim and perpetrator --or whichever combination of the above one could think of (LaCapra 2009; 2013).

The insufficiency of the above considerations --including the suggestion to characterize these episodes as in-between phenomena, at the intersection of scapegoating and double-binds -- suggests a further interpretive move, which, while not yet minimally adequate, unveils or calls attention to these inadequacies. To call it an "interpretive move" might be too generous. It is, rather, an observation aimed at blocking the temptation to feel satisfied with the above considerations. Namely, if all we've done is shift from siding with one character to siding with the other --aren't we still within the binary logic of friend and foe; within dichotomy structures that our interpretive practices have been trying so hard to leave behind --and for the most part failed to do?

Put differently, this oscillation between siding with the adult, and siding with Laura, complex and richly layered as it may be (re)conceptualized, thorny as the double-bind nature of the oscillation is, does not escape, if we leave it at that, a deeply binary "trap:" Is the moral of the story that we are in a state of suspension between two alternatives, i.e., between finding ourselves, at times, either siding with the "bad guy" and, other times, with the "innocent" victim?

In sum, unless we do work out a more fitting schema or conceptualization of the grid, we might be moving too quickly, unwittingly or not, toward yet another dichotomic, double-bind conclusion, which would, quite likely, put an end to a discussion that has barely begun.³⁴ This

³⁴ Happy as we may have been to characterize the episode as a case of *scape-goating-meets-double binds*, to think that thus we are *not* presenting a simplistic picture is a bit too quick --or naïve, or facile.

very lack of solid ground that *Manèges* sheds light on reminds us that there is a sore need to focus on these *loci* of violence, vulnerability, and precariousness that yoke large groups of people, as much as large, if weakened, capacities or frameworks of description and judgment. Like *Traiciones*, the performative loop in *Manèges* undermines (or gives us a more precise view of) our limited epistemic position. Unlike *Traiciones*, the focus isn't our own memory, but our view of self-knowledge and self-interpretation, which bears strongly on antagonistic discussion, as well as on (or as a function of) the confidence with which we hold our convictions, weigh evidence for or against them, and are willing to change our minds in light of evidence contrary to them.

In sum, it bears strongly on our capacity and flexibility to see, hear, and evaluate phenomena about which we were not aware, or about which we hold deeply ingrained convictions. Performative “loops” of this sort weigh against Manichean views that are still very much alive in the memory regimes of the seventies. Furthermore, they put into question both the assumption of societal “innocence” --and the opposite tendency: the hasty condemnation and demonization of sociopolitical actors, who acted, or failed to act, in ways that are prescribed according to present-day, hindsight-influenced, and ideologically-driven standards.

Now, is this exercise in close reading doing enough “work” to justify drawing conclusions about issues concerning the politics of memory and recent history? On its own, it might not. However, if – in addition to the exploration of the intra-textual operations driven by the text’s *centrifugal* impetus – we take heed of the second “condition” imposed by the text --- i.e., the need to go *beyond* the text to restore (part of) its *context* -- our situation *qua* interpreters

Certainly, each of the two are, on their own, complex and "unthinkable" enough; compounded, they are certainly formidable; regarded as closing the discussion, unacceptable.

may change. That is, provided we take seriously the fact that *Manèges* points in many directions outside and beyond itself, in a *centripetal* impetus that blurs the borders between text and world.

3.4 Context and Restitution. Puzzled Letters.

Earlier, we mentioned and touched upon a third text, in addition to the Prologue and Epilogue, in which Alcoba-*qua*-author explains a particularly important aspect of her research. The word *embute* was the first thing that came back to her “from the instant when I started to look into my memories” “[d]és l’instant où j’ai commencé à fouiller dans mes souvenirs.”] (49). She tells us *how strange it was to remember the word, but not its meaning*, and how much stranger it was *to pronounce it and feel a flood of memories streaming down through her* – but the meaning of the word still eluding her. “Car ce terme tant de fois prononcé et entendu, indissociablement lié à ces morceaux d’enfance argentine que je m’efforçais de retrouver et de restituer, je ne l’avais jamais rencontré dans un autre contexte.” She searches various dictionaries, but, “*pas de trace d’embute*” (49).

Not without differences, Laura’s search brings to mind that of Abad’s. Both are rather bizarre, and Laura’s becomes increasingly so when she “lands” on a Mexican blog devoted to “des questions sexuelles plutôt techniques et pointues.” Soon, in a grotesque, eerily funny, oneiric atmosphere, Laura begins to ask questions during a debate whose title seems more apt for a self-help book than for an obscure blog on risqué sexual practices: *Beso negro* is the theme (“black kiss” is used across Latin America in the same sense and meaning – roughly, the equivalent of -- the of the American English expression, “rimming”). But the debate takes place under the ridiculous, “Intro to X”-sounding name of *Beso negro: ¿qué es?*.

Tancredo, as if springing from the forest after killing Clorinda (Freud 1920; Caruth 1996) *responds to Laura's call*. Alcoba writes that “one person .. under the name of Tancredo wrote: [n.b., in Spanish in the original) the word *embute* is much used by *don Nadie* (Mr. Nobody) (“une des personnes... sous le nom Tancredo écrivait: *La palabreja embute, tambieen es muy empleada por don Nadie*” (53).

But this *Don Nadie*, Monsieur Personne, or Mr. Nobody can't be found. And, since everyone appears under a pseudonym, Tancredo may not be Tancredo. And *Nadie*, or Personne, or Nobody, may be nobody.

Again the issue of names and identity. With an added component: the charged wordplay making a less indirect allusion to disappearances, yet one in which something close to humor prevails (e.g., the aforementioned Tancred, landmark in trauma studies, from Freud onwards, Caruth 2013) ; the contrasts between French, Spanish, and English: *personne* – nobody – sounds like the Spanish *persona* (person); and “nobody” is, if split in its two components, “no body,” which is the thrust of the cruel methodology of disappearances: presumably dead, but no body to confirm whether this is so. No *corpus delicti* – an expression that blends the physical and the legal aspects of the crime.

But Laura limits herself to say that *don Nadie* couldn't be found. Eventually, some vaguely referenced Argentines tell her that the word *embute* “seems to belong in the jargon of the revolutionary movements in Argentina, dated for years, and visibly disappeared” (“semble bien appartenir a un forme de jargon propre aux devoted to mouvements revolutoaries argentins années plutôt daté et *visiblement disparu* (53, emphasis added).

Again, the humorous (?) paradoxical formulation: “visibly disappeared.” And again, not a reference to the real *desaparecidos*, but to a *word*.

Lastly, the serious, authoritative authorial tone with which this short chapter began (tone, and content: Alcoba is apparently speaking of the search that led her to bring back the memories on which the book is based) gradually shifts toward an implausible, half-funny, half-grotesque, half-playful series of statements.

Like Carri, Alcoba may be *not only nudging us to confirm* what she is saying, but also, perhaps, warning us about the alleged authority of the voice of the witness or survivor.

Alcoba's brief *embute* reflection is but one of the many nudges to the reader— perhaps the most conceptually explicit. However, there are others, which take different forms and emphases. Perhaps the most urgent, in terms of the need to understand the characters and the sense of relevant scenes in the narrative, is the one presented in a scene in which Laura created a crossword puzzle..

Stuck in the house, Laura accepts Diana's offer to give her grade school-like exercises. Now, as a surprise, Laura attempts to design a crossword puzzle – she manages four or five words, which she put together on the grid, laboriously and with some frustration.

Diana approached her, looked over her shoulder, and smiled. Laura feels she partially succeeded, for she had chosen words to make Diana laugh [“pour faire rire Diana”] (125); also, words that “spoke a bit about what was happening to us” [“parlaient un peu de ce qui nous arrivait”] (123), since all of them alluded to *Evita Montonera*. Among them, “le slogan qui servait toujours a clore les articles les plus importants du *Evita Montonera* ou les declarations de Firmenich” (125). Next to a reproduction of the crossword puzzle, the page reads thus:

Horizontales:

<i>Del verbo “ir:”</i>	VA
<i>Imitadora fracasada y odiada:</i>	ISABEL
<i>Del verbo “dar:”</i>	DA
<i>Patria o...</i>	MUERTE

Verticales:

<i>Asesino:</i>	VIDELA
<i>Casualidad:</i>	ASAR
<i>Literatura, música:</i>	ARTE

Diana points out a spelling mistake: Laura had spelled “azar” (“hasard”/“chance”) with an “s,” that is, “asar”, or “to grill,” as Diana explains. “That’s where “asado” comes from. The word you’re thinking of is a noun that means or refers to the occurrence of something unexpected, . But it must be written with a Z” (“) (“C’est de là que vient le mot *asado* Le mot auquel tu pensais, c’est le nom commun qui a le sens d’occasion ou événement imprévisible” Mais il s’écrit avec un z” (124)

Laura’s *revised version* looked almost the same. She simply *changed one spelling mistake for another*: she corrected “azar,” so that the word she so much loved be correctly spelled, but inevitably turning “Isabel” into “Izabel.” She made, however, a minor revision *in the*

directions. To the original line – “Imitadora fracasada y odiada,” (in Spanish in the original; “Hated and Failed Imitator”) she added a parenthetical clarification. So, the initial line,

Imitadora fracasada y odiada:

ISABEL

became,

Imitadora fracasada y odiada (con una falta de ortografía): IZABEL

All Laura did was have the courtesy of warning her reader that there is a spelling mistake. Perhaps, this is yet another displacement: if the verb “to disappear” is seldom used to refer to the “methodology” of the military regime, but to *losing* everyday objects; if there’s not a single gunshot or drop of blood in the whole book, but the streets are *criblée des trous* (16), perhaps Laura’s “trick” is yet another displacement -- an allusion to the complex, often confusing, relationship between words and world.

Laura doesn’t change the object to which the definition refers (i.e., she doesn’t change the word, “Isabel,” which is the “object” to which the definition refers—the “reference,” one might be tempted to say). Instead, she changes the definition or “description” of that “reference,” so that there is an artificial “fit” between definition and word – between *description and reality*, so to speak.

This move – changing the definition or description, as if that were to change reality – was a move typical of the military regime, and, according to Rodolfo Walsh's critical reports to the CN of Montoneros, an error the organization was prone to committing, too (Walsh 1976). That

is, assuming, for the sake of argument, that nouns can be regarded, even if playfully, as “second-order” objects, which we identify by way of descriptions or definitions. Of course, proper names make things much more complicated, so, changing the “description” of “Isabel” is not such an easy compromise as Laura tends to think. Ironically, a proper name—a proper last name – is what Laura is missing; or omitting. Still, when she receives her new false name, *which one* will be her “*real*” name?

The configuration of the tensions between performance *qua* acting and “identity,” and between original and copy, are given here *another turn* . If in *Traiciones*, Roux obliterated the distinction between original and copy by drawing a “new” original from a “copy” whose “real” “original” was in the hands of Mr. Rey, , *which one is Laura’s name?* Which papers stipulate her *real* name? In a crossword puzzle, she can resort to facile solutions. But, as we have seen in the kitchen-neighbor scene, things aren’t so easy in the real world.³⁵

Now, *what to make of the crossword puzzle proper?* The plea to go beyond the text in order to restore -- *reponer* or *restituer* -- the necessary context couldn’t be clearer. First, *all* foreign editions of *Manèges* feature the puzzle –and the “directions” -- in Spanish. So does the original French edition. The first step, then, will involve a dictionary. But soon we should realize that, like the suicidal translator in “Nota al pie,” a dictionary won’t really help. His Appleton was no longer useful. Likewise, What use could we make of knowing that “imitadora” is the feminine form of “imitator” or someone who mimics or pretends to be someone else, whether in jest or

³⁵ During the neighbor episode, Laura had sensibly wondered, « Je crois qu’elle m’a demandé : « Et ton nom de famille ? » ... Ça n’existe pas une petite fille de sept ans qui ne connaît pas son nom de famille et qui pense qu’il est possible de ne pas en avoir... Mais *qu’est-ce que je pouvais répondre, alors ? C’est quoi, mon nom ?* (73)

with the intention to deceive? One may start with some general background information – a few lines in a footnote³⁶ can dispel some doubts – or, perhaps, we might get to understand the brief sentence, “Failed and hated imitator” or perhaps “failed and hated fake. “But, *in what sense is that related to Isabel? And why would “Patria o Muerte”* would make Diana laugh?

In the absence of a minimum of historical knowledge, we can hardly make sense of any of these questions; and, insofar as they are relevant to understand Diana (as well as many issues of the narrative), *we can hardly make sense of relevant aspects of the narrative*. In this case, contextual information – the second condition imposed by these texts – seems to be not a luxury but a condition of possibility of reading itself.

³⁶ The first three words are, *Muerte, Videla, and Isabel*, i.e., "Death," "Videla" (at the time of the events, Gral. Videla was *de facto* President and head of the military *junta*); "Isabel" was the nickname of María Estela Martínez, maiden name of Mrs. Perón, who came to marry the exiled leader years after the death of Eva, and years still before he could come back. But when he returned in 1973 and ran for President, he chose *her* as running mate;; no one quite liked it – or her --, but still, he won with over 62% of the votes with the ticket “Perón- Perón;” took office, held the Presidency for nine turbulent months, and died on July 1, 1974. Then, Isabel, VP, was sworn in. It would be Jose Lopez Rega, personal secretary of Perón for over a decade, the one making major political and policy decisions. Former policeman, rabid anti-Communist, and head of the Ministry of Welfare (appointed by Perón himself), the Minister was in charge of attending to the needs of the health-care system, of unions and professional associations, and, among many other things, of commanding and equipping the paramilitary death-squads of the AAA—mentioned by 7-year old Laura on the first page of her book. The other words were *Va, Dar, Arte, and Azar*, i.e., "[He or she] goes," "To give," "Art" and "*Chance*," which -- Laura says -- was formed by *chance*, while she was working on two other crossed words. ³⁶ The crossings, if we go back to the previous page, permit reading fragmentary phrases such as VA – ISABEL – DAR – MUERTE (“Dar muerte,” in Spanish, means “to murder” The death-squads began to operate under her Presidency; possible under her husband’s)

The first place to look for, we hope it is evident by now, is *Evita Montonera* proper. *Evita Montonera*, the whole reason why everyone is risking their lives in the rabbit house, is withheld from us; but scenes like this one strongly suggest that *it is on us* to search for the *Evitas* and try to make sense of Diana's (and the whole cell's) actions.

And, as it wouldn't be hard to guess, a fairly simple internet search can take us to reliable sources where the collection of *Evitas* can be downloaded in PDF form.

The juxtaposition and parallel reading of the *Evitas* and *Manèges* takes on, somehow, a form analogous to that of some of *Traiciones'* texts (e.g., recall the juxtaposition of the US State Department memos on the "detention" of Susana Panero, who might have led to the Borges poems: no commentary on the juxtaposed texts).

Before taking a quick look at the issues of *Evita Montonera* corresponding to the period in which Laura Alcoba lived in the "rabbit house" --from late 1975 through July/August 1976) – let us give a brief overview of the “ending” of Laura-*qua*-girl's story.

Her narrative closes in a few deceptively brief pages. By mid-1976, Laura's mother negotiates a way out --she wants to take her daughter away from the rabbit house, with a view of going into exile. After some protracted negotiations, she is allowed to leave.

The story narrated by Laura-*qua*-child ends here. There follows a transition toward the epilogue-letter; this transition takes the form of brief paragraphs separated by asterisks, which highlight the main points of her post-rabbit-house life, from a guarded, low-profile stay at her grandparents,' through her trip to France, once the new papers finally arrived.

After the last asterisk, the text takes on a more explicit letter-like "tone" and form of address, which, like the prologue-letter, bears all the markers of authorial texts that precede and/or succeed fictional and non-fictional narratives (e.g., prologues, introductions, epilogues or

post-scripts, etc.). Therein, Alcoba recounts how she learned of the attack on the house of rabbits, referencing a conversation with her mother as well as the laconic words of her father, who gave her the well-known and much-debated book, *Los del 73. Memoria Montonera*, from which she quotes the account of the attack on the house of rabbits; she also cites excerpts from a newspaper piece (quoted in the aforesaid book), which cites, in turn, the official military communiqué. (Note the layers of mediation, which, strictly speaking, aren't necessary).

The seven *montoneros* – Diana among them – contained the attack for almost four hours. Only when mortars and other light artillery were brought to the place and used to blast the walls did the military forces manage to break into the house and murder the seven youth. (Painceira 2007; 2010).³⁷ They murdered everybody, except the one-month old daughter of Diana and Daniel, who was taken alive, and “placed” into a military or pro-military family.

In 2004 --we are told in the epilogue-letter --Alcoba visits Chicha Mariani, and they go together to the house of rabbits, which has become an important *sitio de memoria*. (Wallas 2013;

³⁷ In what was probably an unintentional admission, the official account coincides for the most part with the manifold accounts that have since then been amply documented: police and military forces surrounded the house; snipers and machine-gun teams took aim from the roofs of neighboring houses; and yet, Diana and six other *cadres* contained the military for three hours and forty-five minutes, armed with FALs (semi-automatic rifles) and .45 mm pistols. Only when reinforcements carrying mortars and other light artillery were brought to the place did the military forces manage to break into the house and machine-gun the seven montoneros. See Painceira 2007, probably the most reliable study of the last days of, and the attack on, the house of rabbits, its repercussions, and the still unsolved gaps in the events that followed, including questions regarding the disappearance of the body of Diana --machine-gunned from behind, but subsequently burnt and carbonized *in situ* --and the fate of her daughter, Clara Anahí, who was taken alive by the military, and to this day searched relentlessly by Chicha Mariani, first on her own, then as founding member of Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, and nowadays from the Clara Anahí Foundation, an NGO created as an institutional resource against past and present political *and social* “disappearances.”

2014). With some difficulty, Alcoba asks how the military found out about the guerrilla cell and the printing press. Mariani tells her that the information was given away by the man who built the printing press—the Engineer.

Alcoba protests: *he didn't know where the house was. He had always been brought to the house "tabicado" (blindfolded).*

Mariani explains that *he didn't have to know* where the house was. It was more than sufficient to know, as he did, *how to look for* the house. Since he had designed and built a whole new part of the property, where he had set up the *embute* and the printing press, he would be able to identify it, provided his point of view was that of a regular designer or architect when looking at the “map” or on-paper design (now, mostly on computer) displayed on a big design-table when they work—or when they show their customers the way the house is coming. These “maps” are, one could say, drawings on scale seen from above.

Chicha Mariani explains that the military combed the whole city in helicopters, block by block, with the Engineer to tell them which was the house (130).

Alcoba is stunned. She regains some composure, and says to herself, as if to confirm what she's heard, “C'était donc l'Ingénieur” [So it was the Engineer] and, with an eerily aloof, cold tone, she wonders, “Avait-il infiltré le mouvement dès le début, ou avait-il tout simplement craquée sous la torture?” [Had he infiltrated the organization from the beginning, or did he simply break down under torture?"] (139-40)

Soon thereafter, Alcoba picks up “The Purloined Letter,” and begins to read. When she reaches the passage in which Dupin explains his theory, Alcoba remembers very vividly the Engineer. But she is more specific about what she remembers: “Je me souvenais avec une grande netteté de son regard et de son sourire tandis qu'il exposait sa théorie. C'était étrange d'entendre

ainsi, de nouveau, l'ingénieur, derrière les mots de Dupin" (I remembered with palpable clarity his eyes and his smile while he presented his theory. It was strange to listen to the Engineer again, behind the words of Dupin; 140).

The memories of the Engineer while explaining Poe's theory come back to her ; and, with them, the attraction she felt for him. If the scene of Laura-qua-child approaching the Engineer was lost on the reader, the lexical choices might help. Now, in 2004, she speaks of "son regard et de son sourire." Thirty years and thirty pages earlier, she had referred to his big, grand smile that *lit* (or "illuminated: "brightened) him *entirely*" (his "grand sourire qui illumine son visage tout entire,")" adding that she'd never admitted the extent of his good looks.

But the Engineer's voice in Dupin's words., bringing memories with erotic undertones, , are suddenly interrupted. "The famous passage about "excessive evidence" left me frozen. I reread, unable to believe at first; horrified later. I have read I more than once since then. ("le fameux passage sur "excessive evidence" m'a glacée. Je l'ai immédiatement relu, incrédule d'abord. Puis épouvantée. Depuis, je l'ai relu plus d'une fois." (141)

She reproduces the famous ten lines in which Dupin describes the game.

Yet then again, immediately after quoting the short passage, Alcoba writes, straightforwardly, with candid bravery, that since she read that passage, she hears the clear pronunciation of the Engineer's voice in her head—"Since I reread that passage listening to the voice of the Engineer over the words of Dupin..." ("Depuis que j'ai relu ce passage en entendant résonner dans ma tête la voix de l'Ingénieur sur les mots de Dupin; 141)—but thinking, in astonishment, how he had managed, after all, to figure out how to apply the "game" to the military chase of the house of rabbits; how he was "capable of reading, from the sky, the lines and the figures... the enormous letters, the bloated characters" that allowed him to spot the house

(“capable de lire, depuis le ciel, les lignes et les traits ... les lettres enormes, les gros caracteres;” 142). She wonders whether it was all part of a detailed plan; whether they were pawns in a game they could not control. “Il y a des *manèges* subtils, trop subtils... *pour dominer* autrui et *avoir le dernier mot*. “ (142, emphasis added). It is worth noting the contiguity between *domination* and *having the last word*.

And she asks herself whether those *manèges* are also “[p]our retrouver une lettre volée, ou pour sauver sa peau, quitte à provoquer un massacre ? (“to retrieve a stolen letter, or rather, in order to save one’s skin, cause a massacre, or let it take place? 142)

The appearance of symmetry, or Design -- as opposed to Chance – is clear... initially. Soon a sort of *trompe-d-oeil* complicates the problem. The binary Design-Chance rests on the letters-*qua*-alphabet characters that *she couldn’t decipher*, whose initial idea rests *within a letter-qua-epistle* which is part of a text (Poe’s story) *within another letter* that is part of yet another text/story (i.e, the epilogue-letter within Alcoba’s book).

Despite this appearance of symmetry and perverse order, which might point at a secret design or intentionality, Laura refuses to accept such a thing, to favor that “placeholder” that recurs in her speech: *chance*— with a non-capitalized “c” (“Hasard” in the original French). “Non, ça ne peut être si simple. Et Poe ne peut pas être de mèche. Non. Pas plus que Dupin. Je veux croire qu’il y a le hasard. Je veux croire aussi qu’il y a bien d’autres ‘excessives évidences’” (143)

But, at the same time, chance doesn’t *fully* satisfy her – *was it by chance that she couldn’t* outwit the Engineer? Neither a carefully designed plan – Design – nor mere randomness – Chance – seem appealing. But, is there a way out of this dichotomy?

Again, Alcoba as much as Abad and Carri seem to require a kind of reading that we may be ill-equipped to embark in. We are required to *hold on to the discomfort and feeling of unsettlement* that the compressed, cunningly crafted last pages of *Manèges* both *instill* and *dissolve*.

As mentioned earlier, critics often refuse to accept this uncertainty, and prefer to advance reading hypothesis that, while not implausible, are not warranted. A recent critical piece claims that although Laura brings up again “the question of the intentionality and responsibility of the engineer,” she refuses to adjudicate on those matters, and that she prefers instead “to settle the sense or meaning of the story (and of History) in mere chance” [“la cuestión de la intencionalidad y responsabilidad del ingeniero ... [pero se resiste a atribuírsela] para asentar el sentido de la historia (y de la Historia) en el mero azar”] (Santos 2015, 17)

Yet, there is no such definition. There is however, the possibility – even the imperative – to check out some information. Thus, the ambivalence about the Engineer, for instance, could be dispelled.

Yet, immediately after *wondering* about the role of the Engineer in the demise of the house of rabbits, *the authorial voice shifts* and “changes the subject,” addressing Diana again, and at the same time asking the reader to heed the plea of Diana's mother-in-law, Chicha Mariani, who is still searching for her granddaughter.

“Clara Anahí lives somewhere,” writes Alcoba. “No doubt under a different name, she probably ignores who were her parents and how they met their deaths.” Then, addressing Diana, thus reminding us that the Prologue and Epilogue are “letters” in which the “intra-textual” addressee is *someone who isn't there*, she adds, “But I'm sure, Diana, that she has your bright smile, your strength, and your beauty.” (“Clara Anahí vit quelque part. Elle port sans doute un

autre nom, elle ignore probablement qui furent ses parents et comment ils sont morts. Mais je suis sûre, Diana, qu'elle a ton sourire lumineux, ta force et ta beauté," 143).

"This, too, is excessively obvious" ("Ça aussi, c'est d'une excessive évidence," 143), ends Alcoba's Epilogue-Letter to Diana -- and, with it, the book.

This is, perhaps, the most explicit of the many "invitations" to go beyond the book, outside the text and into the "real-life" correlate of the events therein narrated. And it's also the most effective – and, perhaps, the most misleading, for it's more than *tempting to follow Alcoba's shift and focus our attention on this issue* – unquestionably important (probably one of the symbolic pillars of the increasingly broader political relevance and interests of Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo) – *but in so doing, losing sight of the other, thornier ones.*

3.5 Not the Last Word? To See and *Not See* What's Before Us.

Recall the observation and the question that Alcoba, in 2004, poses almost in passing: "It was, then, the Engineer. Had he infiltrated the organization from the beginning, or did he simply crack under torture?" ("C'était donc l'Ingénieur. Avait-il infiltré le mouvement dès le début ou avait-il tout simplement craqué sous la torture ?)

Here, as anticipated in the last section, the intra- and extra-textual movements must work in tandem. On the one hand, the derisive or cavalier attitude when referring to someone speaking under torture should bring to mind the two other scenes in which torture becomes part of the conversation. On the other hand, this seemingly extraneous issue could be construed, again, as a call for the reader to reconstitute or bring back contextual information.

Let us start with this last point. The presentation of the trial *in absentia* of Roberto Quieto --bracketing the appropriateness of the term "trial" --is a central feature of the 12th issue of *Evita Montonera* (December 1975/January 1976). Its complementary and (purportedly) "reinforcing" counterpart is also pervasive in the same and subsequent issues --and this time it *does* transpire in a few moments of *Manèges*: the heroic deaths of "true" revolutionaries, who --unlike Quieto -- either died in combat or (allegedly) didn't speak under torture.

If the capacity to withstand torture is simply a matter of "ideological conviction," as the official line of Montoneros' held (and had published in the *Evita* more than once), then Quieto's behavior was indeed tantamount to treason, as the verdict of the trial concluded. The barrage of propaganda in the *Evitas* contrasted with the puzzled reaction of many sectors of the *montonero militancia*, for whom the issue of torture was still an open question, and for whom it was hard to change views about Quieto overnight.

Needless to say, to take for granted a sort of equivalence between speaking under torture and infiltrating an organization -- an equivalence between, let us say, Lt. Astiz infiltrating Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, and Roberto Quieto's "treason" in the torture chambers -- is, at the very least, a proposition that cannot be accepted without reasonable argumentation and evidence.

Some cadres were *absolutely convinced* that will-power and political conviction could win over physical and psychological pain. Others believed it *could* be possible; others *hoped it would be*. (Vezzetti 2009; Ollier 2009 for fieldwork on these issues).³⁸

³⁸ Yet others thought it was sheer naiveté or idiocy to even entertain such an idea, which seems to rest on either voluntarism, or some form of dualism -- a radical separation between "mind" or "soul" and "body," whereby strength of the former might control and, somehow, be inaccessible to the pain of the latter. Others -- Walsh among them -- rejected the idea, and considered it was impossible to know what or how would one's organism would react under extreme, limit-situations.

Differences notwithstanding, it is a historical fact that *the normative view of the OPM was that a true revolutionary could, and must, withstand torture*. This was a hard-and-fast “order” of the CN. And yet, their conceptual confusion (to put it charitably) became evident when they manufactured and distributed cyanide pills for their cadres. A real *montonero* withstands torture.... But how many “real *montoneros*” do we really have, if we must launch mass production of cyanide? So, while keeping the normative view on torture, the CN also admitted that the main error was to be captured alive. If one didn’t die in combat, and ran out of ammunition, the cyanide pill would take care of any potential ideological lapses.

El Negro Quieto, as he was known and called with unanimous affection by thousands of working class Peronists and left-wing militantes – had been a leader of the Peronist Resistance from times prior to the creation of Montoneros. Unlike the younger generation that led the OPM, Quieto had risen from a social stratum *in-between* what Argentines call, rather vaguely, *lower middle-class* and the “clearer” (?) working classes (the Montonero leadership came from middle- to upper-middle class, university-educated, Catholic background).

Quieto had managed to earn a law degree, and moved from legal to underground battles against right-wing forces in light of the repeated coups that rendered legal procedures mostly ineffectual. Courageous but not reckless or suicidal, he was known for the careful consideration he gave to operations in which the lives of cadres under his command were at risk.

When he was detained in December 1975 -- caught, inexplicably, in broad daylight, during a visit to his family (a visit that was meant to be short in light of the dangers that contacting one's family entailed by that time) -- the Montonero leadership launched a national and international campaign demanding that Quieto be freed. Among others, Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir signed the petition.

The campaign was halted abruptly days later, when some Montonero safehouses "fell," thus evincing that Quieto was, or had been, "cantando" --speaking under torture. Hence the trial *in absentia*, the death sentence, and the campaign *against* Quieto's reputation, backed by allegedly "real," "committed" revolutionary conduct whose examples flooded the pages of *Evita Montonera*.

It is against this background that the pictures of Diana and the Engineer become more complex. It is against this background that one should read Diana's words when, after meeting a fellow militante Diana says to Laura, "See that woman? They tortured her, but she didn't talk. They did horrible things to her; you know, things one cannot talk about with a girl of your age. But she didn't open her mouth." ("Tu vois, cette femme. Elle a été torturée mais elle n'a pas parlé. On lui a fait des choses horribles, tu sais, des choses que l'on ne peut pas dire a une petite fille de ton âge. Mais elle n'a pas ouvert la bouche;" 119)

Laura didn't ask any questions to figure out what those things were. "I too know how not to talk; how to keep silent." *She just imagined them*. Laura concludes with the following confession. "And I thought of the woman, who didn't open her mouth.... and then I told myself . . . *that is what being a strong woman is*." ("je me suis dit, de moi a moi, qu'être une femme forte, c'était ça," 119)

Diana seems to make this comment with admiration, though it's not clear whether there might have been something more than admiration. In any case, Laura picks up, or understands, or thinks she understands, that *withstanding torture is not a supererogatory action, but, rather, something closer to an obligation or requirement*. The issue is handled with subtlety and, again, reading and rereading carefully offers a variety of possible scenarios, but does not settle the issue.

It is not moot to bring back Diana Taylor's early discussion of the then- politically incorrect issue of "mirror-reactions" of many organizations, and, more so, of women, who had to "prove themselves" and unwittingly mirrored, or followed in one way or another, a script that was *not* an alternative, but a "contra" attitude and behavior -- *counter*-hegemonic, and therefore tied to the hegemonic – the “hyper-masculine”, *pace* Franco 2013 -- ideology of male cadres who, paradoxically, claimed and demanded that the OPM members be "uncontaminated new men," freed from bourgeois excrescences.³⁹

Having said that, or precisely because of that, the possibility of Diana's (Teruggi's, not Taylor's) views on the demands of the *hombre nuevo* and the “real” or “strong woman” having had some influence on “adult Laura” cannot be ruled out—though it does appear to be “out of character”, as a provocation of sorts. What can, and must, be ruled out is the notion of a blunt, mechanical, monocausal relationship between Diana-*qua*-martyr and Laura-*qua*-impressionable child who is “indoctrinated.”

Again, by posing a Diana that is at once “real” and not always – not often – transparent; by posing scenarios in which slightly different “Dianas” would act in slightly different ways, the text compels us to grapple with the problem.

³⁹ Diana Taylor's early and lucid discussion presents further points that help us think about these issues. What does it mean to confront an hegemonic power? Does that turn us, *inevitably*, in a mirror image— *counter*-hegemonic? Does this picture constrain women to replicate “scripts” against which Vicky Walsh and her generation fought? For more recent discussions, see Ahmed 2010 and Franco 2013, chap. 5, in which she analyzes, from a feminist perspective, the Codes of Revolutionary Justice of some Argentine armed organizations. For a different, though equally critical, view of the Codes, see Vezetti 2009 and the recent hybrid pieces of Urondo, daughter of Paco Urondo—whom we mentioned earlier—a renowned poet and *montonero* officer, who was demoted because he began to see his soon-to-be second wife before getting a formal divorce—and for not bringing up the issue to the CN of Montoneros.

Manèges doesn't lionize Diana --it presents her as a remarkable woman, yet with the limits that *no ready-made revolutionary consciousness* can shake off. Even if it is not a live issue anymore -- or even if it is not an issue for, say, a middle-class American – the question is not futile. More so if one aims to understand, to attempt to understand, both Alcoba's text, and – to some degree – the life and times in the rabbit house—and in the seventies. Like the “different Carris” in *Los rubios*, perhaps *adult Laura*, in the Epilogue, is planting a carefully crafted problem, and not, as it would appear if we follow publishing conventions, expressing a personal opinion or a view of Laura Alcoba *qua* person or *qua* author.

After all, immaculate heroes are easy to make, and quite convenient too: they aren't at our reach: we are not at their height; *we are petite*; we cannot but admire them; sit together and spin yarns about them, but never discuss the ways in which we might be able to follow and deepen the tracks they opened with their discoveries--and the ways to avoid their mistakes and blind spots; especially, to concoct ways of spotting them before the mistakes are made.

A scared Diana -- “*Diana aussi a eu peur*” (116), writes Laura when the door knocks, near the end --. who nevertheless walks cautiously to the door -- Laura under her dress – ready to peep and act according to the circumstances, is more admirable than the idealized image of a fearless warrior, who, in the *montonero* imagery, was also very feminine, very much fulfilling the role of housewife, and at the same time ready to fight like the ideal *guerrero*. (the ideal warrior, or the ideal of the warrior). A more “real” Diana, a scared Diana—more like us—establishes an example, perhaps, with a certain comparative demand for reaching the standards of the admired behavior.

It is against this background, too, that *Manèges* has begun to cause unease among some former *montoneros*—and satisfaction among others. Both among *former cadres* and among

readers and critics, there is an incipient but increasing polarization. The picture of Diana is not that of the more widespread, quasi-hagiographic versions cherished by the *memoria montonera*.

In the last chapter, we argued that the child is doubly silenced: first, as legitimate speaker and interlocutor about the events Carri is bringing up; second, as agent or bearer of some agential features, probably in an in-between state that tends to cause discomfort—hence the projection of “pure innocence” (Brennan and Erpp 2015, 3) onto children who seem to be already in need of hardening themselves if they want to survive.

In the case of Alcoba, we find something similar, only this time focused on sexual innocence. The narrative of one of the last persons alive to have shared everyday life with the heroes of Calle 30 *cannot* be construed as a *sexualized* child. This would mean that, to some extent, she is not pure—and is not, therefore, to be trusted or regarded as reliable.

If sexualized at an age when girls should be utterly ignorant of sinful matters, forced to “grow up” abruptly, through no fault of her own, but nevertheless neither pure (and therefore, no longer a child) nor adult; neither innocent nor blameworthy, she is nevertheless not to be trusted. She is the “knowing child,” who, actually, is no longer a child, for her childhood has been “stolen.” And she is dangerously close to the third myth Brenna and Erpp discuss: the “out-of-control” prepubescent child—the “other” kids who might corrupt mine. The “bad girls” who, according to surveys carried out in the US and Canada, can *taint* our children. This “out-of-control” child, whose figure is “not neutral with respect to race, class or gender” (p. 7) – mostly identified as African American, of “twisted” inclinations (LGBT) and/or “ignorant and uneducated (socioeconomic status).

If sexualized, Laura is no longer a child – she had known evil – and she was not an adult either. She was a “knowing girl” or an unfortunate being whose childhood had been stolen – *the*

very expression some interviewers and critics began to use to refer to Alcoba's life in the house of rabbits. To which Alcoba usually responds that it's obscene to speak of hers as a "stolen childhood" in the context of State terrorism, when so many children were *really* stolen.

Still, before the questions about "the girl" ("Who's the little girl?" became, around 2014, the most frequent question surrounding, and addressed to, Alcoba) surrounding Alcoba, she was, for the most part, regarded as innocent and asexual. A view that carries a double risk: allegedly "asexual" children are not well-equipped to deal with their own desires—or with other people's. Keeping them in the dark, or leaving the learning of those "things" to others, may ultimately be detrimental to their well-being.

Worse, the "innocent" child is erased *qua* person, and becomes a *tabula rasa* where adults might find a certain unconfessed appeal, since they are "that which *is not* yet, but *can be*, corrupted" (Brennan and Erpp 2015, 4)

Along the same lines, and, perhaps not by coincidence also in the context of a discussion on *what girls should and should not* know about an adult world devastated by violence, Castillo writes in regard to Caryl Churchill's play, "Seven Jewish Children",

If innocence and purity are figured in the child, and otherness in the inassimilable stranger, what... if the other to be expelled is itself described by the figure of the child? ... this fear of the oppressed and objected minority also enforces a kind of ineluctable intimacy. The child, an inappropriate object for either hate or (sexualized) love, becomes the most potent representative of this confounding and undesired intimacy. *children seem eternally suspended between nations, families, and homes. Their contagious discomfort models our affective response. ... the fascination with a safely-distanced, victimized child*

serves as one form of melancholic, nostalgic connection to the collective, just as the nesting instinct brings us back to individuals, families, our own homes. (Castillo 2011, 132; emphasis added)

Alcoba was silenced in her childhood, under a terror regime that aimed to paralyze a whole society but that targeted (as a means to spread terror, and also as an end in itself) the very group of people with whom she lived. What is more striking and unsettling is that she should also be silenced 40 years later, under a democratic regime. Certainly, this does, at least, unmask the fact that it is a society still captive or prey to blindness and other forms of conscious or unconscious bias (Saul 2015).

Not only do we silence aspects of the child that we may find uncomfortable; *we silence relevant aspects of the account of an adult woman* – of her life as an adult, even when, naturally, such life coexists, so to speak, with the “selves” of our past.

Be that as it may, it is still the case that we are not responding to (the figure of) *an adult woman owning up to – taking responsibility for – her adult experiences*. It is an address – a call - - of a woman who owns up to her desires – whether erotic or violent—without yet settling the issue.

She faces a disquieting quandary: still *attracted to, yet loathing*, the Engineer; *perhaps even inured at the idea of torture* when she wonders how he gave away the safe-house. Perhaps wanting to disengage from the feelings of attraction, which at times she seems to do – when they’re replaced by anger – yet soon again enjoying his voice spinning in her head.

Granted, this could be a fictional addendum to the “faithful” memories of Alcoba. Yet, in this juncture—in the context of an almost complete silence about the issue – the question of

whether her quandary is veridical or not seems to be beside the point. If even from the safe distance of reading we do not see, or we pretend not to see – if we are not capable of facing the address of an adult person *qua* sexualized woman, *still attracted to, yet despising* the Engineer, perhaps *inured at the idea of torture* when she wonders how he gave away the safe-house -- what should we conclude? *How not to conclude that we have not yet risen to the occasion? That no estamos a la altura or on n'est pas a l'hauteur?*

Manèges brings up a rare opportunity to discuss historical events in the context of a non-agonistic, exploratory, scenario-projecting proposal to think together, to think through and out and beyond the complexities of the *militancia* and the repression. And, instead, the text is reduced to a device framed within the logic of friend-or-foe, and both "Laura" and Diana are either mechanically reified and purified, or dissected and thinned down, eviscerated.

CONCLUSIONS

If what I have argued about the challenges posed by Laura Alcoba's *Manèges/La casa de los Conejos/The Rabbit House* (2007), Héctor Abad Faciolince's *Traiciones de la memoria* (2009), and Albertina Carri's *Los rubios* (2003) is sound, or at the very least merits consideration in light of its plausibility, we should think, to begin to think about revising certain practices. For a start, we would tentatively propose the following two changes.

a) *renouncing "argumentative," or "strong" interpretations*, which often, despite our efforts, still partake in agonistic models. These, in turn, may easily slide towards interpretive analogues of zero-sum games, which tend to take the form of explicit or -worse --implicit binary, dichotomic structures in the context of which texts and "textual support" are much more easily violated, for the sake of "not losing ground."

b) *taking up a much more active role in the construction of the (sense of the) work itself*; a role that may, and often does, involve two opposing but complementary movements: careful (intra)textual analysis (i.e., a centrifugal impetus characteristic of the works discussed in this dissertation); and an equally careful extra-or para-textual inquiry (i.e., a centripetal impetus leading the interpreter --nudging her, and at times almost gently pushing her --*beyond* the work itself) in search of information that, sometimes, becomes as important as to constitute a condition of possibility of intelligibility of (relevant aspects of) texts.

Other times, it places the interpreter in an in-between vantage point from which one may pursue equally compelling avenues of inquiry: some lead us further "away" from the text, while others "return" to it.

It is not a matter of abandoning textual support *in toto*, but, rather, of abandoning a certain way of using the text to give credence and plausibility to a given interpretation. If, as I argue, in these texts there is no “strong” textual support (i.e., no textual support that can be strong enough to bolster a given interpretation over others), no strong readings are warranted.

On the face of it, these points seem to involve a severe loss. Yet, as we argued in this dissertation, the impossibility of settling on any one interpretation opens up the possibility of exploring more thoroughly, with more “time” and detail --again, “reading more slowly,” as Daniel Hernández suggested in “La aventura de las pruebas de imprenta” -- the different scenarios that these texts suggest.

These works propose, in other words, that we engage in reading projects whose common denominator is the following pair of features: the strong suggestion of many different interpretive possibilities, and the equally strong suggestion of the impossibility of adjudicating among them. Each of these possibilities, in turn, branches out into several further ones.

The assessment of these possibilities yields a wide range of scenarios --some very similar to one another, with just a slightly different nuance or change here and there; others, instead, are radically different and even mutually exclusive --which, needless to say, involve different assessments of the characters' attitudes and actions; of the scene under discussion; and therefore, of the impact and overall interpretation of the text.

It is worth emphasizing that abandoning strong interpretations does not entail any less commitment. The text certainly engages the reader and commits her to grapple with questions that tend to be thorny and thornily avoided: What would we have done in that situation? Not *qua* question, but as a *condition of intelligibility* of the text, provided we accept it on its own terms, i.e., provided we accept the impossibility of settling on, or articulating, any “reading” or

"interpretation" of the thorniest, most politically charged scenes, and accept, instead, that they are *scenario-eliciting artifacts* embedded in the narrative.

Moreover, in light of the second condition – contextual information – a counterpoint-like form of reading is likely to enhance the interpretive interplay among different textual artifacts.

This may sound as little more than a Pyrrhic victory, especially if we bear in mind the serious epistemic limitations that Abad “imprinted” on us. However, *first-hand experiences* of our epistemic limitations (should) carry more weight than merely reading about them. Put in slightly hyperbolic terms, epistemic fragility or precariousness might prevent or reduce our second-nature tendency to approach the discussion from a standpoint that tends to be, *from the outset*, laden with political and interpretive “armors” --entrenched biases --which are, as is well-known, more pronounced when dealing with politically fraught issues like the ones these works grapple with.

The second point --the demand for a much more “active reader” than the over-used expression connotes --leads to performative operations that bear a resemblance to those of *Traiciones*, which, along with those of *Manèges* and *Los rubios*, form a complementary set or constellation of performative loops that act on the reader, in a frequently unsettling way that *makes these works' demands* --- -interpretive as much as ethical --*almost physically apparent*.

Talk of “imposition” and “demands” might be misleading; perhaps it is more accurate to speak of these performative loops as making almost *physically apparent* the *terms of engagement* that these works present or pose to (or require of?) the reader. One important corollary of this challenge is the *questioning of voices that we have been trained to consider* as either *fully authoritative* or as having a vastly superior claim to authority – as having “the last word;” and in this case, the three works go for a very provocative instance: the voice of the survivor/witness.

Like many other issues in these works, this is a problem that is being presented as subject for debate, as a conversation-starter, and not, necessarily, as a pre-conceived conviction to be defended, or attacked, disregarding whatever arguments against our own position there may be.

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