

From Saints to Mere Mortals: The Desacralization of Disappeared Persons in the Work of Félix Bruzzone and Mariana Eva Pérez

This article explores a recent development in Argentine post-dictatorship literature: the desacralization of disappeared persons. The narrative of Félix Bruzzone and Mariana Eva Pérez marks a substantial break with the production of the genre from the end of the dictatorship to the early 2000s, which is characterized by the sacralization of the disappeared within a highly idealized and sentimental rendering of the political militancy of the 1970s. Through a playful poetics of irreverence, transgression and profanation, Bruzzone and Pérez forge new modes of representing dictatorship at a moment when memory discourse was being appropriated by both the State and mass media.

Keywords: *memory fatigue, desacralization, profanation, postdictatorship, mourning and melancholy*

Este artículo analiza una novedad en la literatura argentina de posdictadura: la desacralización de los desaparecidos. La narrativa de Félix Bruzzone y Mariana Eva Pérez propone una ruptura contundente con la producción del género del período desde el fin de la última dictadura hasta principios de la década del 2000, que se caracteriza por la sacralización de los desaparecidos como parte de una visión idealizada y sentimentalizada de la militancia política de los años 70. A través de una poética de irreverencia, transgresión y profanación, Bruzzone y Pérez desarrollan nuevos modos de representar la experiencia de la dictadura, en un momento histórico en el que el Estado y los medios se apropian de los discursos de memoria.

Palabras clave: *memory fatigue, desacralización, profanación, posdictadura, duelo y melancolía*

When Felix Bruzzone published his first novel, *Los topos*, in 2008, twenty-five years had passed since the end of the last Argentine military dictatorship. During that period a multiplicity of approaches had sedimented into a relatively stable and uniform set of narrative conventions (Garibotto 128). Post-dictatorship narrative tended to be mournful or melancholic in tone. In addition to this pronounced swing toward a solemn register, post-dictatorial narrative tended towards an epic reading of history, a romanticization of political militancy, a depoliticization of victims, and a sacralization of the disappeared. After several decades of production in this tenor, by the early to mid-2000s, the post-dictatorship novel had been conventionalized to the point that readers knew exactly what to expect from a novel about the experience of dictatorship, a clear sign that the genre was showing signs of exhaustion. The ludic, irreverent and desacralizing tone of the work of Félix Bruzzone and Mariana Eva Pérez upset these expectations and scandalized a public that had come to expect something much different from the children of disappeared parents.

Throughout the 1990s Pérez had been politically active in human rights organizations and participated in Teatro por la Identidad, a group dedicated to explicitly political theater dealing with themes related to the abduction of children during the dictatorship. Her career as a public intellectual took what could only be perceived as an unexpected turn when, in 2009, she began writing entries in a blog, *Diario de una princesa montonera*, published in book form under the same title in 2012. In sharp contrast to the aesthetics of Teatro por la Identidad, her new project parodied both human rights organizations of Buenos Aires and the implementation of memory politics by the Kirchner-Fernández administrations. In the case of Bruzzone, his novels *Los topos* (2008) and *Campo de Mayo* (2019) portray children of disappeared parents who find no need to affiliate themselves with the human rights organizations who fight in their name nor to continue the legacy of their parents. From their middle-class origins, these characters spiral out of control into an underworld of homelessness, marginality and even disappearance. Both authors humanize the figure of the disappeared, bringing him or her down from their lofty heights to a level at which it is once again possible to question their motivations, judgment and character. Despite the fact that the story of the disappeared and their family members has been told over and over again in Argentine literature, it has not been told in this way before. Through parody, humor, and irreverence, Bruzzone and Pérez forge a new idiom to speak about the nation's traumatic past, as they push the genre of Argentine narrative about the experience of dictatorship into uncharted territory.

In the following pages, I argue that the work of Bruzzone and Pérez constitutes a substantial break with Argentine post-dictatorial literature of

the period from the end of the dictatorship to the mid-2000s. Their poetics of desacralization disputes the mournful and melancholic accounts of the nation's traumatic past and develops a new mode of representing the experience of the dictatorship. In particular, the ludic and irreverent treatment of the disappeared transgresses a long-standing taboo of the genre, which dictates that they be presented as heroes and martyrs (Vezzetti 204-05). Furthermore, they parody the consecrated status of memory discourse at the moment of its incorporation into the State and mass media. Taken together, these innovations constitute a radical reorganization of the aesthetic and political principles of the genre, as it struggles to maintain cultural currency and intelligibility in a changing socio-historical context.

The objective of the first section of this article is to establish the poetics of the genre from the period that spans from the end of the dictatorship until the mid-2000s, when second generation writers like Bruzzone and Pérez started becoming active in the public sphere. I argue that, during this period, the need to utilize representations of the Nation's traumatic past as acts of cultural resistance to State policies of impunity, amnesty and forgetting led to the development of a poetics of sacralization. This highly codified set of aesthetic parameters for representing dictatorship, however, became increasingly unable to address a rapidly changing sociohistorical context, marked by the appropriation of memory discourse by the State and mass media. The series of ruptures and innovations proposed by Bruzzone can only be fully apprehended within this context of the diachronic development of Argentine post-dictatorial literature and broader political and cultural changes in the implementation of transitional justice measures.

In the second section, I analyze how broader shifts in Argentine politics and culture provoked a crisis within the genre that caused it to question, for the first time, the efficacy and currency of its aesthetic principles. At the same time, it also became necessary for writers to differentiate their mode of representing dictatorship from the instrumental appropriation of memory discourse by the State and mass media.

In the third and final section, I argue that the desacralization of the disappeared is a central tenet of the recalibration of the aesthetics parameters of Argentine post-dictatorial narrative in its negotiation with the political and cultural demands of the present. Through profanation, understood as liberation from the constraints of sacralization, Bruzzone and Pérez playfully experiment with representations of the disappeared and, in doing so, they forge new modes of writing Argentina's traumatic past.

MOURNFUL AND MELANCHOLIC ACTS OF RESISTANCE

In this section I analyze how the sacralization of the disappeared came to be one of the principal factors that determined the form and content of the

post-dictatorship literature in the period leading up to Bruzzone and Pérez's work. The following sections, then, explore the relationship between these conventions of the genre and the poetics of desacralization and profanation that have effectively destabilized and displaced them. I follow Verónica Garibotto's periodization in *Rethinking Testimonial Cinema in Postdictatorship Argentina: Beyond Memory Fatigue* (2019), which establishes 2003 as a turning point in Argentine testimonial narratives (26). The production of the period that begins with the return to democracy in 1983 undergoes a qualitative change after 2003, when the Néstor Kirchner administration establishes a human rights agenda as the central tenet of Kirchner's political program (Garibotto 3, 128). After this watershed moment that initiated the progressive incorporation of memory politics into State institutions (Bell 12), Argentine narrative about the experience of dictatorship enters into crisis and begins a process of reorganization that extends up until the present (Garibotto 16). The work of Bruzzone and Pérez represents the culmination of this process, the arrival of a wider set of aesthetics parameters and the advent of new meanings and uses of memory discourse.¹

In the period after the restoration of democracy in 1983, the discursive strategies for representing the nation's traumatic past gradually developed into a stable set of norms and conventions. Argentine post-dictatorial literature acquired its own specific poetics based on a highly codified way of representing the past that structured the genre and set its formal and semantic parameters. Sacralization, as Garibotto observes, became a central feature of the poetics of the genre (4). According to Nelly Richard in *Eruptions of Memory* (2017), in the period after the dictatorship literature of the Southern Cone was marked by a nostalgia for revolutionary militancy that served to mythologize and romanticize what was perceived as a lost past and sanctify the victims of State terror (6). Jordana Blejmar makes a similar claim in *Playful Memories: The Autofictional Turn in Post-Dictatorship Argentina* (2016), where she argues that the post-dictatorship cultural production of the 1980s and 90s cast the disappeared in the role of heroes within an epic and ceremonious rendering of the recent past that didn't do justice to the complexities of historical reality (18). In *Queering Acts of Mourning in the Aftermath of Argentina's Dictatorship: The Performances of Blood* (2014), Cecilia Sosa, for her part, argues that this type of epic reading "monumentalizes the past while adhering to the cult of the victim" (51). Through these mechanisms of idealization and mythologization described by Garibotto, Richard, Blejmar and Sosa, the literature of the Southern Cone in the period from the end of the dictatorship to the early 2000s sacralized the figure of the disappeared. Throughout this period, there is an unequivocal tendency within post-dictatorship narrative to depict the

disappeared as victims, saints and national heroes in an often sentimentalist and highly axiological rendering of traumatic events.

The point, however, is not to criticize the excesses nor expose the failings of post-dictatorship literature in the period before 2003, but rather to understand the cultural meaning and social function of a poetics of sacralization within its own socio-historical context and according to its own parameters and criteria. How did this mode of representing the traumatic past intervene in the debates of the Argentine public sphere in the post-dictatorship era? What did it mean to insist on remembering at a time of forgetting, to speak at a time of silence, to insist on justice in a time of impunity, and to turn to the past of the Nation at a time when the State seemed eager to leave it behind?

In *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning* (1999), Idelber Avelar argues that the literature that emerged after the experience of dictatorship in the recent past of Latin America underwent a qualitative change that he characterizes as “a turn towards mournful literature” (3). “The imperative to mourn,” he states, “is the postdictatorial imperative par excellence” (3). From the point of view of progressive politics and the often radical cultural sensibilities of the preceding period, the dictatorships and the neoliberal democracies that followed in their wake could only be perceived as a defeat and, as Avelar argues, Latin American literature of the post-dictatorship registers and explores the contours of this defeat.

In the case of Argentina, the election of Alfonsín in 1983 and the trials against military officials in 1985 offered a glimmer of hope, but upon “Alfonsín’s systematic concessions to the military concerning their crimes, as well as to the IMF concerning issues of economic policy” this initial enthusiasm proved short-lived and unfounded (Avelar 60). A period of a State politics of forgetting, silence and impunity ensued, which culminated in Menem’s official pardon of the perpetrators of human rights violations during the dictatorship (Jelin 141). In fact, Avelar maintains that the function of the dictatorships, as “the ushers of an epochal transition from State to Market,” was to eliminate resistance to the implementation of a neoliberal economic program (11). If the return to democracy was framed by the State as a re-foundational moment, a proverbial wiping the slate clean, then the “free market established by the Latin American dictatorships must, therefore, impose forgetting not only because it needs to erase the reminiscence of its barbaric origins but also because it is proper of the market to live in a perpetual present” (2). Avelar insists that, in this specific context, mourning becomes “an affirmative practice with clear political consequences,” an “anti-hegemonic social practice,” that oppositional artists and intellectuals employ to “counter social isolation and political defeat”

(211, 146). In a time of backlash against the political agenda of the sixties and seventies, mournful literature, as the remembrance of a suppressed radical past, becomes an act of resistance. This is precisely why Garibotto considers the testimonial narrative of this period “a subaltern narration of history” that is oppositional or counterhegemonic with respect the official discourses concerning the State’s legacy of violence (10).

Avelar’s assessment of this “memory value” of post-dictatorship narrative hinges on Freudian psychoanalytic theories of trauma, which understand mourning as the process of overcoming attachment to a lost object (Avelar 5). In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud analyzes the structural differences between each of these approaches to overcoming attachment to a libidinal object. Faced with loss, the subject engages in the “work of mourning” through which the attachment to the lost object is gradually overcome, setting the ego free to attach to a new object (Freud 204). This is largely a conscious process, in which the causes of psychological distress are readily attributed to the experience of loss. In melancholia, however, the subject is unable to renounce its attachment to the object and, furthermore, its mechanisms for coping with the loss are largely unconscious (Freud 205). Freud paints the resulting condition in the following manner:

Melancholia is mentally characterized by a profoundly painful depression, a loss of interest in the outside world, the loss of the ability to love, the inhibition of any kind of performance and reduction in the sense of self, expressed in self-recrimination and self-directed insults, intensifying into the delusory expectation of punishment. (204)

All of these symptoms coincide with the work of mourning with the exception of the loss of the sense of self. What, in mourning, was a loss in the world becomes a loss of self for the melancholic: “In mourning, the world has become poor and empty, in melancholia it is the ego that has become so” (Freud 205-06). In other words, “the loss of the object has been transformed into a loss of the ego” (208-09). The unnegotiability of the melancholic subject’s attachment to the lost object causes it to identify with the subject position of the object and to consequently see itself as an object, thus justifying any harm done to it by the lost Other. Although the subject renounces its own well-being, it is able to conserve its attachment to the object, albeit in a sublimated form: “The narcissistic identification with the object then becomes the substitute for the love-investment” (209). This strategy for dealing with loss, however, comes at a high price, “draining the ego to the point of complete impoverishment” (212).

In his analysis of these strategies of confronting loss, Freud is careful to highlight that this loss can be of a “notional nature,” which is to say that it is

not restricted to a lost person but rather often includes abstractions, such as the loss of an ideal or a cause (205): “Mourning is commonly the reaction to the loss of a beloved person or an abstraction taking the place of a person, such as fatherland, freedom, an ideal, and so on” (203). In the case of Argentina, the mourning and melancholia that afflicted the Left after the defeat of revolutionary movements in the 1960s and 1970s was without a doubt bound to the loss of life through the assassination and disappearance of political dissidents. At the same time, however, this loss was not only material but also involved the dramatic eclipse of the ideal of a more just future, of emancipatory aspirations, of explanatory frameworks of History, and of a general worldview or structure of feeling. Wendy Brown in “Resisting Left Melancholy” characterizes this loss in the following manner: “Thus we suffer with the sense of not only a lost movement but also a lost historical moment, not only a lost theoretical and empirical coherence but also a lost way of life and a lost course of pursuits” (460). Much in this same line, Bruno Bosteels in *Marx and Freud in Latin America: Politics, Psychoanalysis, and Religion in Time of Terror* notes a “notorious tendency towards melancholy in political thought today” that stems from the difficulty of gauging the dimensions of the loss in question (163).

According to Avelar, Latin American post-dictatorial literature became a site to confront this type of loss. Referring to the privileged role of literature in the newly emerging memory politics, he argues that post-dictatorship fiction assumed the responsibility to “become the reserve of memory” (10). In this context, memory, as the end product of the process of “affirmative mourning,” transforms the neurotic repetition that characterizes loss, especially in the case of melancholia (Avelar 226-07). Post-dictatorship cultural production, for Avelar, displays both a “desire to mourn” and a “mourning of desire” (229). The ultimate horizon is to work through mourning and to generate new desires: “...only the resolution of mourning will open up a space for the production of desires that would not be mere symptoms of loss” (229).

In *Actos melancólicos: Formas de resistencia en la posdictadura argentina*, Christian Gundermann takes issue with Avelar’s cultural politics of affirmative mourning, which he frames in terms of betrayal: “Insistir en el duelo, es decir, exhortar un proceso que apunta la aceptación de la pérdida es poco menos que un apoyo directo al olvido y la impunidad” (20). Instead of overcoming attachment to the lost object, he advocates a melancholic attachment to the revolutionary past as a mode of resistance to a present characterized by triumphal neoliberalism:

A diferencia de otros teóricos que ven en la melancolía puro estancamiento, planteo la noción paradójica de un “trabajo melancólico” [que] no produce y no rinde, ya que

olvidar y rendir son las dos caras de la misma moneda: la moneda neoliberal, impuesta por los militares y continuada por las democracias posdictatoriales. (61-02)

While Avelar looks forward to the moment of a new affirmation, the combative melancholia of Gunderman, which clings onto the revolutionary past as refusal to accept defeat, stresses the moment of negation: “Es esta negación de la derrota política la que forma la base de toda una cultura melancólica de izquierda en los años ochenta y noventa” (13-04). By insisting on the revolutionary past of the region, the melancholic narratives of the 1980s and 90s become politically operative “como dispositivo en la lucha contra la derrota” (40). The culture politics of Gunderman do not represent an attempt to return to the past but rather a mode of using the past to inform a new Left in its struggles in the present: “La melancolía ha constituido, y sigue constituyendo, la condición que posibilitó no solamente la supervivencia de una cultura crítica al proyecto neoliberal, sino que incluso produjo profundas transformaciones en el imaginario cultural hacia la fundación de una nueva izquierda” (40). Amar Sánchez’s analysis of narratives of defeat in the 1980s and 90s, in *Instrucciones para la derrota: Narrativas éticas y políticas de perdedores* (2010), has more in common with Gundermann’s combative melancholy than Avelar’s affirmative mourning, since she emphasizes the political value of the refusal to accept defeat and equates mourning with forgetting:

[N]o se trata aquí exclusivamente de una experiencia de duelo; elaborar el duelo es aceptar la pérdida y resignarse a la ausencia definitiva, reemplazar el objeto, olvidar, es decir, producir una transformación del sentimiento desde la desolación al consuelo. Nada más lejos de la propuesta de estas ficciones; el perdedor en estos relatos va más allá del duelo, no intenta superar una pérdida personal, sino construir un camino en el que la resistencia y la insistencia en la memoria impiden, justamente, el olvido. (77)

Dominick LaCapra in *History and its Limits* (2009) signals the potential of a political instrumentalization of melancholy in contexts which forgetting is actively promoted and the plight of victims is not recognized: “Melancholy may have a critical or at least cautionary dimension, especially when it attachment to lost others places in question a context in which there is a pronounced inclination to forget or objectionably airbrush a disconcerting past and the fate of its victims” (82). In this sense, literature acquired a unique social and political function as a repository of counterhegemonic collective memory in the context of official policies of amnesty, impunity, silence, and erasure of the militant past that characterized the 1980s and 1990s.

At the same time, however, this same mode of remembrance also ran the risk of converting the experience of State violence into what LaCapra terms a “founding trauma.” In this case, a traumatic history experiences becomes not only the basis of a political struggle for recognition and reparations but also the basis of a group identity: “Perhaps this is the tangled region of thought and affect where one should situate founding trauma – the trauma that paradoxically becomes the basis for collective or personal identity, or both” (*Writing History* 81).

One could argue that the experience of political violence has been foundational for a post-dictatorship identity in Argentina. Although LaCapra admits that “this is understandable,” he is quick to add that “it should also be questioned: trauma should be seen as raising the question of identity, rather than simply founding an identity” (162). Ironically, in the case of Latin America, the impulse to use the political violence of the recent past as a “founding trauma” and therefore as the basis of the identity of the regional Left, or even the Nation, can mystify and reify political militancy instead of recognizing the agency of revolutionary militants as political and historical subjects. In *Política y/o Violencia: Una aproximación a la guerrilla de los años setenta* (2013), Pilar Calveiro, herself a revolutionary militant who escaped from a clandestine torture center in Argentina and went into exile in Mexico, describes how the homages to the disappeared, as a type of liturgy in the secular religion of the 2000s, are incompatible with the sensibilities of the political militants of her generation. Here, she reproduces the reaction of the wife of a fallen combatant, Da Silva Catela, to an homage to her husband:

Ahí descubrían la placa donde estaba mi marido y tantos compañeros. Me pareció espantoso. El problema es que tengo otra escuela política, entonces yo noto que hay una manera de hacer política con un contenido y que frente a la orfandad se borra toda continuidad política, aparecen todas las organizaciones de Derechos Humanos y entonces no estamos nutriendo la lucha sindical, la lucha estudiantil... Gente llorando horas. Yo creo que cualquiera de mis compañeros se levanta de la tumba y se agarra de los pelos, digo, se levanta de la tumba o del Río de la Plata ... La política es otra cosa. (15-16)

There is a point, then, when the struggle to recognize victims and to advocate for justice can give way to a fixation on victimhood, the sacralization of a traumatic episode, and the idealization of a lost past. Calveiro argues that “la exaltación de vidas ‘heroicas’ que no están sujetas a crítica, realiza otra sustracción: impide el análisis, la valoración de aciertos, de errores y, con ello, la posibilidad de revisar la práctica y actuar en consecuencia” (16). According to Nelly Richard in *Eruptions of Memory: The Critique of Memory in Chile, 1990-2015* (2019), the mystification of the militant

past can have the opposite of its desired effect, which is to say that it can lead to complacency and political inaction:

The mythologization of the historical past as a symbol of the purity and untaintedness of political ideas led to the victims' sanctification... Hence the post-dictatorship subject's melancholic-depressive symptoms, which leaves her sadly submerged in decay, in the silence and inaction of retreat, without the vital stimuli for articulating responses to senseless threats. (7)

Here the weight of defeat is too much to bear, and the corresponding sense of loss is more debilitating than politically operative. In these contexts, the trauma of a collective past can acquire the status of what LaCapra terms "negative sublimity" (*Writing History* 161): "I have intimated that the sacralization of trauma and the traumatic experience may be interwoven with its figuration as sublime, since in both cases trauma becomes unrepresentable, awesome, beyond the ordinary, and somehow elevating – even redemptive – in its very excess" (70). In fact, for Giorgio Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (2002) the traumatic experience is defined precisely by its impossibility to be accounted for in language and thus signified:

This means that testimony is the disjunction between two impossibilities of bearing witness; it means that language, in order to bear witness, must give way to non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness. The language of testimony is a language that no longer signifies and that, in not signifying, advances into what is without language. (39)

It is precisely this difficulty of accounting for traumatic experience in language that gives literature its privileged place within trauma theories. In debilitating the referential dimension of language and folding back upon itself meta-discursively, literature has the power to explore the limits of language, the zone where it gives way to non-language. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), a seminal text for trauma studies, Cathy Caruth claims traumatic experiences must "be spoken in a language that is somehow literary" (5). It is not just any type of literature that Caruth has in mind. In "Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age," Stef Craps specifies that literary modernism is often identified as the ideal mode of narrating trauma:

Trauma theorists often justify their focus on anti-narrative, fragmented, modernist forms by pointing to similarities with the psychic experience of trauma. An experience that exceeds the possibility of narrative knowledge, so the logic goes, will best be represented by a failure of narrative. Hence, what is called for is the

disruption of conventional modes of representation, such as can be found in modernist art. (50)

In the case of Latin America, Avelar makes a similar claim about the capacity of post-dictatorship narrative to work through the traumatic past of State violence. For him, this task cannot be accomplished through mimesis but rather through obliquity, circumvention, allegory, and experimentation.² In his analysis of Argentinian post-dictatorship literature, *Nombrar lo innombrable* (1992), Fernando Reati makes a similar appeal to experimental and non-mimetic literary forms:

Se trata entonces de un choque entre los sucesos que se quiere representar y el lenguaje disponible para hacerlo, entre una realidad horrorosa de nuevo cuño y unos recursos literarios que parecen ineficaces para referirse a ella. Por eso, para hablar de la violencia contemporánea, el escritor debe buscar estrategias originales, no miméticas, alusivas, eufemísticas, alegóricas, o desplazadas. (34)

In this sense, his claim mirrors Caruth's privileging of non-mimetic literary discourse to represent the unrepresentable, to narrate the unnarratable.

While running the risk of turning the experience of dictatorship into negative sublimity and a founding trauma, mourning (Avelar) or melancholic (Gundermann) post-dictatorship cultural production fulfilled a double function in the 1980s and 90s. It offered the possibility of collectively confronting loss through the representation of the unrepresentable, at the same time that it disrupted and disputed the hegemonic discourses of the State and mass media concerning State terrorism and human rights violations during the dictatorship, as expressed in policies of amnesty, impunity, silence and erasure. The mournful or melancholic character of the post-dictatorial literature of this period is expressed through the tendency towards sacralization, as part of both the poetics and politics of the genre. Within the socio-historical context of the post-dictatorship, this particular mode of representing the past acquired a distinct cultural meaning as a form of resistance. From our current historical vantage point and from the perspective of our present sensibilities, characterized as they are by what is often referred to as memory fatigue, it is easy to lose sight of this oppositional and innovative edge of early post-dictatorship Argentine narrative.

What happens, though, if this specific set of socio-historical conditions begins to change? A logical consequence of the poetics of a genre being so closely tied to a specific historical moment and political context is that it may lose its social function and cultural currency once the historical conditions begin to change. This is precisely what happened in the early 2000s, by which time the underlying social and historical conditions of Argentine

post-dictatorial literature had undergone two dramatic shifts: 1) the end of the amnesty laws in 2001 and the incorporation of memory politics into State institutions beginning in 2003 when Kirchner made it a central tenet of his political program; 2) the increasing assimilation of memory discourses into mass media and other social institutions, that is is often referred to as “the memory boom.” Both these shifts signal a dramatic modification in the status of memory discourse within Argentine politics and culture, which in turn have repercussions within the realm of literature.

The poetics of authors like Félix Bruzzone and Mariana Eva Pérez cannot be adequately accounted for within the theories of Caruth, Reati, Avelar, and Gundermann. The theme and central reference point of the experience of extreme political violence remains the same, but that is where the similarities end. The poetics of the Bruzzone and Pérez have little in common with the solemnity and mournfulness of the somber first-generation post-dictatorship novel. There is no sacralization of political militants, no idealization of a lost past, and no fixation on the figure of the victim. Trauma does not figure as the negative sublime, nor the foundation of a new group identity. Bruzzone and Pérez consistently resist the temptation to melodramatize loss, idealize the vanquished, or sacralize victims. In the following sections, I explore this series of ruptures and innovations proposed by Bruzzone and Pérez with respect to the previous tradition, decidedly mournful and melancholic, of post-dictatorship narrative.

CONSECRATION AND CRITICAL DISTANCE

The poetics of sacralization that characterized the period from the end of the dictatorship to the early 2000s was radically destabilized by the incorporation of memory discourse into State institutions and the mass media. “It was precisely as the genre reached the center of the public sphere,” Garibotto observes, “that reluctance arose” (3). According to Blejmar, this reluctance created the possibility of breaking with the poetic-political program of sacralization: “[a]s human rights became more explicitly integrated into State policies during the government of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández, literature and art were freed from certain constraints,” which created create the possibility of talking “about the past without always falling into an homage of the victims” (39). From the mid-2000s, when second generation artists and intellectuals were beginning to become active in the public sphere, the poetics of sacralization were increasingly being challenged and displaced by anti-epic, anti-sentimental, parodic and even humoristic discourses about the Nation’s violent past. Blejmar analyzes this shift in the poetics of second-generation artists as “a playful turn” that signals a process of distancing that is often expressed

through desacralization (36). She observes how “the estrangement that some artists and authors feel towards the world and lexicon of the 1970s and their childhood experiences of violence have led them to represent that world in playful and sometimes even humorous way” (Blejmar 36). Once memory discourses had successfully been appropriated by the State and mass media, a melancholic aesthetics of sacralization was no longer a political necessity and, therefore, to continue reproducing the conventions of the genre in a new epoch became anachronistic and less culturally relevant. The work of Bruzzone and Pérez registers this crisis in the genre of Argentine post-dictatorship narrative and represents an attempt to move past its limitations and arrive at a new set of aesthetics parameters that reflect the experience of their generation. In this section I will analyze the ways in which these authors problematize the consecration, appropriation and utilization of the disappeared by the State and mass media.

From the Full Stop laws (*Punto Final*) in 1986 and law of Due Obedience (*Debida Obediencia*) in 1987, which granted impunity to perpetrators of human rights violations during the dictatorship just a few years after the return of democracy, to the overturning of these laws in 2001, memory discourse had a stable meaning within Argentine politics. For the fifteen-year period in which the politics of the State actively favored impunity, silence and erasure, the social movement that arose around memory politics articulated itself in unequivocally oppositional terms as a struggle for *memoria, verdad y justicia* (Vezzetti 21-02). As Elizabeth Jelin has pointed out in her analysis of memory politics during this period, “los movimientos sociales se aglutinan cuando hay un adversario unificado y fuerte” (149). What happens to the counterhegemonic identity of this social movement, however, when memory politics are successfully incorporated into the institutions of the State?

In her analysis of the Kirchner administration’s appropriation of memory politics, Elizabeth Jelin, in *La lucha por el pasado: como construimos la memoria social*, writes that:

El gobierno nacional comenzó a implementar una amplia gama de iniciativas y políticas ligadas a la memoria. Muchas fueron muy visibles y con fuerte carga simbólica, como la recuperación del predio de la Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA) y la política de marcación de sitios de detención clandestina durante la dictadura, o establecimiento del 24 de marzo como feriado nacional. (149)

These institutional measures coincided with a “avalanche” of high-profile court cases against perpetrators of human rights violations during the dictatorship (Jelin 148). As Sosa observes, “[f]or the first time a government embraced the position of the victims, assuming mourning as a national commitment” (18). Garibotto, for her part, frames these institutional

developments in terms of hegemony, arguing that during the first decade of the new millennium, memory discourse shifted from a counterhegemonic to a hegemonic position, which subsequently undermined the oppositional status of testimonial narratives. “To put it simply,” she states, “testimonial narrative is no longer a subaltern narration of history; it has become... a hegemonic version” (Garibotto 10). This process of cultural legitimation and political appropriation of memory politics is well-documented in Pérez’s *Diario de una princesa montonera*, written from 2009 to 2012 and published as a book in 2012.

Throughout this period, Pérez kept a blog in response to current events related to what she playfully and irreverently calls “el temita,” that is, the minor issue of her parents’ disappearance. In the entries, she closely follows the coverage of memory politics in the media and its often clumsy implementation by the Kirchner-Fernández administration. The blog, however, does not limit itself to the public use of memory, but also reveals private details of Pérez’s experiences as a human rights activist in Buenos Aires throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, giving her readers a glimpse into the gossip and in-fighting that characterize the movement. Although there is no question that the events narrated correspond to the personal life of Pérez, the entries are attributed to an autofictional persona,³ the “princesa montonera,” an activist during the period when memory politics shifted from a counterhegemonic to a hegemonic position, that is, during the early years of the Kirchner administration, a specific historical moment described repeatedly in the blog as the “Disneyland of human rights.” Developing this analogy further, she assigns the role of prince to Néstor Kirchner and, if Pérez reserves the title of princess for herself, it is on account of her utility to the administration and the cultural capital allotted to her as a daughter of disappeared parents. Like so much of the diary, the title is parodic because the implementation of memory politics by the State was far from a fairy tale, despite its symbolic importance for the human rights movement. The *Diario de una princesa montonera* goes on to chronicle the love-hate relationship of the princess with the Kirchner administration as she struggles to come to terms with her identity as an activist, artist and public intellectual. The enthusiasm and naivety of her involvement with activism in the 1990s stands in sharp contrast to the disillusionment and skepticism she expresses in the present towards both the Kirchner administration and the response of human rights groups to the institutionalization of memory politics.

One consequence of the newly achieved hegemony of memory discourse was that the State began to disrupt and displace the activity of grassroots social movements and human rights advocacy groups, many of which were comprised of family members of victims of State violence, like

Pérez herself. The annual march, on the 24th of March, to mark the anniversary of the military coup became a barometer of the level of appropriation of acts of remembrance (Bell 11-12). What was once a counterhegemonic activist tradition was rapidly overtaken by State organisms and official political parties. In her diary, the princess documents how there was a proliferation of such public acts that were appropriated by the State, like the following homage to the disappeared, in which Eduardo Luis Duhalde, the minister of the newly created Ministry of Human Rights, made a high-profile appearance:

Hay un escenario grande y muchas sillas en la platea, todas ocupadas. Llega Eduardo Luis Duhalde y mira para todos lados buscando las cámaras.

A la derecha del escenario, a un costado, fuera del escenario principal, estoy yo, con un militante de los 70, probablemente amigo de José, que me cuenta que ya no pueden organizar homenajes a los desaparecidos: pedimos permiso para hacer un homenaje, viene el gobierno de la ciudad y hace el homenaje, se queja. Ya les pasó varias veces. El compañero está frustrado porque les roben iniciativa, pero insiste con el mismo procedimiento, porque, según entiendo, no pueden hacer actos sin autorización oficial. Todo esto me comenta, mientras vemos circular a Eduardo Luis Duhalde a muchos otros funcionarios de traje, desde el costado. Somos espectadores de lo que debió ser nuestro propio acto. (139-40)

The configuration of the space within this scene is revealing. The victims of State violence during the dictatorship and human rights activists are literally sidelined, relegated to the background, while State officials take center stage. The people who were once protagonists of a movement of social justice have been converted into spectators, unable to act without asking permission from the government.

This critique of the misfires and lack of sincerity of the appropriation of a human rights agenda by the State reaches its high point with the episode of the “kidnapped goals.” At the time of the World Cup in 2010, the Fernández de Kirchner administration was engaged in a political standoff with the major media conglomerates. Overturning the *Ley de medios*, which had been established during the dictatorship and consolidated the power of the Argentine media, was one of the political objectives of *kirchnerismo* at the time. As part of an effort to break up the media monopolies and offer an alternative to paid coverage of the World Cup games, the Kirchner administration launched “Fútbol para todos,” a state-sponsored initiative to provide free coverage of soccer games on public television. In promoting the service, Fernández made an analogy between paying to watch the World Cup games and kidnappings that took place during the dictatorship by saying the media companies were attempting to “secuestrar goles” or kidnap goals. Blejmar summarizes this misappropriation of memory

discourse in the following manner: “Cristina Fernández, President of Argentina between 2007 and 2015 and Nestor’s wife, made an unfortunate comparison between the need to pay to view football and the abductions that took place during the dictatorship, using the phrase ‘disappeared goals,’ as if they have been kidnapped by commercial television” (80). In the diary, the “princess” confesses that “[l]os goles secuestrados marcaron el lowest point de mi relación amorosa con los Kirchner” (Pérez 190). When Geoffrey Maguire, in *The Politics of Postmemory* (2017), characterizes the politics of the blog as “a direct aversion towards the politicization of mourning in post-dictatorship Argentine society,” he is referring precisely to this type of instrumentalization of memory discourse within partisan politics (109). It is important to note that, although she often felt “usada” by the administration, she was deeply affected by Nestor Kirchner’s death and recognized the importance of the State’s adoption of a human rights platform, however flawed its implementation turned out to be (Pérez 190).

The shift from counterhegemony to hegemony, however, did not only take place in the realm of politics but within culture as well, as a part of the assimilation of memory discourses into mass media. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, literature, film and television about the experience of dictatorship enjoyed increasing prestige and popularity, as memory narratives found inroads into the culture industry. Trauma theory and memory studies became specialized fields as programs and departments opened up in universities throughout the world. Curricula that contemplated the effects of traumatic historical events were being implemented and taught to schoolchildren in many countries, including Argentina. Thematic museums, like The Memory Park in Buenos Aires, dedicated to the commemoration of victims of history’s worst crimes opened their doors to the public, inadvertently contributing to the creation of a burgeoning international trauma tourism industry. Urban landscapes were transformed as cities made room for new monuments and memory sites to celebrate heroic acts and denounce atrocities. It is no wonder, then, that by 2003 Andreas Huyssen declared, in a famous passage from his book, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (2003), that “today we suffer from a hypertrophy of memory” (3). He goes on to argue that by the time that he is writing in the early 2000s “memory fatigue has set in,” due primarily to “the culture industry’s exploitation of hot themes and popular topics” (Huyssen 3).⁴ As early as 1995, Tzvetan Todorov, in *Les Abus de la mémoire* (1995), was signaling the excesses and abuses of memory in the media. In the Spanish edition, *Los abusos de la memoria* (2000), the boom in memory is described as “un nuevo culto” that is characterized by “un delirio conmemorativo” (49-50). Argentina was no exception to this global trend. Hugo Vezzetti, in *Pasado y presente: Guerra, dictadura y*

sociedad en la Argentina (2012), characterizes the excessive presence of memory in Argentine media as the “‘show del horror,’ un bombardeo de imágenes y testimonios que buscaban un impacto inmediato” (22).

In *Campo de Mayo* Bruzzone mercilessly satirizes this use of memory by the culture industry as spectacle and as a commodity within a burgeoning memory market. In this novel, the protagonist, Fleje, the child of disappeared parents, an autofictional figuration of Bruzzone himself, moves to the vicinity of the Campo de Mayo, the clandestine detention center where his mother was tortured and most likely disappeared. The move upends Fleje’s middle-class lifestyle and serves as the trigger that sends him running throughout the area of the camp and puts him into contact with a series of marginal characters that echo, in the present, the horrors of his family’s past. One of these characters, Tierra, who sells black market merchandise on commuter trains, comes up with a business plan to sell jars with little pieces of the walls of ESMA to tourists interested in the memory sites of Buenos Aires:

Tierra, entonces, se dice: ahora esto de los derechos humanos va a ser un tema importante, puedo plegarme al negocio y ponerme a vender pedacitos de la ESMA a los turistas. Ir a Plaza de Mayo y vendérselos a los que van a ver la ronda de las madres, por ejemplo. Un pedacito de la ESMA, el más famoso campo de concentración de la dictadura, como recuerdo de haber visitado la Argentina, país de los desaparecidos. (96)

Since the Campo de Mayo is closer to his apartment, Tierra ultimately decides to use its dirt for his money-making scheme. The final product is a test tube with a label that reads “Tierra de Campo de Mayo,” followed by the slogan used by the Abuelos, Madres, HIJOS and other human rights advocacy groups, “30,000 detenidos desaparecidos, presentes ahora y siempre” (98). This scene can be read as an analogy of the process of the commodification of memory discourse and its lucrative incorporation into the culture industry. It also demonstrates the degree to which the explicitly political demands of human rights organizations can be successfully appropriated, recontextualized and utilized for commercial purposes.

Private initiatives, like those of Tierra, would not be possible without the existence of what Andreas Huyssen describes as a global cultural of memory: “Certainly, the voraciousness of the media and their appetite for recycling seems to be the sine non qua of local memory discourses crossing borders, entering into a network of cross-national comparisons, and creating what one might call a global culture of memory” (95). The appropriation of memory by the media, then, goes hand in hand with the development of an infrastructure that encompasses international tourism, publishing houses, television and film production companies, etc.,

specifically designed to produce memory commodities, such as literature, film and souvenirs to be sold in a specialized market. An opportunist like Tierra, then, is merely a symptom larger shifts in culture, politics and economy.

Bruzzone broadens his critique to include some of these aspects when, in *Campo de Mayo*, he ridicules The Memory Park in Buenos Aires. The park, conceived as a “monument to the victims of State terror,” like the ESMA, has become a major tourist destination for national and international visitors. Bruzzone exposes how this project, an initiative of the State, displaced the historic Gay Village of Buenos Aires:

[Y] se autorizó el desalojo de la llamada “Aldea Gay”, ubicada en los fondos de la Ciudad Universitaria, con el fin de hacer un parque natural y armar las defensas para el río que necesitaban construirse, no solo para el parque natural, sino también, y sobre todo, para el Parque de la Memoria, homenaje a los desaparecidos. (53)

The monument to past victims has created new ones, further marginalizing vulnerable communities in the novel’s present. The indifference of the State to the inhabitants of Gay Village undermines the sincerity of its commitment to past victims. Without necessarily denying the good that can undoubtedly come from museums like the ESMA and The Memory Park, Bruzzone raises the question of the potential harm that such instrumental uses of memory can cause.

The commodification of memory is also one of the principal targets of the *Diario de una princesa montonera*. In an entry of the diary, the princess sarcastically commodifies her own experience as victim of State terror. Written in the register of a television or radio commercial, she sells to the highest bidder the “Show del Temita,” a spectacle that consists in sharing a week in the life of the daughter of disappeared parents. The show promises

cada día un acontecimiento único e irrepetible relacionado con El Temita: juicios, homenajes, ensayos para el teatro de la identidad, tomas de muestras de sangre, proyectos de ley, atención de familiares de la tercera edad y militontismo en general. Una vida 100% atravesada por las consecuencias del terrorismo del Estado. (39).

Pérez uses the neologism “militontismo” (a fusion of the Spanish words *militancia* and *tonto/a*) to refer to the simple-mindedness of much human rights discourse, which is often reduced to a stable set of widely circulating set of slogans and clichés. When trauma has been turned into a spectacle in the mass media or a strategy to get re-elected, what becomes of the previous aesthetic value and political function of testimonial narratives as acts of resistance?

Within Argentine post-dictatorship literature, the commercialization of memory discourse had the effect of overdetermining the traumatic past,

that is, of converting it into a fixed ideologeme. Garibotto argues that, through repetition, narratives about the experience of State terrorism underwent a process of codification that “has fixed previously heterogenous elements around a stable unity, around an empty signifier called ‘military dictatorship’” (128). According to her argument, the meaning of Argentina’s traumatic past had reached a point of “universal signification” within the Argentine culture (134). After more than twenty years of production, by the mid-2000s a multiplicity of approaches and formal strategies had sedimented into a relatively stable and uniform set of literary conventions. Garibotto characterized the strategy of memory narratives as “emotional hegemony” or what I would describe as axiological overdetermination, that is, when the text itself provides valuative markers that guide its interpretation, filling in the gaps so as to leave little room for alternative readings (22). This rigidity left Argentine post-dictatorial narrative unable to address changing political, social and cultural realities, like the consecration of memory discourse by both the State and the culture industry. The literature of Bruzzone and Pérez addresses not only these important historical developments but the failure of post-dictatorial literature to adapt to them. Their iconoclastic literary practices undermine the anterior poetics of sacralization and expose the problems that arise with the increasing assimilation of memory into the institutions of the State and commercial media. In doing so, they invent a new idiom for the genre, that is, they develop new strategies for conceiving the Nation’s traumatic past in light of the changing realities of the present.

FROM SAINTS TO MERE MORTALS

In the previous section I analyzed the development of Argentine post-dictatorial literature from a diachronic perspective in order to be able to characterize the innovative uses of memory discourse introduced by Bruzzone and Pérez. The poetics of sacralization that characterized the mournful and melancholic literature of the period from the end of the dictatorship to the early 2000s served an important social function as a form of cultural and political resistance to State politics of impunity and silence. With the progressive assimilation of memory discourses into the mass media and the incorporation of memory politics into State institutions, though, this mode of representing the Nation’s traumatic past was no longer as politically necessary nor as aesthetically productive. Argentine post-dictatorial literature had begun a process of reorganization that was characterized by distancing and desacralizing techniques that established a clear break with the prior poetics of sacralization. The objective of this section is to define desacralization and characterize how it functions in the literature of Bruzzone and Pérez.

In *Infancy and History* (1978), Giorgio Agamben has argued that desacralization occurs through play and profanation. He postulates “a relation of correspondence and opposition between play and ritual,” in which the former “radically transforms” and “overturns” the realm of the sacred (77-78). Sacralization is a process of codification that fixes the constitutive and regulative rules and norms of a structure, whereas desacralization, which often occurs through play, decenters and destabilizes such structures. If “ritual fixes structures,” Agamben states, “play, on the other hand, ...changes and destroys it” (77). In *Profanations* (2017), Agamben further develops this idea, arguing that the sacred “can be defined as that which removes things from common use and transfers them to a separate sphere” (74). According to this definition, sacralization is not limited to religion but includes other institutions, such as museums and the media, which, according to Agamben, have the function ensuring the impossibility of profanation (84). If mechanisms of consecration cause something to move from the profane to the sacred, play causes them to move in the opposite direction, from the sacred to the profane (75). Profanation, then, can be defined as that which “ignores separation” and returns “that which has been ritually separated” to “common use” (74-75). Play, as a method of profanation, expropriates and re-signifies a consecrated object and gives it a new use and meaning.

I would like to suggest here that, in the face of the crystallization of modes of representing dictatorship and, in particular, the sacralization of disappeared persons, the desacralizing aesthetics of Bruzzone and Pérez function as a form of play that decenters and destabilizes the genre and as a form of profanation that irreverently appropriates consecrated forms and invests them with new meanings and uses. Bruzzone and Pérez employ multiple strategies to achieve this end, but perhaps the most substantial is their playful and irreverent treatment of disappeared persons. Here they break the central taboo of the genre, which had previously been organized around highly idealized representations of the disappeared as saints and heroes.

The use of photography in *Diario de una princesa montonera* (2012) is a clear example of this treatment. Marianne Hirsch has written extensively about the importance of photograph in the work of second-generation artists and writers.⁵ She considers the mediation of memory through artefacts, such as photographs, a central feature of what she terms the postmemorial productions of second-generation artists (Hirsch 35). Pérez reproduces this convention of foregrounding photography, but she uses it in an unconventional and irreverent manner by playing with the pictures of her disappeared parents. Breaking the aura of solemnity and respect that often surrounds these fetishized objects, she manipulates photos of her

parents by writing, drawing and superimposing discordant images on them. Pérez, for example, darkens the background of one of the photos of her mother and highlights her eyebrows and eyelashes in black to make her look more like the actress on sixties television program *Get Smart*. This parodic gesture is raised to the second degree, compounded by the fact the *Get Smart* is itself a parody whose humor hinges on its intertextual relationship to detective stories, like James Bond, that served as allegories of the ideological confrontation between the capitalist West and international communism. In the diary entry that corresponds to the photo, Pérez explains how the photo reminds her of an episode of the program in which the actress plays a ghost that returns from the dead:

Hay una sesión de espiritismo. En la oscuridad aparece una cara, la cara de un fantasma, sólo el óvalo contra una cortina negra. Al final, es un truco, un fraude. Cada vez que veía ... en esta foto



pensaba en ese episodio del Superagente 86 y me daba un poco de miedo. (Pérez, 113)

Not only does this kitsch portrayal of her disappeared mother highlight the relationship between memory and the culture industry, a theme that runs throughout the *Diario*, but Pérez takes her ironic gesture ever further: she irreverently employs an icon of the anti-communist ideology of the Cold War era to represent her mother who gave her life in the struggle against capitalism.

When another photograph unexpectedly falls into her hands, Pérez takes the opportunity to play with the memory of her parents. She turns the uncertainty of the image into a possibility to creatively fill in the gaps of her family's past. The photograph shows her father playing tambourine on stage with other musicians in a rock band. Although music had only been a small part of his life, having played keyboards for a brief time before getting involved in revolutionary politics, Pérez takes advantage of the opportunity to cast her father's personality in a different light, by writing on the

photograph in big, bubble letters that “Papí es un Rockstar” (Pérez 146). In the entry that corresponds to the image, she exclaims that “me interesa más José rocker” than in other aspects of her father’s identity. This foregrounding of a quotidian and depoliticized image of her father serves to counterbalance the public aspect of his identity, which is often stressed in the ceremonies of public remembrance. Furthermore, the hyperbolic character of the statement comically relieves the tension created by the tragedy of her family history.

In an entry of the diary, Pérez explains her use of photography and other artefacts related to her parents. She exerts her right to use for her own ends “las fotos, cartas, libros, platos, copas, tantas cosas, demasiadas, pero mías. Y esto es lo que hago con todo esto: tomar lo que me gusta, transformarlo, hacer de eso heredado algo propio” (165). It is possible to read this passage as a key to the poetics of *Diario de una princesa montonera*. Pérez takes what she wants from her family history, without regard for what is expected of her as a daughter of disappeared parents, and transforms this “inheritance” to fit her own needs in the present, aesthetic or otherwise.

Felix Bruzzone, for his part, takes a similar approach in his portrayal of disappeared persons in his novels, *Los topos* (2008) and *Campo de Mayo* (2019). According to Geoffrey Maguire in *The Politics of Postmemory: Violence and Victimhood in Contemporary Argentine Culture* (2017), his novels systematically avoid any sentimental and epic representations of the victims of State violence during the dictatorship (Maguire 85-86). In fact, the disappeared are often portrayed in compromising and humiliating situations.

In *Los topos*, the first-person narrator of the novel, the child of disappeared parents, struggles to make sense of his family history, to interpret an equivocal and disparate set of clues, as he undergoes a profound transformation, in which he is orphaned from the stability of his life at his grandmother’s apartment and from the comfort of his heteronormative relationship with Romina, a human rights activist, to take up residence in the house where he grew up, now abandoned, and to fall in love with a trans sex worker, whose disappearance further dislodges him and sets him on a journey through the margins of society to Patagonia and to his own potential disappearance in the arms of a sadistic father figure. The protagonist of the novel, raised in the suburbs by his grandparents, like the author himself, was inculcated with an extremely negative attitude towards his father: “En realidad era imposible saber algo de papá, en casa casi nunca habían hablado y, si lo hacían, era para ejercitar o perfeccionar insultos. Desde ‘tibio,’ hasta ‘asesino,’ podían escucharse variantes de ‘traidor,’ ‘espía,’ ‘infiltrado,’ ‘filtro,’ ‘frú-frú,’ ‘mal-parido,’ ‘hijo de puta,’ ‘hijo de un vagón de putas,’ ‘conchudo hijo de re mil’” (Bruzzone, *Los topos* 133). It

is only when the protagonist learns the details of his father's story from his paternal uncle, Mario, that the reason for this hatred became clear:

Papá había llegado a la política, como muchos de los jóvenes de aquellos años, por amigos que militaban y por ese impulso de la juventud de siempre querer hacer algo diferente, nuevo. Pero cuando cayó preso por primera vez todo se le complicó. Estaba con mamá en un grupo que después de la muerte de Perón había quedado mal parado y terminó, ya en libertad, por ceder a los temores maternos y dedicarse a entregar compañeros. ...empezó a traicionar a los que tenía más cerca, incluida mamá. (136)

Throughout the narrator's investigation into the identity of his father, the image that comes into focus is that of a superficial person whose political convictions were insincere and whose principal motive had always been self-interest, which explains how he ended up becoming a double agent and turning his comrades and even his own wife, the protagonist's mother, to the police (*Los topos* 133, 136).

Bruzzone uses the photographic image of the protagonist's disappeared parents in a similar manner as Pérez: the photos of *Los topos* conceal more than they reveal and create more doubt than certainty about the past. In an effort to better define the features of his own past, the protagonist is pleasantly surprised when he sees a photograph of his father for the first time. He sees a confident, well-dressed young man, a winner: "[e]n una de las imágenes, la amiga de mamá abrazaba a un joven de pelo engomando, anteojos de sol, cigarrillo en la boca y campera negra de cuero" (Bruzzone, *Los topos* 134). His grandmother Lela, however, assures the narrator that he is mistaken in this impression of his father. "Ese topo," she exclaims, "siempre parecía algo distinto a lo que era" (134). In this quote, we can see how the title of the book, among other things, is a reference to the duplicity and mendaciousness of the disappeared father. Within Argentine slang, *topo* (which literally means "mole", as in the burrowing animal) is a polysemic term used to connote introversion and social isolation, but in its principal use, and the one that is dominant within the text, it refers to infiltrators, double agents. This use of the term reinforces the negative image, constructed within the text, of the figure of the disappeared father as a traitor.

In the case of *Campo de Mayo*, it is the figure of the disappeared mother that is removed from the pedestal of national hero and relegated to the margins of society. With a narrative structure similar to that of *Los topos*, the protagonist of *Campo de Mayo*, Fleje, is the son of disappeared parents who undergoes a vertiginous descent from a stable middle-class lifestyle to persecution, homelessness, and marginalization as a result of becoming increasingly entrapped by the unresolved aspects of his family's traumatic

past. At the beginning of the story, he unwittingly moves to the same neighborhood where Campo de Mayo, the detention center where his mother was disappeared, is located. Shortly after the move, Fleje abandons his wife and son and starts living on the property of Campo de Mayo, where he meets a host of marginal characters, one of whom, “el principal,” puts forth the idea that some of the people detained in the camp during the dictatorship are still there: “Luego, el principal... cuenta que en Campo de Mayo todavía hay gente detenida” (Bruzzone, *Campo* 105). Taking this hypothesis as his starting point, Fleje develops the theory, through a series of irrational associations, that his mother survived the camp and is being detained in one of the whorehouses along a nearby highway: “Porque el principal, un día, dijo que hay gente viva, que el ejército todavía tiene gente viva. Y Fleje asocia. Piensa en su madre. Y ¿si estuviera viva, encerrada en un puterío?” (107). The second part of the novel ends with this question, as a transition to the third and last part, in which Fleje sets out on a journey to locate his mother by having sex with all the prostitutes in the vicinity of the Campo de Mayo.

After implementing this plan, Fleje finally finds his mother: “Todo se precipita. Encuentra su madre” (Bruzzone, *Campo* 112). Although there is considerable doubt as to whether or not it is really her, Fleje is more than happy to have sexual relations with the person he believes is his mother: “no tiene mayores inconvenientes en coger con su madre” (122). With this transgression of the incest taboo, Bruzzone also transgresses one of the most substantial norms of the genre, that is, the consecration of the disappeared. In this symbolic transformation of the status of the disappeared mother from consecration to marginality, from having given her life for the Nation to living on the margins of society, working in a whorehouse along a highway near the detention center where she was tortured, Bruzzone profanes, in the sense used by Agamben, the conventionally consecrated representation of the disappeared within Argentine post-dictatorial literature. Through the portrayal of the disappeared father as a traitor in *Los topos* and of the disappeared mother as a sex worker in a suburban brothel in Campo de Mayo, Bruzzone dispels the aura that had previously surrounded these mythical beings in post-dictatorship literature and brings them down from their saintly heights to the level of mere mortals.

Another strategy that Bruzzone uses to destabilize the conventional image of the disappeared is to deconstruct the binary between victim and perpetrator. In both *Los topos* and *Campo de Mayo*, the distinction is not always clear as characters often cross from one side of the line to the other. In *Los topos*, for example, Maira, the daughter of disappeared parents, traditionally portrayed as a passive victim, becomes a perpetrator of illicit violence herself. Taking justice into her own hands, Maira assassinates

violators of human rights, or at least according to the narrator's interpretations. Later in the same novel, the protagonist plots to kill el Alemán, a prototypical authoritarian figure who, allegedly guilty of human rights violations during the dictatorship, is hiding out in Patagonia. After having become a transvestite and successfully seducing el Alemán, the narrator abandons this initial plan because he falls in love with his enemy, despite the violent and sadistic tendencies of this father figure. There is a similar pattern in *Campo de Mayo* when Simi, who is obsessed with taking revenge on the military, plots to kill the Vikingo, another sadistic authority figure. When Simi shows up at Vikingo's door, she accepts his invitation to enter the house and, by the end of the first drink, she is already in love with him. In both cases, the plans for revenge could not withstand the test of interacting personally with an abstract object of hatred. Originally portrayed as the standard caricatures of the victim with Argentine post-dictatorial literature, these characters undergo a transformation, in which their hatred turns into complicity or identification with the figure of the oppressor. At the same time, the sadistic and authoritarian tendencies of both Vikingo and el Alemán are attenuated by a series of positive traits, like sympathy and patience, which serve to humanize them. These types of representations challenge the axiological rigidity and complicate the simplistic portrayal of both victim and perpetrator within the tradition Argentine post-dictatorial literature in the period from the end of the dictatorship until the early 2000s.

The full significance of this treatment of the disappeared can only be fully understood within the diachronic development of the genre and within the particular political, social and historical context of Argentina after the implementation of memory politics into State institutions. In the first period, from the end of the dictatorship until the early 2000s, when the State actively opposed memory politics, the revindication of the figure of the disappeared can be understood as a form of cultural resistance through a mournful or melancholic insistence on representing that past so that it is not forgotten altogether. Within this context, the children of disappeared were expected to identify with their parents and continue their political legacy; to not do so would be interpreted as a betrayal of the memory of their family members and the demand for justice in their name. Cecilia Sosa is referring to this tendency when she observes that "genealogical inscription became mainstream for human rights discourse" during this period (52). There is a paradigm shift, however, once memory politics is incorporated into the State and mass media. When the demands for justice that characterized memory politics in the 1980s and 1990s are no longer under threat, melancholic attachment is no longer politically expedient and indeed can lead to entrapment, that is, of a neurotic repetition of the past which undermines agency in the present. What had previously been both

poetically and politically productive had become anachronistic, a hindrance to the development of the genre. From this point forward, critical distance can be taken without being interpreted as betrayal. This is precisely Garibotto's point when she argues that second generation artists, when they came of age in the mid-2000s, tended to "disrupt identification" and "challenge genealogical inscription" (118). In the *Diario de una princesa montonera* Pérez makes this position clear on many occasions, as when she praises Victoria Onetto as an ideal model for other children of disappeared parents because, ostentatiously, "no compartía la lucha de sus padres" (175). These distancing techniques and, in particular, the desacralization of the disappeared signal neither personal nor political betrayal, as they would have at earlier points in the development of the Argentine post-dictatorial literature but serve to create new channels to address the Nation's traumatic past.

In Marianne Hirsch's widely influential work, the term "postmemory" refers to the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next. The memories of the children of victims of the extreme violence that characterizes history's "limit situations" are not firsthand but mediated through "the stories, images, and behaviours they grew up with" (Hirsch 5). Postmemory, then, designates a mediated form of memory, a negotiated remembrance of a violent past whose traumatic effects continue into the second generation. There are several reasons why the term is insufficient for characterizing the work of the authors analyzed in this article. In the first place, it could be argued that Bruzzone and Pérez are not second-generation victims at all, since they were both directly affected by State terror, even if they were only children at the time. This is especially relevant in the case of Pérez, who was born in captivity and only later restored to her biological family. There is another sense, however, in which the term is inadequate for their work. The narrative of Pérez and Bruzzone polemicizes with theories of trauma like Hirsch's. They categorically reject the sacralization of victims, the idealization of a lost past, the mythologization of the revolutionary militancy, and axiological oversimplification, all of which are the literary devices embraced by the literature informed by trauma theories.

While the categories of trauma theory, like mourning and melancholy, are indeed useful for analyzing Argentine narrative from the period from the end of the dictatorship to the early to mid-2000s, they are notably insufficient for characterizing recent developments in post-dictatorship narrative, like those proposed by Pérez in *Diario de una princesa montonera* or Bruzzone in *Los topos* and *Campo de Mayo*. The poetics of profanation, desacralization, and play that characterizes these works radically challenges and disrupts the sacralization and idealization that characterizes mournful and melancholic cultural production of the early post-dictatorship era. This abandonment of a poetics of sacralization, however, does not in

any way entail a betrayal of the legacy of the disappeared nor does it diminish the historic struggles for memory, truth, and justice. It signals, rather, the ability of the genre to adapt to a rapidly changing sociohistorical context, characterized by major sociohistorical shifts, like the appropriation of memory discourse by the State and mass media. These sociohistorical developments provoked a crisis in which post-dictatorship literature lost its social function and its special status as a repository of collective memory and, thus, freed from prior constraints, was able to reorganize its aesthetic and political principles. To continue reproducing mournful and melancholic tropes in this new context would not only be anachronistic but also culturally unintelligible and politically ineffective. The work of Pérez and Bruzzone, then, announces the arrival of a new set of aesthetic parameters that go beyond the melancholic attachment and neurotic repetition of past trauma and creates the room necessary for unprecedented responses, like playfulness and humor. This trait of their literature is at its most symbolically condensed point in their irreverent representation of the disappeared, in flagrant violation of a longstanding taboo in post-dictatorship cultural production. This operation pushes post-dictatorship into uncharted waters, un-chartable, in fact, within the categories of trauma theory. There is, however, one sense in which the narrative of Pérez and Bruzzone can be considered post-memory. Here, the prefix does not indicate continuity but rupture, not the unconscious repetition of past trauma but a new form of agency in the present. Post-memory, in this sense, connotes what comes next, what comes after the memory boom and the apogee of trauma theory. Understood in this manner, the poetics of Pérez and Bruzzone marks a way out of the impasse of early post-dictatorship cultural production. Revising the previous aesthetic norms of the genre, they forge a novel mode of representing dictatorship, one that is capable of addressing both the Nation's past and the needs of the present.

Independent Scholar

NOTES

- 1 Albertina Carri's *Los rubios* (2003) constitutes an important antecedent, in cinema, to the literature of Pérez and Bruzzone. Also a child of disappeared parents, though several years older than Pérez and Bruzzone, Carri broke new ground in second generation cultural production with her film's irreverent treatment of the disappeared. In their work, Pérez and Bruzzone explore and extend the possibilities opened by *Los rubios*. In the present investigation, I limit my discussion to literary works, especially considering that Carri's film

has been studied so thoroughly and competently. For an in-depth discussion of the film, see Gonzalo Aguilar's *Other Worlds: New Argentine Cinema* (2008), Jens Andermann's *New Argentine Cinema* (2012), Cecilia Sosa's *Queering Acts of Mourning in the Aftermath of Argentina's Dictatorship* (2014), Jordana Blejmar's *Playful Memories: The Autofictional Turn in Post-Dictatorship Argentina* (2016), and Geoffrey Maguire's *The Politics of Postmemory* (2017).

- 2 This claim presupposes a previous process of "literary modernization," understood in the case of Latin America as the transculturated amalgam of the aesthetics of literary modernism and aspects of creole, indigenous and afro-Latin imaginaries. In *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina*, Ángel Rama argues that the process of literary modernization took place in the wake of the telluric novel, or *la novela de la tierra*, with the emergence of the new Latin American novel in the 1940s, culminating in the narrative production of Boom authors in the decades of the 60s (96-100).
- 3 Autofiction is a predominant literary device in second generation narrative. With the advent of memory politics and human rights movements for memory, truth, and justice, the private lives of the children of the disappeared took on a public dimension. The use of first-person narrators that correspond to the biographical information of the authors highlights the public dimension of the private lives of the children of the disappeared, at the same time that it mobilizes the authority granted to them in the public sphere to break taboos and articulate critiques that otherwise would not be possible. In other words, the special status of the authors, as children of victims (and as second-hand victims themselves), gives them the cultural capital necessary to critique the practices and values of their parents and other victims of State terror. Although a discussion of the genre of autofiction exceeds the scope of the present investigation, many scholars have addressed this issue with acumen and aplomb. For an in-depth discussion of the "autofictional turn" in second generation cultural production, consult Jordana Blejmar's *Playful Memories: The Autofictional Turn in Post-Dictatorship Argentina* (2016), as well as Teresa Basile's *Infancias. La narrativa Argentina de HIJOS* (2019) and Leonor Arfuch's *Memoria y autobiografía: exploraciones en los límites* (2013).
- 4 It is important to point out that Huyssen is in no way undermining the ethical and political demands that underpin memory discourses but rather pointing to some of the dangers that arise when memory is misappropriated and exploited (Huyssen 6).
- 5 Although a discussion of the material support of memory exceeds the limits of the present investigations, readers can consult Marianne Hirsch's *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (1997) for more information. Hirsch views the use of photographs as a process of negotiation, appropriation, and mediation in which second generation artists frame a traumatic past in light of the concerns of the present. This mechanism opens

the possibility of the sacralization that typified Argentine narrative in the early post-dictatorship era, until 2003, as well as the possibility of parody and even humor, as is the case with Bruzzone and Pérez.

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