

“The Country that Doesn’t Want to Heal Itself”: The Burden of History, Affect and Women’s Memories in Post-Dictatorial Argentina

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“The Country that Doesn’t Want to Heal Itself”: The Burden of History, Affect and Women’s Memories in Post-Dictatorial Argentina

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I draw on first-hand oral testimonies taken from two groups of Argentine women who represent two antithetical versions of the recent Argentine past: those affected by military repression and those affected by armed guerrilla violence. I contend that we need to look beyond political and ideological contestations and engage in a deeper analysis of how memorial cultures are formed and sustained. I argue that we cannot account for the politics of memory in modern-day Argentina without acknowledging and exploring the role played by individual emotions and affects in generating and shaping collective emotions and affects. In direct contrast to the nominally objective and universalist sensibility that traditionally has driven transitional justice endeavours, I look at how affective memories of trauma are a potentially disruptive power within the reconciliation paradigm, and thus need to be taken into account.

When I interviewed Maria in 2009, she had just given her oral testimony at the Tribunal Oral Federal 6, a court located in the Argentine capital of Buenos Aires. Her testimony described the torture she suffered at Campo de Mayo, a clandestine detention centre in Buenos Aires during the 1976–83 military dictatorship. An eyewitness to the military’s human rights abuses, Maria told me how unsafe she feels living in a society such as Argentina, where those responsible for gross human rights violations during the years of military rule continue to live with impunity. Maria told me:

It angers me that justice in this country is not used in a way that finishes with this business, because the longer this goes on, the sicker Argentina becomes as a society. It’s thirty-three years ago!

Can you believe it? A country that doesn’t want to heal itself; that doesn’t want to begin anew.¹

Maria confided that she had lost her unborn baby as a result of the torture she endured at the hands of one of the dictatorship’s worst known perpetrators of kidnap and torture. She encountered this man again many years later in a downtown Buenos Aires café. After he made a flirtatious remark to her, Maria screamed at him, “Don’t you know me? You don’t have the right to say anything to me.” The offender replied, “Be grateful. You were one of the lucky ones.”

Argentina is a society where an estimated thirty thousand individuals were disappeared between 1976 and 1983 (whose bodies have often never been recovered),² where up

1 Interview with Maria del Socorro Alonso, Buenos Aires, 4 May 2009. The research for this paper is based on twenty oral testimonies I collected in 2009 in Argentina as part of my PhD research with two groups of women: those whose family members were kidnapped and murdered by the armed political groups between 1973 and 1976; and those whose family members were kidnapped, disappeared or murdered by the military government between 1976 and 1983. I made contact with the women through three local human rights organisations based in Buenos Aires. A call for individuals willing to par-

ticipate in this study was made and the interviewees were then able to contact me to arrange an interview. Each in-depth interview was conducted in Spanish, and lasted between one and a half and three and a half hours. The interviewees emphasised their preference for disclosing both their names and the identities of their missing/killed family members. All translations of the women’s quotes are my own.

2 The total number of disappeared is contested. While the official Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (CONADEP) report docu-

mented 8,960 cases of disappeared individuals, the figure is likely to be higher due to factors that prevented individuals from testifying to the CONADEP taskforce, including aggravated threats made to witnesses and fear of reprisals for offering information (CONADEP 1986, 5). Argentina’s Under Secretariat for Human Rights has confirmed about 3,000 new cases, bringing the official number up to 12,000 (Barahona de Brito et al. 2001, 121). Thirty thousand is considered a symbolic figure used by the majority of Argentine human rights organisations.

to five hundred children who were taken from their kidnapped mothers and given to families with close military ties are still unaware of their real identities, and where victims continue to encounter their torturers. The relatives of the *desaparecidos*³ are concerned that the violence that pervaded Argentine society in the 1970s and 1980s is not finished; they fear a future in which their children will experience the same terror.

I went to Argentina in 2008, seeking to interview women like Maria who were living with traumatic memories of violence and loss. More than three decades since the completion of a transitional process of truth and justice was declared in Argentina, I wished to analyse women’s memories of violence in light of their subsequent experiences and, with temporal distance, to understand any reinterpretations or new meanings they may have made. In the process of speaking to the women, I began to think there was a lot to be learnt from Maria’s insightful observation that Argentine society did not want to begin anew.

Towards the end of my year-long stay in Argentina, I discovered that there was another group of women giving oral testimony in the public sphere in memory of their loved ones: those who were murdered by the armed guerrilla movement, predominantly in the democratic period leading up to the start of the 1976 military dictatorship. This group also fears a return to past violence and demands legal redress against those individuals within the armed guerrilla movement suspected of human rights abuses. Since 2010, while legal trials have ensued for those in the military, no member of the armed guerrilla movement has been prosecuted. As a result, this group of women similarly feels compelled to live in a society that has failed to prosecute perpetrators of past violence.

While I had initially thought to focus exclusively on women whose lives were directly affected by the military

dictatorship, the need to widen my focus and to explore the personal memories of the two different groups of Argentine women (namely those affected by military repression *and* those affected by armed guerrilla violence) became increasingly apparent. Members of both groups are engaged in mourning and remembering, yet they are understood to occupy radically different positions in Argentina’s memorial culture and to belong to the opposing ends of the political and ideological spectrum.⁴ Indeed, the women’s memories of loss and violence have been shaped by the fissure of ongoing deep-seated social and political animosity. Both groups of women carry memories of enduring personal trauma that are commonly perceived as unable to coexist in a shared mnemonic space.

Argentina is a very divided society in which there are different groups of victims resulting from the period of violence between 1973 and 1983. The different forms of violence used by the military (disappearance) and armed guerrilla groups (kidnapping and murder) have produced different forms of grievance among the two groups of women. In particular, the families of the *desaparecidos* have had to endure impossible, irresolvable and protracted mourning as a result of the military’s systematic use of disappearance. As there could be no burials, thousands of families have had great difficulty in mourning their loved ones. However, the women from both groups continue to suffer the effects of trauma from this period and both groups’ traumatic memories endure in the public sphere. By considering the lived experiences of those who belong to different social groups affected by this period of violence, it is possible to provide new insights into the way this decades-old conflict is remembered.

Since the return to democratic rule in 1983, competing claims about how the period of political violence and state terrorism of the 1970s and 1980s should be collectively remembered by the nation have caused deep political and

³ Coined by the military as a way of denying the kidnap, torture and murder of its citizens, the word *desaparecer*, “to disappear”, began to be used as a transitive verb from the time of the military coup, 24 March 1976 (Feitlowitz 1998, xi). Those who were disappeared by the military are referred to in Argentina

as *los desaparecidos*. The majority of these individuals were abducted by the security forces and taken to clandestine detention centres, where they were tortured and later murdered (CONADEP 1986, 10).

⁴ In Argentina, the two different groups fall into two political/ideological camps. More broadly, and

in a complicated and not entirely satisfying way, individuals affected by military repression are commonly referred to as the political “left”, and individuals affected by armed guerrilla violence are referred to as the political “right”.

societal divisions. Argentine scholar Elizabeth Jelin (2003) suggests that, whenever Argentina has experienced political change, debates have surfaced over how to memorialise the period of state terror and political violence of the 1970s and 1980s. Various actors who have taken part in these debates have linked their political orientations towards the future with the memories of a violent past (Jelin 2003, 3). As a result, the two different groups of victims view the public sphere in which they articulate their memories of trauma as a “scarce resource” (Rothberg 2009, 3). It appears as though different memories compete for political, social and legal recognition in which (again) there are only winners and losers (Rothberg 2009, 3). As Barbara, whose father, José Miguel, was killed by the armed guerrilla movement in 1976, told me:

I’m tired of it all. If they think they’re the “goodies” and I’m not, how am I ever going to be able to talk with them [human rights organisations, the government]? I don’t understand. What kind of communication could there ever be because we’re never going to understand each other? [...] There is no such thing as “goodies” and “baddies”. There is no left and right. There are all sorts of people and we all, both left and right, make up a society. There’s us and then there are the politicians. They’re meant to represent us but they don’t represent me [...] I am discriminated against and segregated [within society] [...] Argentina is like a jigsaw puzzle and my story has to be a part of this puzzle.⁵

Political actors have advocated that certain groups of victims be publicly remembered, and others be sidelined. Within Argentina’s collective memorial culture, contentious discussions about how to remember the violence and terror of the 1970s and 1980s within society have intensified. These discussions have resulted in the polarisation of groups that struggle to overcome the additional sense of injustice generated by the contest for public recognition over whose history and political culture should ultimately be recognised and validated. This dynamic has created a sense of enmity between two groups of victims struggling for justice, and for the memory of their loved ones to be recognised in the public domain. These competitive ideological battles have had major consequences for the make-up of the public sphere in which individual

memories circulate in the present day; they have also had crucial implications for the shaping of Argentine collective memorial culture and identity. With an increasing need for collective identity amidst social and political conflicts over how to account for human rights violations experienced during this traumatic past, Argentina has developed into a society of memory groups, with each claiming recognition and the legitimacy of its voices and demands.

Reparation mechanisms, such as truth commissions, have been adopted since the end of the Cold War as a way of achieving acknowledgement of human rights violations and national reconciliation, and of healing psychosocial trauma in post-conflict societies at both an individual and a collective level. It is still commonly accepted within the current truth commission literature and conflict resolution theory that psychological issues – whether individual or collective – can be healed through mnemonic performances of oral testimony or storytelling (Millar 2010). Little evidence is available to prove this assumption, however, and over time it has become clear that the psychological benefits from participating in these mechanisms of “reparative remembering” (Dawson 2007, 315) may be overstated (Hayner 2011, 149).

Indeed, as Rigney (2012, 252) acknowledges, reconciliation efforts in post-conflict contexts have more often than not yielded a “‘thin’ form of mere co-existence” rather than the “‘thicker’ form of social integration and solidarity invoked by redemptive narratives of ‘national reconciliation’”. This has been certainly true for Argentina, where the public performance of witnesses’, victims’ and perpetrators’ stories of violence has not been the catalyst for the collective psychological or socio-emotional reconciliation that has been sought in other transitional contexts. Talking about their traumatic memories in the form of oral testimony has not played any such role in helping the women deal with their painful memories. Silvia, whose father, Roberto, was kidnapped in 1974 and later killed by the armed guerrilla movement, told me:

I haven’t felt any sense of relief [from talking about her father’s memory] [...] no [...] I haven’t felt any sense of relief [...] It [talking about her traumatic experience] hasn’t relieved me

⁵ Interview with Barbara Tarquini, Buenos Aires, 17 July 2009.

internally in any way. It’s not like I go around talking about it and a weight is lifted off me, no, no.⁶

In this paper, I wish to understand how, despite the passage of time, the divisions between the two groups of women are self-perpetuating and growing only deeper; and why, despite pioneering those mechanisms designed (in the transitional justice speak) to “deal with”, “work through” or “come to terms with” the past in transitioning democracies, Argentine memorial cultures appear beholden to the entrenched political and ideological divisions of old.⁷ There are many evolving and complex historical, political, social, legal and cultural factors that have shaped the cultures of remembrance in post-dictatorial Argentina. However, in the story of remembering and forgetting, these factors – though essential – are not sufficient to account for the animosity pervading Argentine memorial cultures.

I argue that we cannot account for the politics of memory in modern-day Argentina without acknowledging and exploring the role played by individual emotions and affects in generating and shaping collective emotions and affects (Hutchison and Bleiker 2008, 385).⁸ Affect may be a pre-political and pre-social force, but it has major consequences for the perpetuation of fault-lines running across particular memorial cultures. Thus, rather than simply rendering a factual narrative of the past, this paper engages with emotions and affects as a way of exploring how these may

become the source of a different kind of understanding of existing societal antagonisms in contemporary Argentina.

1. Politics of Remembering

Having pledged to investigate and legally address the abuses of the military regime following the country’s return to democratic rule in 1983, President Raúl Alfonsín created the Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons; CONADEP), an independent commission set up to investigate the disappearances of individuals carried out under the direction of the military dictatorship in the years 1976–83. CONADEP’s brief was to receive depositions and gather other forms of evidence, and to pass this information on to the courts where responsibility for crimes committed would be determined (CONADEP 1986, 449). The first-hand narratives of human rights violations experienced under military rule 1976–83 were published under the title of *Nunca Más* (never again) (CONADEP 1986). *Nunca Más* became the authoritative text on human rights violations committed by the military junta and succeeded in constructing a “new public truth” (Crenzel 2008, 173) about individuals’ disappearances and the abuses that occurred in some of the 560 secret detention centres scattered across Argentina. It established a clear distinction between insurgent violence and the disappearance of individuals, and thereby highlighted the responsibility of the dictatorship for the latter (Crenzel 2011, 1065).⁹ CON-

6 Interview with Silvia Ibarzábal, Buenos Aires, 28 July 2009.

7 A number of such terms have emerged within the field of transitional justice to describe strategies and initiatives used to achieve justice and to build trust among adversarial communities. Discourse around national reconciliation has more recently relied upon a therapeutic model, which seeks to heal wounds in connection with past violence and focuses on recognition of the victims of violence to recover sovereignty (Humphrey 2005, 211).

8 Affect can be used as a broad term to refer to emotions, feelings, and affects in the narrower sense. Though they are often used interchangeably, it is important to define the difference between the three. Feelings are personal and biographical, emotions are social and affects are pre-personal (Shouse 2005, para. 2). Displays of emotion can be genuine or feigned; when we relay our emotions publicly, they may be an expression of our internal state or they

may be contrived in order to fulfil social expectations (Shouse 2005, para. 4). Meanwhile, affects are more abstract than emotions because they cannot always be fully realised in language. They are non-conscious and unformed, and refer to the body’s way of preparing itself for action in a given circumstance with an added dimension of intensity (Shouse 2005, para. 5).

9 In the mid-1990s, *Nunca Más* was no longer regarded as a legal instrument, after the impunity laws passed by President Menem blocked any further trials. Instead, the report became seen as a vehicle for the transmission of memory (Crenzel 2011, 1072). In 2006, at the urging of Nestor Kirchner’s administration, a new official interpretation of the report was published, with the addition of a new prologue written by the National Secretary of Human Rights (Crenzel 2011, 1072). It was critical of the explanation given for the political violence in the original report, stating that it was “unacceptable to attempt to justify State terrorism like a sort of

game of counteracting violences, as if it were possible to look for a justifying symmetry in the action of individuals faced with the Nation and the State’s estrangement from their proper goals” (CONADEP 2006, 8–9, own translation). As Crenzel explains, the new prologue failed to place the political violence in its historical context, and did not establish civil and political responsibilities for the violence. Taking on a social justice tone, the report excluded any mention of guerrilla and political activity from the lives of the disappeared, and talked instead of the human rights movement’s thirty-year struggle for “truth, justice, and memory” (Crenzel 2011, 1072). The new prologue was met with criticism by former members of CONADEP, including journalist Magdalena Ruiz Guinazu: “It is a grave historical mistake to think that the report was an apology for the theory of the two demons” (cited in Galak 2006, para. 6).

ADEP and *Nunca Más* were of great international and historical significance. The efforts of the commission succeeded in radically influencing the course of international transitional justice.

Since the end of military rule, there have been political attempts to have the magnitude of the issue of the *desaparecidos* recognised in Argentina. Only under the consecutive governments of Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) and Cristina Fernández Kirchner (since 2007), however, have the *desaparecidos* been officially recognised. For the first time since the early days of the return to democratic rule, the Kirchner administrations endorsed new cultural models of collective remembrance and commemoration. The Kirchners also issued a number of presidential decrees that declared laws limiting prosecutions under the Alfonsín administration, and other policies of impunity pursued by the Menem government, null and void. As a result, by August 2013 a total of 381 sets of criminal proceedings in relation to state terrorism were in process, in which 2,071 armed forces personnel, security officials and civilians are facing charges linked to state terrorism during the military dictatorship of 1976–83 (CELS 2012).

However, despite this relatively new-found public and official recognition for survivors and the families there are a number of unresolved traumatic legacies of this violent past. First, questions about the fate and the whereabouts of thousands of missing individuals remain unanswered by those responsible in the armed forces. Exactly what happened to each individual following their abduction by members of the security forces remains a complete mystery for most families. The families of the disappeared – many of whom had already been traumatised by the abduction and permanent disappearance of their children or partners – have had their trauma compounded by an inability to bury their loved ones’ bodies.

Second, while the organisation Las Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo) has challenged the military’s endemic silence and denial over what hap-

pened to illegally appropriated babies and children, many individuals remain unaware of the truth about their past.¹⁰ Third, while legal proceedings in relation to state terrorism are currently in process in Argentina, many of the women with whom I spoke were concerned that political and judicial gains to bring those accused of human rights abuses to trial could be lost with a change of government. Many also spoke about their lack of faith in a justice system that previously had failed them, and that continued to accommodate corrupt and biased judges.

On the other side of the ideological divide, while the testimonial narrative of *Nunca Más* and the testimony heard at the trials of the ex-commanders established what had happened during the years 1976–83, it also sent a clear message about what should be left behind or forgotten. Significantly, victims of the armed political movement during the 1973–76 period were not included in the CONADEP report. The right-wing sectors of society therefore challenged the report, alleging that it did not make mention of these crimes (Vezzetti 2002, 125). CONADEP leader Ernesto Sabato was forced to respond to accusations of partiality – of denouncing only one side of the events while remaining silent about the “terrorism” that occurred prior to the military takeover in 1976 (CONADEP 1986, 6).

While it was not the commission’s central role to investigate the violent activities of the armed guerrilla groups during the period 1973–76, the omission of the testimonials of their victims meant that certain groups’ experiences were not included in what was a new democratic chapter of Argentine history (Crenzel 2011, 1072). According to Argentine author Hugo Vezzetti (2002, 28), the *Nunca Más* report stood as the first institutional representation of the Alfonsín government’s new approach to justice. However, because the report has been so influential and foundational to the creation of a “new public truth” within society (Crenzel 2008, 173), and has subsequently been used as the principal reference point for memory issues in Argentina, the omission of some groups’ experiences has had serious implications for the entrenchment of

10 As of August 2013, 109 of an estimated 500 children taken from their mothers after birth while

held in one of the military’s clandestine detention centres have been recovered with the assistance of

Las Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo (Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo) (www.abuelas.org).

ideological divisions within cultures of memory. While the report repudiates the political violence in the lead-up to the military coup, it is confined to the prologue, and as such ignores this period of Argentina’s past (Crenzel 2008).

In recent times the families of victims of the armed guerrilla movement have rallied together to fight against perceived moves by the current government to remember one side of history while forgetting another. The families of victims of the armed guerrilla movement told me that their feelings of victimisation had been reignited since the first Kirchner government took office. In their view, the Kirchner administrations made the memories of loss and violence of the families of the *desaparecidos* more politically relevant than those of the families of the victims of the armed guerrilla movement. Vittoria Villaruel from the advocacy group El Centro de Estudios Legales Sobre El Terrorismo y sus Víctimas (Centre for Legal Studies of Terrorism and its Victims; CELTYV) stressed that the organisation had initiated thousands of lawsuits over recent years. However, the families of the victims of the armed guerrilla movement contend that the Kirchners have played a powerful role in the shaping of judicial memory work by deciding what constitutes a crime, whose injuries will be recognised and how individuals’ suffering should be addressed. In 2011, the National Chamber of Criminal Appeal declared that crimes committed by armed guerrilla organisations during the dictatorship did not qualify as crimes against humanity, citing that “what distinguishes crimes against humanity is a crime committed by a government or quasi-governmental organisation against groups of civilians under its jurisdiction and control” (*Página 12*, 25 March 2011).

I have briefly explored some of the historical, political, social, legal and cultural factors that frame the way in which Argentina’s recent history has been generally articulated and understood. However, in the story of remembering and forgetting, these factors – though essential – are not sufficient to account for the animosity pervading Argentine memorial cultures. In the second half of this

paper, I extend my analysis by exploring this phenomenon through a different lens which foregrounds the many varied legacies and traces of individual and collective trauma. What sort of account of memory cultures in post-authoritarian Argentina could be created if trauma became our starting point?

2. Deep Memories of Trauma

Veena Das (2001, 67) suggests that a traumatic experience does not just alter one’s inner world; it changes it profoundly. The Argentine women I interviewed described various ways in which the traumatic events they lived through had permanently altered their lives.¹¹ For example, Barbara, who was a young girl when her father was murdered by the armed guerrilla movement in 1974, told me that the trauma resulting from this event had outweighed any happy memories of her childhood. Barbara told me of her struggles to support her mother who suffered mentally and physically through many difficult years as a result of the violence. “It was an operation with the aim of assassinating my family; and they managed to,” Barbara told me.¹²

Holocaust survivor Charlotte Delbo wrote extensively about living with trauma and the challenges of envisioning a future in the midst of the destruction of one’s emotional and cognitive capacities. Delbo communicates to us, through her exploration of deep memory, the complex ways in which the past continuously and unexpectedly ruptures trauma survivors’ reconstructed realities. Delbo (2001, 3) uses the term “deep memory” to refer to those memories that record the physical imprint of a traumatic event within the individual. She describes deep memory as different from common or intellectual memory in that it preserves sensations – it is the memory of the senses.

Maria’s physical and psychological pain acts as a constant reminder of the torture she endured in one of the military’s clandestine detention centres. Maria told me that she will frequently enter into the grip of deep memory when recalling what she endured. This experience can last for days at a time. Maria’s deep memories plunge her back into

11 On the psychological effects of state terror in Argentina, see Kordon, Edelman and Equipo de

asistencia psicológica de Madres de Plaza de Mayo (2007), and Puget and Kaes (1991).

12 Interview with Barbara Tarquini, Buenos Aires, 17 July 2009.

reliving the past in a way similar to Delbo’s (2001, 2), who was fearful lest “the camp get hold of me again”. Maria told me about how anxious she can become, as she suffers physically from the injuries she sustained from torture. Maria told me that the smell of blood from her daughter’s cut finger can transport her instantly back into the darkness of those violent days:

[...] the smell of blood, the smell of dried blood, because there was blood everywhere. And as I was paralysed, I had to drag myself to the bathroom. I had to drag myself across [other inmates’] blood.¹³

For Maria, in reliving the horror and trauma of her experience, “the sensory memory that is deep memory replaces the sensation itself and re-replaces the survivor in the death space” (Grunebaum and Henri 2003, 107). Maria is made to recall her vulnerability during torture as she smells the blood from her own daughter’s wound. By virtue of her deep memories, Maria is continuously faced with the possibility of being plunged again and again back into the physical horror of the clandestine camp in which she was held. These sorts of memories never fade or lose their initial integrity for Maria. The physical pain she feels is all too similar to the pain she endured at the hands of the repressors. In these moments, she is unsure whether she will survive, as she once again feels “death fasten” on her (Delbo 1995, xiii).

“They broke my neck,” Maria told me. As a result of the torture she experienced, Maria suffers from a degenerative spinal condition and feels like her body continuously fails her. As Maria relives the horror of torture, we are reminded by Parveen Adams (1998, 63) that although a scar may be healed, “it nevertheless opens you up continuously to the previous time of the open wound, a continuous reopening of the wound”. Maria’s reaction to smelling the blood from her daughter’s wound tells us about the difficult process she must face on a daily basis in dealing with the unconscious and unpredictable nature of deep memory. When I asked Maria how she was affected psychologically by these memories as they arose in the present, she replied:

And so, I get through the days like this [...] always [...] I get panic attacks when I feel the [physical] pain come on [...] I get very panicked when these moments arise. And in those moments, I’m very fearful because I never know how I’m going to get out of it.

Following a traumatic episode, Maria slowly pieces herself back together and re-enters her “normal”, everyday life. However, as Jean Améry writes (1995, 136): “Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world”; the experience of torture leaves survivors like Maria with few bearings by which to navigate their lives. She predicts the long-term impact her violent experiences will have on the rest of her life:

[...] I believe I will suffer until the end of my days. So it’s impossible for me to forget [the torture]. That’s the truth.

The Argentine women’s oral testimonies tell us much about what continues to dominate their lives as survivors of violence. To call oneself a survivor, according to Elizabeth Lira (1997, 227), is to recognise that there was a risk of or closeness to death, often leaving those who survived with the “taste of death”. Watching a loved one being violently kidnapped or disappeared has had long-lasting effects for many of the women I spoke with. For example, Silvia, whose father was kidnapped and who herself survived a violent attack by an armed guerrilla group, explained how she has lived with her memories of violence:

I feel like I was also kidnapped, as if I also couldn’t speak, I couldn’t say anything [...] I was young but for so many years I dealt with other things that in reality I didn’t feel like I was living on earth.¹⁴

Silvia’s comment attests to the way those affected by political and state violence in Argentina have become “a symptom of history that they cannot entirely possess” (Caruth 1995, 4–5). Silvia’s body has become a site and focus for her memories of trauma, which remain ever-vulnerable to revival. This raises an important issue about the long-term consequences of living with deep memories that are too painful to acknowledge in a person’s everyday reality and identity.

13 Interview with Maria del Socorro Alonso, Buenos Aires, 4 July 2009.

14 Interview with Silvia Ibarzábal, Buenos Aires, 28 July 2009.

Silvia told me there was no way to avoid remembering the violence she and her family lived through. She said that she was constantly and unexpectedly faced with feeling deep pain in the most subtle of ways:

You know what happened? This last week, I was working on my computer and my husband was looking for some papers beside me [...] he was opening boxes and at that moment a photo fell from one of the boxes right next to my computer. And it was a photo of my father. And so, I looked at the photo of my father, well, it was of my mother and father's wedding; it was a photo that was taken of them kissing, with the cake beside them [...] a typical wedding photo. And I was filled with so much sadness because I thought about the fact that he missed out on raising his kids [...] he didn't know his own children, he didn't get to know his grandchildren.

When I asked her how she feels when remembering, Silvia told me:

Abominable. Even though I'm not a person of faith, I have never felt hatred [...] it's a feeling I've never experienced, but instead I feel a deep pain [...] So you ask me how I feel [...] abominable [...] in this moment I feel so much pain, so much anxiety and here I am sitting here telling you this thirty-five years later.

Silvia's story is an example of just how difficult it is for the women interviewed to cope on a daily basis, when their existence has been so disfigured by the violent wrenching away of a loved one. In witnessing the recall of such deep memory, it becomes clear that no amount of public truth-telling can ease the pain of the women's deep memories that persist outside the parameters of closure (Langer 1995, 15). Silvia told me that even when she saw on television that the man held responsible for the killing of her father had died, it did nothing to ease her painful memories:

Clearly the pain and the traumatic experience I lived through, or, the awful memories – this never changes. So, he [her father's murderer] was imprisoned for three years, was pardoned and was freed. This man had the opportunity to form a political party, which never amounted to anything because he became sick and died. And even then I didn't feel anything when he

died, not happiness or sadness, not even the feeling that he deserved it [...] nothing.

Silvia's narrative shows how the locus of pain remains with the individual long after experiencing the original trauma. Her deep memories are a clear sign that her life will not be one of renewal, but will continue to be one of endurance. Her pain does not just magically dissipate with this man's death. Though she perhaps would have thought she would feel a sense of peace or relief, or perhaps even justice, if such a thing were to happen, she admits that she feels nothing.

The women's testimonies reveal how deep memory can inhibit the sense of relief and finality that the concepts of truth and justice are supposed to deliver. Their deep memories will never leave them, will never fade with time, and will never cease to be a burden on their lives. While we, as listeners, might wish to intrude on the women's memories, hoping that closure and certainty is possible amidst such devastation, it is revealing how deep memory defies closure or indeed any type of certainty.¹⁵ This is particularly true for families of the disappeared for whom the effects of the loss of a cherished family member are compounded because they have never recovered their loved ones' bodies. The absence of bodily remains and a lack of knowledge about the fate of loved ones are an open wound that constantly triggers the memories of family members. Graciela told me she has never been able to go fully through a process of grieving:

Now, what happens [...] you can't put the past behind you, you keep doing things, but you can't put the past behind you [...] the pain doesn't leave, it doesn't hurt because you've never seen a body [...] pain comes with death [...] different cultures [deal with burying the dead] in different ways, whether that's burning a body, I don't know [...] burying it. But we were never able to do this, so we live with this uncertainty until death [...] it's that we've never had the luck to identify remains.¹⁶

Eliana, whose sister was disappeared by the military in 1976, goes through the process of submitting her DNA in the hope of finding the remains of her sister. However she

15 See Grunebaum and Henri (2003) for a discussion on how survivors of traumatic violence can experience further disembodiment when their per-

sonal memories of violence are silenced and edited out of public memory in the name of nation-building.

16 Interview with Graciela Lois, Buenos Aires, 23 June 2009.

questions whether her actions will really deliver what she seeks:

I believe that even if they returned the bodies, even if we found the remains and held ceremonies with their ashes and everything, the pain would still be there [...] because those who give their DNA, [in order] to have a chance of greater certainty can never take away [the pain] of disappearance [...] And you think, “what would I do if I found the remains?”¹⁷

Eliana finds herself contemplating an unbearable future predicament. Though she wants to feel relief from knowing with certainty where the remains of her sister are, Eliana admits that this knowledge may not in fact provide her with the relief she hopes for.

In critically analysing the way in which deep memory plays out in survivors’ everyday lives, we are given insight into why oft-repeated formulas such as a “past that refuses to go away” or “an unmastered past” remain relevant to the Argentine context today (see Donghi 1998, 3). Exploring deep memory shows us that even when survivors of violence successfully obtain justice, the psychic and physical pain provoked by deep memory will continue to be a part of their lives, insofar as traumatic memories of violence continue to exist. Exploring deep memory allows us to engage with the various complex layers of memory through which a traumatic experience is viscerally experienced by survivors, so we can enter the realms of the traumatic experience on its own terms (Langer 1995, 7). Only then can we acknowledge just how histories live on undiminished, their substance unaltered, in the present day and beyond.¹⁸

3. Affective Transmission

I argue that it is also important to consider the interpersonal pathways of traumatic histories and memories with regard to how and why they can stir individuals and collectives to such an extent that the past continues to operate as a source of social and political division. Powerful collective memories about the period of state and political

violence of the 1970s and 1980s have heightened political and social tensions in contemporary Argentina. In turn, strong bonds have been formed between individuals situated within adversarial memorial cultures, resulting in highly specific collective memories. Much of the power of these collective memories, I argue, has in part been derived from the strong emotions that they provoke. For memory belongs in the “intermediary realm” between individuals; it develops and grows out of the interplay of interpersonal relations, and as such the emotions play an important role in this process (Assmann 2006, 3).

The women’s emotional investment in the recalling and retelling of their traumatic experiences is strong. However, this investment can reinforce their fixation on a past that keeps in place, and possibly deepens, their already traumatised state (Jelin 2003, 5). Raquel, whose son and daughter-in-law were disappeared by the military and who searches daily for the grandchild she suspects was born in captivity, reflected on what motivated her personally to emotionally invest in the retelling of her traumatic past:

We’re sometimes preoccupied by what’s happening politically because we are living a moment in which we’ve had a lot of luck with the opening of many things. We’ve reclaimed clandestine centres; we’ve reclaimed places where they tortured our children. We’re very afraid that we would lose all this if another government comes to power and they’d leave us with nothing; like has happened before. This is our worry.¹⁹

Raquel is fearful that the recent hard-fought gains for the families of the *desaparecidos* could be lost with a change in government. This happened before: Alfonsín’s successor, Carlos Menem, adopted a policy of forgetting the past when, on taking power in 1989, he extended pardons to military personnel who had been convicted of human rights crimes.

Empirical evidence suggests that emotions tend to be socially shared (Rimé and Christophe 1997, 133). As Raquel repeatedly and openly relates the emotional story of the disappearance of her son and daughter-in-law by the military,

17 Interview with Eliana Carreira, Buenos Aires, 8 June 2009.

18 For further discussion on the physical and psychological manifestations of Argentine women’s deep memories of trauma, see Stockwell (Forthcoming).

19 Interview with Raquel Marizcurrena, Buenos Aires, 17 June 2009.

and her feelings and reactions to others, her private emotional experience “feeds” into collective memory through an important social psychological process called the “social sharing of emotions” (Rimé and Christophe 1997, 133). While scholars previously considered emotions as merely a short-lived and intrapersonal phenomenon, more recent research on emotions has delivered convincing evidence that emotions are essentially interpersonal communicative acts, which instead involve long-term social processes: the more individuals are upset, the more likely they are to share their story with others and to elicit vivid, precise and long-lasting memories of the event (Rimé and Christophe 1997, 144). This process can influence the way an historical experience is organised in memory and perhaps recalled in the future (Pennebaker and Banasik 1997, 7).

Oral testimony has played a crucial role in how events have collectively been assimilated and remembered in Argentina. The significance of the political and state violence of the 1970s and 1980s has been orally transmitted within Argentina’s memorial cultures, and individuals’ perceptions and understanding of the events have been shaped by those giving oral testimony. In regularly speaking publicly about their traumatic memories and relating their emotional experiences in the form of oral testimony, the women I interviewed have thus played a significant role in socially sharing their emotions. However, I suggest that this process has contributed significantly to the ongoing polarisation between the right and the left. I argue that the process of telling and retelling individuals’ memories never “exhausts” the violence that was inflicted during the period of political and state violence, but instead symbolises and even evokes it. The fear and terror associated with past violence are strongly communicated by the women in their narratives, and this in turn can engender strong feelings in those listening.

Empirical evidence suggests that exposure to the emotional narrative of another can induce considerable emotional changes in the individual listening (Rimé and Christophe

1997, 137). In fact, Rimé and Christophe’s study showed that the more the survivors revealed their in-depth emotions when talking about their experiences, the more emotionally affected were the listeners (1997, 137). We can see this process clearly at work when Gladys, whose military husband was killed by the armed guerrilla movement in 1976, reiterated revisionist claims that she had received through others within her memorial group about the “real” fate of the *desaparecidos*:

The children that they [human rights organisations/families of the disappeared] say are disappeared [...] you can’t believe that it’s true. Some friends of mine went to see the names listed on the posters [of Las Madres] in the Plaza de Mayo and they know for a fact that they are alive. So it’s not certain [...] it’s not certain.²⁰

As Gladys circulates this type of negationist claim that serves to create doubt about the fate of the *desaparecidos*, her emotional experience also circulates and spreads throughout her social group. Kent Harber originally developed the idea that communicated emotional experiences can “feed” social knowledge of emotion, using the term “the human broadcaster” (Rimé and Christophe 1997, 143). Harber proposed that individuals’ inclination to communicate an emotional experience served both an intrapersonal need, in the sense of gaining perspective, as well as an interpersonal need for news (cited in Rimé and Christophe 1997, 143). Therefore, as individuals repeatedly relate their emotional experiences to others, the social group gradually assimilates those experiences and, as a result, is furnished with new emotional knowledge (Rimé and Christophe 1997, 144).

In going beyond the women’s standard narratives of trauma and violence, and in exploring the transmission of their emotions, we can see how the women have “an ability to affect and be affected” (Massumi 1987, xvi) when they talk about their shared pasts. I argue that the women’s emotions are an enduring social force that remains at work

²⁰ Interview with Gladys Echegoyen, Buenos Aires, 22 July 2009. While some women within the political right made negationist claims about the fate of the disappeared, others clearly condemned the human

rights abuses of the military. For example, Victoria Paz of CELTYV told me, “I am in complete solidarity with the pain of the families [of the disappeared], of the persons who died because of the

actions of the military.” Interview with Victoria Paz, Buenos Aires, 12 July 2009.

in the public sphere long after they have shared their experiences with others. I suggest that the women’s emotions leave an affective residue, or what Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth (2010, 9) call a “bloom-space”. These emotions are a central part of unseen forces that mark the “passages of intensities” between individuals, and determine the relationship between ourselves and others (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 13). This residue has what Anna Gibbs (2010, 187) describes as an “energetic dimension” or “capacity”. I suggest that this capacity contributes toward a sense of the continuance of animosity and resentment over time. The affective residue helps to sustain and preserve the connections between those ideas, thoughts, values and habits that act as an affective charge within a politics of remembering in contemporary Argentine society.

Exploring how emotions can both circulate between bodies and shape subjectivities is crucial to our understanding of how affect can form and mobilise individuals or groups in different ways over a period of time. In this way, the circulation of the women’s narratives and the accompanying affects result in the shaping of the contours of the public space they inhabit (Rothberg 2009, 221). Their public testimonies fill this space with “the psychic and physical losses that cannot be transcended” (Rothberg 2009, 219). If we come to understand how affect works to align individuals with communities, we can also explore the crucial role it plays in the materialisation of collective bodies, including the “body of a nation” (Ahmed 2004, 25).

4. Affective Transmission and Perception

A number of scholars (e.g. Brennan 2004; Gibbs 2001; Probyn 2005) suggest that affects can be contagious. Teresa Brennan’s work on the transmission of affect (2004) develops this idea in her model of connectedness and transmission of affects. In *The Transmission of Affect* (2004), she asks: “is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and ‘felt the atmosphere?’” (2004, 1) Brennan’s idea also forms part of the intellectual history of crowd psychology and the sociology of emotion, and explains that we are not self-contained in terms of our energies; there is no clear boundary separating individuals and their environment. I suggest that we look to theories of affect contagion as a way of understanding the role affects

may play in the constitution of a relationship between individuals, groups and communities (Ahmed 2004, 9).

Indeed Sara Ahmed argues that affect plays a crucial role in the “surfacing” of individual and collective bodies: how we feel about others is what aligns us with a collective. According to Ahmed (2004, 27), one’s perception of another involves a form of “contact” between the individual and the other that is shaped by longer histories of contact. It is the “moment of contact”, shaped and informed by past histories, that allows the proximity of the other to thus be perceived as threatening (Ahmed 2004, 31). So, for example, when the group Las Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo (The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo) was nominated to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, an email petition was circulated by CELTYV in protest at the nomination of Las Abuelas. The petition stated that Las Abuelas had never spoken out in support of the victims of the armed guerrilla movement, and was in fact associated with those guerrillas who had killed the petitioners’ family members.

Such a narrative produces a polarisation between the two groups of victims, and sets up an “us” versus “them” dichotomy that blames Las Abuelas, who have pursued a discourse of human rights to locate abducted babies and children, for destroying any future possibility for peace in Argentina. The online petition reveals the existence of a perceived injury: the refusal of Las Abuelas to condemn the violence committed by the armed guerrilla movement is constituted as the cause of CELTYV members’ ongoing feelings of pain.

The violence experienced during the 1970s and 1980s was not just inflicted on the bodies of those individuals who personally lived through the terror, but was also inflicted on the body of Argentine society; society itself was torn apart by the disappearance and murder of thousands of its citizens. This has resulted in a collective trauma that has involved “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (Erikson 1995, 187). While trauma can engender a sense of community between individuals and groups, it can also damage the fabric of a community (Erikson 1995, 187). Dori Laub and Nanette

Auerhahn (1989, 397) write that the link between individuals is predicated on the possibility and expectation of empathy. However, when individuals’ vital needs either go unheeded or are ignored by others, they lose the expectation that their needs will in some way be met (Laub and Auerhahn 1989, 379). For example, as Barbara, whose father was killed by an armed guerrilla group, told me:

I went to the human rights organisations to demand my rights as a victim of the military government because my father was a victim. They told me no, that my father was a fascist, that he didn’t belong [to human rights organisations] [...] How could they say this to me?

In Argentina, considerable social damage has been done by the significant absence of empathy for the grief of others. This has denied both groups of women what they desire: the acknowledgement and empathic engagement with their suffering by those individuals instrumental and directly responsible for causing their emotional pain. When the women believe their memories have not been given the moral, social, cultural and legal recognition they feel they deserve within the public sphere of collective remembrance, affective alignment fails; this failure of affective alignment perpetuates the stalemate between members of antagonistic memorial cultures (Ahmed 2004, 26).

For the women I interviewed this means that the failure of empathy for the other group’s grief destroys the possibility of communication between adversarial memorial cultures. The women’s ideologically charged projections result in certain fixations “that project onto others or deposit into others negative affects”; in turn, these can create the illusion of affects being “located” in other individuals of ideologically opposed groups (Schwab 2010, 112). The circulation of negative affects can radically disturb people’s understanding of themselves, as well as their relations with others and the past (Probyn 2010, 86). What is then produced is a lack of what Ahmed (2004, 36) calls “fellow feeling”: the women’s pain cannot be shared through empathy with others in different memory groups.

5. Conclusion

In direct contrast to the nominally objective and universalist sensibility that has traditionally driven transitional jus-

tice endeavours, I have sought to understand the ways in which the affect generated by shared memories of trauma acts as an invisible yet potent cultural force – at times disruptive, but always generative – challenging the “reconciliation paradigm” and subtly recasting public conversations about the nation’s past and present. While the traumatization of individuals and groups has been the central premise for national reconciliation projects, which seek to heal the wounds of the past and promote peace within fractured societies, my research findings considerably complicate the notion that the process of enacting justice is automatically commensurate with the alleviation of individual trauma.

An attention to affect, and particularly to the ways in which its rhythms and timings come to mark the passages of intensities within and between individuals, compels us to rethink the impetus for survivors of violence and trauma to reconcile with their traumatic memories as quickly as possible – or even at all. As Judith Butler tells us, grief is a slow process “by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself” (2003, 30). In other words, it takes time for survivors to move from a state of mourning into new understandings and consideration of the vulnerability of others (Butler 2003, 19).

When we consider the time it could take for new understandings of the vulnerability of others to emerge between antagonistic memorial cultures, it may be fruitful to wonder what it would be like if we let go of the idea that history needed to be settled. What would it mean for transitioning democracies to let go of the mantras of “coming to terms with the past” and “moving on”? What if we shifted our attention to individuals’ narratives, and really listened to what was being said, rather than skirting over the voices of individuals in the name of peace-building projects?

After all, affective memories can – and do – take their time to emerge into consciousness, both individual and collective. When so much pain exists that may be as yet unready to be seen or narrated, and when we set limits on how long survivors can grieve because they become obstructions to our march towards reconciliation, are we not at risk of

plunging them, again, back into the original trauma? Susan Brison (1999) reflects on the difficulties of living with her own traumatic memories of sexual violence while being part of a society that deals with the “unbearable” by pressuring those who have been traumatised to forget what happened to them. She contends that as individuals and as cultures, we impose “arbitrary term limits on memory and on recovery from trauma” (Brison 1999, 49). Telling survivors of violence to “put the past behind them” does not make their deep memories go away, however; it only makes memories more likely to be driven underground (Brison 1999). The thinking of cultural historian Maria Tumarkin echoes Brison’s experience when she asks: “How long will it take for experiences of violence and injustice to be lived through and absorbed, for the forgiveness to emerge, not to be forced out? We don’t know. It will take *as long as it takes*.” (Tumarkin 2011, 143)

It is perhaps wise to follow Sara Ahmed’s suggestion that we should respond to injustice in a way that highlights the complexity of the relation between violence, power and affect. For Ahmed (2004, 38), struggles against memories of injustice are not about “moving on”; rather, they are about how one is moved by feelings into a different relation to the norms that one is contesting and how this movement within an individual leads to the creation of different kinds of attachment to others, and thus to new kinds of interpersonal encounters and relationships. Of course, affect can – and does – result in negative attachment to others. Yet, I contend, it is by following the trails of affect that we can find new relational possibilities and new, non-reductive ways of thinking about memory in a society recovering from violence and trauma.

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