# The living, the dead and the disappeared: memory activism in post-dictatorship Argentina

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## Statement of authorship

This is to certify that the following thesis is all my own work, except where acknowledgment has been made to the work or ideas of others. It has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

Signed Anmarie Maureen Dabinet

# Contents:

# Abstract

Memory is potent in Argentinean society elicited by the traumatic experiences of the military dictatorship era (1976-1983) and the enforced 'disappearances' of up to 30,000 people. This thesis examines memory as a conscious construct for Argentinean human rights organizations whose demands focus on truth and justice on behalf of the dictatorship's victims. Memory draws the past and, indeed, the 'disappeared' themselves into the present, where they act as integral and dynamic forces that are able to shape each group's current initiatives and future plans. This style of memory-focused activism embodies the ongoing relationship between the living and the dead or 'disappeared'. In this framework, this thesis explores a broad range of social and political concerns and the activities of human rights organizations in which this vivid relationship between the living and the disappeared is made visible to others. This relationship unfolds in the context of temporality and place, through performative rituals and commemoration practices, by sharing stories and memories, and through efforts that recover disappeared grandchildren and reunite the remains of the disappeared with their living families.

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Lastly, this thesis is dedicated to those who continue the demand for truth and justice on behalf of all the disappeared victims of Argentina's recent military dictatorship:

*¡30 mil compañeros detenidos-desaparecidos, presentes. Ahora y siempre!*

*¡Hasta la victoria siempre!*

# Introduction:

We spontaneously think of memory as the individual's conscious awareness and remembrance of acts, objects and people that are in the past. However, interpretations of memory from anthropology, phenomenology, sociology and history have emphasised the social preconditions of memory (Ricoeur, 2004; Nora, 1989; Connerton, 1989; Casey, 2000, 1987; Merleau-Ponty, 1945). Halbwachs (1992) argued that each memory, however intimate it may be, inherently exists in a relationship with a vast shared ensemble of understandings of place, people, dates, words and styles of language. We remember with all of society's material and moral life at our disposal. Halbwachs emphasised the importance of the membership of particular social groups such as kinship, class and religious affiliations in our capacity as individuals to acquire, recall and focus our memories. Memories, he argued, are only assembled in our minds because individuals in our group are interested in the same memories, not because we necessarily share the same thoughts (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi & Levy, 2011, p. 18).

Pierre Nora (2011) argues that history has 'accelerated'. Change is far more characteristic of modern society than continuity or permanence. He posits such rapid change as having two distinct effects on memory. Firstly, that it leads to the proliferation of institutions dedicated to memorialisation, such as museums, collections, archives and digital databases. Secondly, the present emerges as the most salient, and almost free floating category in which we seek meaning in our lives, detached as if from a distant obscured past and from an unknown future (Nora, 2011, p. 438).

Equally, studies of memory have given us the insight that, however social and collective the preconditions of memory, there is no single interpretation of the past. There are always multiple versions of what happened, why it happened and who has the legitimate right to determine what should be remembered, and how.

Conflicts around the 'ownership' and representation of historical memory often coalesce around the way in which different members of groups constitute collective memory, since such constructions are underpinned by assumptions as to who belongs to the collective, who is left out of it, and how new generations should be incorporated (Jelin, 1998, p. 3). This point is particularly salient for this thesis. The Argentinean scholar, Elizabeth Jelin (2003), argues that memories are the objects of struggles, disputes and conflicts. The participants in these struggles, through their active and productive role, are the ones "who generate meanings of the past, framed by the power relations in which their actions are embedded in the present" (Jelin, 2003, p. xv). Memories not only change over time they contribute to larger complex political and social constructions. These incorporate human understanding embodied by personally lived experiences, and those experiences conveyed by others (ibid, p. xv).

## Memory and human rights activism in Argentina

The construction of memory in Argentinean society fits in part with Nora's point about the alteration in the status of memory in the context of profound change. Memory in Argentina is a conscious project. And, as Jelin argues, this conscious effort too has been triggered by a massive rupture in society around the traumatic experience of the 'disappearance' of up to 30,000 people during the period of the military dictatorship (1976–1983). As such, the construction and representation of memory has a specifically political focus and ideology. For many social activists in Argentina, 'memory' has become an undisputable premise of their everyday lives, giving meaning to past experiences, and acting as an integral and continuing dynamic that shapes their current initiatives and future objectives.

But Nora also argues that the past seems distant and detached as a result of profound change. In Argentina, for the people and organizations considered in this

thesis, the past is not remote. For those people involved at the core of these human rights projects, the past, and indeed, the dead, are vitally present. Their aim is to make this vital presence something that can be felt and shared by the society at large. The thesis aims to explore this claim in the performative practices of language, commemoration, and public activities and campaigns of the different organizations described. While their styles and often their immediate goals vary considerably, and are sometimes in conflict with one another, all of them exemplify the vitality of an ongoing relationship between the living and the dead or 'disappeared'. This contrasts with practices which acknowledge and honour deaths in the past, such as the Auschwitz State Museum in Poland or the commemoration of ANZAC Day in Australia.

The thesis documents a vigorous political struggle centred on the meaning of what happened and, in fact, for some the struggle is over the meaning of memory itself. The tension is not over a simple opposition between memory and silence. Instead, the contestations occur with and within divergent memories, each with their own silences and voids. But in all cases examined here, it is the ongoing quality of the relationship with the dead that drives the relentless work of trying to establish truth and justice for the dictatorship's victims.

## Research methodologies

The material for this research project is the result of three months of fieldwork in Buenos Aires in mid 2014. The fieldwork used ethnographic methods involving open-ended formal and informal interviews with activists across the generations. They were selected as belonging to some of the most high profile human rights organizations in current Argentinean society with a focus on the representation and promotion of memory. I also attended several of their public activities and campaigns where I conducted unobtrusive observations of the participants and

attendees. As Malinowski (1922) argued, engaging with people in the field can be an intimate experience for the ethnographer. Even observations easily blur into participation. My observations of the activities and commemorative practices of the human rights organizations often flowed into spontaneous informal conversations with other people during such events. This was particularly due to the emotionally charged nature of the events, which focused on people's traumatic experiences during the dictatorship era, and the stories and commemoration of people who were disappeared, and murdered, by the military regime during that time.

Other valuable methods that have enhanced the ethnographic data I collected in the field are theoretical and historical perspectives, and the application of discourse analyses. Farnell and Graham (1998, p. 412) maintain that a discourse-centred approach "emphasises the heterogeneous, multifunctional, and dynamic character of language use and the central place it occupies in the social construction of reality". I have used discourse analyses in the thesis drawing on meanings implicit, as in statements made by organizational members. I have also tried to draw out meaning implicit in their actions. The thesis examines discourses at two levels. First, it refers to performative styles of language that have grown around the lexicon of 'memory' and human rights demands for truth and justice on behalf of the dictatorship's victims. Second, it refers to divergent discourses regarding the same matter – human remains. In one discourse such remains are regarded as forensic and judicial evidence. But this only partly fits with the discourse and affect of those who knew and loved the deceased as a living person.

I speak Spanish competently so all of my interviews were conducted in Spanish without the reliance upon translators or mediators. Although I was a foreigner in Argentina, my Spanish language skills were advantageous because they enabled me to be readily accepted by the human rights groups I was studying. Interview

participants were more relaxed and openly shared with me their everyday and extraordinary experiences, as well as the official perspectives and goals of their organizations. There were also some limitations to this ethnographic research project. Human rights activists often work out in the community rather than in an office environment, so prearranged interviews were sometimes rescheduled to suit their changing commitments and availability. Although I was able to capture quality data and observe a variety of public situations, human rights events in Argentina or globally, do not occur on a daily basis. Therefore, my field notes and observations were drawn from attending specific human rights ceremonies, between July and October 2014, and witnessing the protest marches of two major human rights organizations each week in Buenos Aires' *Plaza de Mayo*. I also engaged with the ESMA Memory Space complex and other commemorative sites, but held back that material due to the strict word count limit set for this thesis.

As an undergraduate majoring in Spanish and Latin America Studies, I studied various Latin American social movements as part of my degree. I also lived and worked in Spain for two years, where I developed a familiarity with the Catalan and Basque separatist movements. However, my interest in Argentinean human rights organizations precedes fieldwork. In 2011, I conducted independent preliminary and preparatory investigations in Buenos Aires, and approached various human rights organizations at that point to learn more about their differing styles of memory-focused activism. The personal contacts I made, and the information I sourced from within each of the human rights organizations, were valuable when I commenced fieldwork for this research project in July 2014.

In terms of theoretical method and contributions of this thesis, two aspects are emphasised.

First, human rights movements, both in Argentina and globally, remain firmly oriented

towards future goals of establishing rights and justice. But they are also centrally about memory. The thesis emphasises this aspect because the significance of memory and history in human rights discourses is often underestimated. Huyssen (2011, p. 608) puts the matter even more strongly. He argues:

> Contemporary memory studies should be linked more robustly with human rights and justice discursively and practically to prevent memory, especially traumatic memory, from becoming a vacuous exercise feeding parasitically and narrowly on itself. But… unless it is nurtured by memory and history, human rights discourse is in danger of losing historical grounding and risks legalistic abstraction and political abuse.

In Argentina, the memories founded in the traumatic experiences associated with state terrorism are central to human rights discourses and this is reflected also in the literature about human rights in Argentina. This thesis builds on the unique contribution of Latin American work on memory and human rights. Within that broad contribution, the thesis makes a particular offering to the study of the disappeared as triggering quite specific versions of memory that re-inflect the nature of human rights endeavours.

Second, nations such as Argentina that have been affected by violence, war or human rights abuses have seen people's perceptual and experiential modes greatly affected. The application of phenomenological analyses to my research project has allowed me to understand and describe the unobtrusive and little noticed elements of human rights organizations. Phenomenology has traditionally drilled down to what is basic and fundamental to human experience.

Three dimensions emerge as a result of this phenomenological attunement to what is basic.

(a) It has enabled the insight that, to the living, the disappeared are not simply the dead. This is elaborated below with reference to anthropological concepts, but phenomenology allows us to notice the fact that for the families and friends, the

disappeared remain alive. But there is also an ambiguity about the sense in which they are alive, since they remain forever alive as they were at the moment of disappearance. In this sense they are alive, but also 'static' in terms of the flow of time.

(b) Phenomenology emphasises the centrality of place. In Argentina, these dimensions are crucial to understanding the construction of commemorative sites throughout the country as well as the practices of the Mothers' organizations in their relationship with the Plaza de Mayo.

(c) Phenomenology emphasises time or temporality. The durable presence of the Mothers in the plaza each week for the last 39 years emerges as crucial in the light of phenomenology. The centrality of repetitive ritualized practices, encoded language styles and modes of storytelling of various Argentinean human rights organizations and social actors are also vital to the elaboration of different ideas of memory, identity and justice. Such practices occur at commemorative ceremonies and memorial sites throughout the country so that temporality and material sites come together in making place. These efforts aim at generalising for all those present, the live presence of the dead and disappeared of the dictatorship.

## The organizations studied

Each of the organizations discussed in this thesis bears a different relationship with the victims who were disappeared by the military dictatorship. The chapters that follow give an account of what this relationship is. What follows here is a brief outline of the organizations considered in this thesis.

The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo (*Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo)* is an organization based on those whose sons and daughters were disappeared during the military dictatorship. Today, they refuse to publicly accept that their children are dead until all

the perpetrators of the dictatorship's crimes are brought to justice. Nor will they accept any remains that have been exhumed.

The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo–Founding Line (*Madres de Plaza de Mayo–Línea Fundadora)*. This is a break-away organization from the original 'Mothers' group, who now focus on commemoration practices and the pursuit of justice on behalf of the disappeared victims of the dictatorship.

The Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo (*Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo)*. The Grandmothers continue searching for the now-adult children who were abducted and illegally adopted during the dictatorship era. In current times, they are the most proactive of the human rights organizations that formed during the dictatorship.

The H.I.J.O.S. organization, whose acronym means Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence (*Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia Contra el Olvido y el Silencio*). This organization, consisting of adult children of political activists who were disappeared, assassinated, or forced into political exile, concerns a segment of a 'new generation' that has taken memory activism to the streets and courthouses of Argentina as a fight against endemic impunity.

The Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF – *Equipo Argentino de Antroplogía Forense*) has been responsible for the exhumations and identification of the remains of the dictatorship's victims. They consider themselves as both a scientific and human rights organization and the thesis explores the overlap and tensions between these roles as they collaborate with the judicial system, other human rights organizations as well as with the families of the disappeared in reuniting the dead with the living.

None of these organizations can be understood without a basic understanding of the dictatorship in Argentina and this will be outlined here since it forms the background for the chapters that follow.

## The dictatorship years

Argentina's darkest period of state violence (1976–1983) emerged after several decades of social and political unrest, the worsening of labour conditions, trade union strikes, street protests and the upsurge of left-wing political guerrilla organizations (Robben, 2005, pp. 128-129). In 1976, the Argentinean military forces seized power from a weakened democratic government and implemented the National Reorganization Process (*El Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*) whose agenda focused on eliminating all political dissidents from society. The right-wing military regime not only violated human dignity and rights, it aimed to systematically enforce silence on its citizens and deprive them of their social memory. As part of their operation, the right-wing regime criminalized all forms of protest against their directives, terminated union activities and vetted or suppressed material from the nation's media organizations (Arditti, 2002, p. 21).

During the following seven years, the military dictatorship waged a 'dirty war' of terrorism that disappeared and eradicated up to 30,000 people in seditious acts of violence that erased all evidence of its actions. In fact, the term 'disappeared' became synonymous with the modes of repression used by the dictatorship regime both in the manner in which its victims were abducted, often in secretive raids during the night, and by the way they were 'vanished' into one of the more than 360 clandestine detention centres across the nation, where they were illegally incarcerated, tortured and usually murdered. Although most victims were not members of left-wing political organizations, anyone who was considered to have subversive or left-wing views was targeted, irrespective of their gender or age. Amongst those disappeared by the military regime were labour union representatives, students, journalists, doctors, lawyers, religious leaders, teachers and social workers (Feierstein, 2010, p. 46). Some of these victims were pregnant women. The estimated 500 babies born in detention centres were taken

from their mothers and unlawfully given for adoption to military families or compatriots of the regime in Argentina or other Latin American countries (Arditti, 2002, p. 22).

The Argentinean detention centres incorporated the cruellest features of the Nazi concentration camps, the French internment camps in Algeria, and the U.S. counterintelligence practices during the Vietnam War. Detainees in the Argentinean detention centres were blindfolded and chained into holding cells. They were regularly tortured with electric prods or their heads were repeatedly submerged in buckets of water to near drowning point. Some detainees were given psychogenic drugs to intensify their sensations of pain and terror. They suffered humiliation, physical and verbal abuse, overcrowding and hunger. Some specifically Argentinean modes of cruelty included the torture of prisoners in front of their children or spouses, or the torture of children in front of their imprisoned parents (Feierstein, 2010, p. 46).

Many of the dictatorship's victims were executed and buried in mass unmarked graves, or died in captivity as a result of torture. Other victims, both dead and alive, were thrown from planes into the Atlantic Ocean and *Río de la Plata* waterway off Argentina, in what became known as the 'flights of death' (Arditti, 2002, p. 20). The dictatorship had covertly initiated a 'politics of oblivion' by eradicating all material evidence of its victims, including their bodies, and by allowing the military leaders to deny any acts of human rights violations or knowledge of disappeared persons. Thus, the reconstruction of memory and challenging the version of reality spun by the Argentinean dictatorship both shared a discursive arena. The military regime's continuing denial that any systemic repression or disappearances had occurred was pitted against the accusations of victims' families and the testimonies of detention centre survivors (Robben, 2005, p. 131).

The Argentinean military dictatorship finally collapsed in 1983. Its collapse was accelerated by its defeat in the Malvinas/Falklands War with Britain and the

mobilization against their National Reorganization Process, spearheaded by various national and international human rights organizations. The call to investigate the human rights violations of the recent past soon became a social and judicial imperative. The newly elected democratic president, Raúl Alfonsín, immediately created the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP – *Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas*) with the aim of compiling evidence and testimonies that would bring the perpetrators of the dictatorship's crimes to trial (EAAF, 2015).

The CONADEP's official report, *Nunca Más* (Never Again), concluded that during the military dictatorship that dominated Argentina between 1976 and 1983, a total of "8,800 persons had 'disappeared' and 172 babies and children had either been abducted with their parents or born in captivity" (Robben, 2007, p. 321). However, these numbers remain highly contested today. Argentinean human rights organizations claim that the figure is closer to 30,000 disappeared persons. This was after families reported thousands of missing relatives, and the excavations of mass unmarked graves revealed the unprecedented number of victims who had been abducted, mutilated and assassinated by unidentified perpetrators (Robben, 2007, p. 323).

## The Argentinean concept of 'disappeared'

Since the beginning of the dictatorship era in 1976, the term 'disappeared' has become a social category of its own. Argentinean society considers missing people in terms of: 'Are you alive? Are you dead? Or – are you disappeared?'. We may think of the disappeared as existing in the kind of ambiguous liminal phase outlined by van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969). In analogy with those undergoing initiation ceremonies, who are neither child nor yet adult, the disappeared neither belong to the realm of the living nor to the dead. The liminality of Argentina's disappeared is particularly acute. There is no proof of their ontological status. There is no witness to their death, nor have they been at the

centrepiece of funerary rituals which could facilitate, for the living, their transition from the world of the living to that of the dead (Crossland, 2000, p. 147).

As Verdery (1999) suggests, dead bodies are an essential element of political transformation because of their symbolic capital. A body's symbolic efficacy lies in its ambiguity, multivocality or polysemy as well as its capacity to affect the reassessment or rewriting of history and the creation or retrieval of 'memory' (Verdery, 1999, pp. 3, 28). The disappeared victims of Argentina's dictatorship are deeply symbolic because each one represents the lived life of a complex human being whose existence was terminated by repressive forces. The void of disappearance is saturated with the social relationships of families that the disappeared have left behind – with friends and colleagues who cared about them and identified with them when they were alive (ibid, p. 111).

## The structures of impunity in post-dictatorship Argentina

The effects of being disappeared raises controversies related to 'culpability' and 'accountability', in terms of who is responsible and how the guilty parties should be brought to justice (Verdery, 1999, p. 111). While the criminal trials that followed the CONADEP truth commission resulted in the conviction and imprisonment of the military regime's most senior commanders, the perception of having achieved some justice for the dictatorship's crimes was short lived (for more details, see Robben 2007). The implementation of a sequence of decrees to legalize amnesty through presidential pardons and the Full Stop (*Punto Final*) and Due Obedience (*Obediencia Debida*) impunity laws acquitted many of the dictatorship's torturers and assassins on the grounds that they were obeying orders. The acquittals radically altered Argentinean society's expectations of the promise of civilian rule (Kaiser, 2006, p. 172). Indeed, the word 'impunity' probably defines the experiences of Argentina, and perhaps all of Latin America, better than any other. The structures of legalized impunity that showed up in the endemic lack of appropriate punishment, investigation, or justice for the

dictatorship's crimes, represented a continuation of social trauma in Argentinean society (Arditti, 2002, p. 25). As such, the demand for 'memory' in Argentina is a demand for justice in the form of an end to impunity.

## The reframing of repression and disappearance as genocide

The significance of the disappearances of thousands of people was reframed between 1983 and 2006 when the narrative of 'dirty war' changed to that of genocide. Argentinean scholar, Feierstein (2014), argues that the military regime's mode of operation, as well as its ultimate purpose, fits with the dominant features of genocide. In Argentina, the military oppressors intended to destroy a victim group that had been categorized as 'subversive' and enforce their hierarchal vision on society, which was social, economic and religious. This was a vision the perpetrators called 'Western and Christian' (Feierstein, 2014, p. 72). It also contained an anti-Semitic stance. Argentinean prisoners who were members of the nation's large Jewish community were singled out and treated with extreme cruelty in the network of clandestine detention centres, which have been likened to Nazi concentration camps. In fact, the military dictatorship's campaign of annihilation was "so effective that social autonomy, critical thinking and political opposition were eliminated from Argentinean society for at least two generations" (Feierstein, 2010, p. 58).

Efforts to prosecute the perpetrators of Argentinean state terrorism under the Genocide Convention have led to a deeper understanding of how genocide is more than the indiscriminate killing of civilians. It is the attempted destruction of a group with the intention of transforming the survivors through the eradication of the victims (Feierstein, 2014, p. 68). In both the Holocaust and in Argentina, we see a technology of power that is founded on defining others as subversive, rendering the bodies of victims invisible, and aiming to symbolically and literally disappear the memories of their existence. The disappearances were also aimed at destroying the network of social relations that

defined the victims' identities and their ways of life. As Feierstein (2010, p. 61) writes, "unlike war, genocide does not end with the deaths it causes, but begins with them". The re-imagining of the dead and disappeared as victims of genocide has led the Argentinean human rights organizations to widen their modes of mobilization.

# Chapter 1:

# Human rights objectives in post-dictatorship Argentina

More than three decades after the transition to democracy in Argentina, many issues regarding the nation's recent violent past are still unresolved. Efforts to clarify the human rights violations of the dictatorship era and bring the remaining perpetrators to trial are still ongoing. The amnesty laws that granted impunity to members of the military regime are still being contested. New investigative commissions are being created and discussions of repatriation policies continue. People are still searching for and seeking to identify kidnapped children of the dictatorship era who are now adults. The process of identifying the remains of those who were disappeared continues. Official memorials, museums and commemoration sites are already completed, or under construction (Jelin, 2007, p. 140).

As Valverde and Humphrey (2016) point out, the key issue underlying the reframing of the dictatorship narrative as 'genocide' was both the fate of the disappeared and the meaning of disappearances. The genocide narrative posited by legal and academic circles both reinforced the gravity and historical significance of the dictatorship period and intensified the survivors' sense of traumatic personal experience and loss, and relationship with the disappeared. The families of disappeared victims, who had been the most vocal opponents of the military regime, remain an ever-present driving force for the material and symbolic recovery of the disappeared and the re-signification of their history.

Although some critics argued that genocide was not an appropriate term because the Argentinean military targeted certain individuals for their political ideologies or actions,

the scholarly debate became secondary to its efficacy for human rights organizations eager to prosecute groups other than the military. The comparative framework of the Holocaust and the Argentine disappearances revealed undisclosed memories, hidden perpetrators and complicit bystanders amongst the civilian population, including doctors, lawyers, business owners, civil servants and administrators. In 2010, questions were raised about the complicity of the Argentinean Press during the dictatorship, leading to the public naming and shaming of several prominent journalists by some of the key human rights organizations (Robben, 2012, pp. 311-312). Furthermore, human rights activists have now adopted the term 'civil-military dictatorship' as a means of reminding society of the breadth of culpability underlying Argentina's era of repression and violence during the 1970s and 1980s. They also use the label 'genociders' to emphasise the human element of the dictatorship's worst crimes.

## The most prominent Argentinean human rights organizations

In current Argentinean society, the most vocal and high profile of the human rights organizations are the relatives of the disappeared of the dictatorship era. The most well known of these are the *Mothers of Plaza de Mayo* (whose children were disappeared), the *Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo* (grandmothers searching for children who were abducted and illegally adopted), and the *H.I.J.O.S.* (adult children of political activists who were disappeared, assassinated or forced into political exile). These organizations continue to demand a complete investigation of the human rights violations of the military dictatorship and refuse to accept anything less than the full disclosure of the truth, and the implementation of justice. Although their activism functions at diverse levels, with divergent objectives and practices, all of them compile information, denounce those responsible and demand accountability under national and international laws. All are committed to campaigns aimed at ensuring that Argentinean society will not forget its violent past, and to bringing an end to social and legal impunity (Kaiser, 2005, pp. 7-8).

In Argentina, the search for and appropriation of disappeared victims for national reconciliation has a particularly gendered dimension. Women are prominent in human rights organizations and in public testimony. They play a vital political and symbolic role in healing fractured social life and relations through restoring the order of everyday life. Women's bodies, both as objects of violence and as witnesses to violence, have embodied the collective memory of past human rights crimes. Their memory, if given voice, can act as a barrier against social forgetting (see Humphrey & Valverde 2008; Bosco 2006, 2004; Hilsdon et al. 2000; Taylor 1997). In an interview about 'childless motherhood' in *Reproductive Health*, a prominent activist, Nora Cortiñas, explained some of the complexities that transformed the women from biological mothers to political mothers:

> Losing a child is always a tragedy, but there needs to be some sort of process so that the person experiencing the loss doesn't remain in a labyrinth, and is able to help others in the same situation. The truth is, it is best not to search alone. It used to be that mourning was observed privately, at home. Women used to shut their pain inside and they became prisoners of their own anguish. They resigned themselves to the loss.
>
> Today, they find strength in groups; they feel useful; they discover that the horror is something that... happened to many other people as well. Nobody can replace the child you have lost, but when that loss does not occur because of a traffic accident, an illness or something similar, but rather because the person was kidnapped and then tortured and the body was disappeared, the pain takes on another dimension.
>
> We emerged out of great tragedy, and that same tragedy gave birth to a political movement that extends beyond borders (cited in Bellucci, 1999, pp. 85, 87).

## The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo – the personal becomes political

The most well known of the human rights organization that emerged during the dictatorship era is the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo (*Madres de Plaza de Mayo*), who began as a small group of 14 women who experienced the personal trauma of the disappearances of their sons and daughters. They met through repeated encounters with each other in police stations, government offices, hospitals and prisons while searching for any information about their

surreptitiously disappeared children. The Mothers began with two unique characteristics that differentiated them from other human rights organizations that emerged during the dictatorship period. Firstly, the organization was composed exclusively of women. Secondly, they were committed to a public campaign of non-violent conflict against the military regime, a stance rejected by other protest groups. Initially, their protests in front of the presidential palace in the *Plaza de Mayo* had very personal objectives. They demanded to know the whereabouts of their disappeared sons and daughters (Navarro, 2001, pp. 249-251). However, the women soon recognised that their grief was a political issue as well as a personal trauma. Drawing on the traditional respect for motherhood in Argentinean society, and their own courage and determination, the women became the most prominent face of public opposition to the military dictatorship.

At a time when public demonstrations of any kind were prohibited in Argentina, the Mothers assembled every Thursday at 3.30pm in the *Plaza de Mayo* in central Buenos Aires. As an act of defiance against the military dictatorship, they walked silently in an anticlockwise direction around a small obelisk in the centre of the plaza. They soon described these walks as marches, because they considered that they were marching towards a goal rather walking aimlessly in a circle. As both a symbol of motherhood and as a means of being readily identified by the public, the women began wearing white headscarves in the shape of a baby's nappy on which was embroidered the names of their children and the dates of their disappearances. The Mothers wore photos of their disappeared children around their necks, or carried them in their hands. Later they moved to larger photo-bearing placards and banners. Onlookers in the plaza viewed the protesting Mothers' group with indifference, contempt or fear while the military guards observed the women with a vigilant gaze (Navarro, 2001, pp. 250-251).

At first, the military dictatorship didn't fully comprehend the political nature of the protests, calling the Mothers 'the crazy women of Plaza de Mayo'. This was advantageous

for the women because it enabled them to formalize the group and develop strategies that included a collective habeas corpus claim, bearing 24,000 signatures, relating to the disappearances of more than 150 persons. To attract international attention, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo approached visiting international dignitaries, contacted human rights organizations in other countries and lobbied foreign politicians. Despite considerable risk to themselves and their abducted family members, the women provided testimonies to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission hearings conducted in Argentina, in September 1979, and rallied others to come forward. The Mothers urged the commission's delegates to take denunciations on the disappearances from human rights organizations and the 3,000 people who queued outside the OAS building where the hearings were held, and to visit known detention centres and burial sites. As the military regime weakened, the ranks of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo grew. By 1982, the organization claimed to have over 2,500 members (Navarro, 2001, pp. 251-253). The Mothers' campaigns in Argentina and the international arena, combined with the efforts of other human rights organizations, therefore contributed significantly to the downfall of the military regime in 1983.

## The tensions around memory and commemoration in the post-dictatorship era

The exhumations of victims' remains, which began at the end of the military dictatorship, gained momentum after Argentina's return to democracy. The opening of mass graves mesmerised the nation and revealed the vast toll of the regime's clandestine actions. They also added another dimension to the social memory of the dictatorship era.

An increasingly complex politics of memory in Argentina grew up around the question of how the remains should be exhumed, and the contrasting meanings ascribed to them once they were uncovered.

New techniques in forensic anthropology contributed to the mounting emotional tensions. The techniques enabled the identification of the exhumed bodies as well as the causes of their deaths. The technology could also determine if a woman had been pregnant, or given birth. Such information opened the new possibility of recovering the abducted babies who had been illegally given for adoption. Additionally, the CONADEP commission's investigations concluded that the 'disappeared' were dead. This was devastating news for the nation. The exhumations confirmed the reality of death. But this process also enabled the implementation of culturally appropriate burial practices and contributed to mourning and acceptance (Robben, 2005, p. 143).

These revelations about the remains, especially the ruling that the 'disappeared' were dead, created a deep rift between the members of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo. In 1986, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo separated into two distinct groups: the Association of Mothers of Plaza de Mayo (*Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo*), and the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo–Founding Line (*Madres de Plaza de Mayo–Línea Fundadora*). Although the initial rift was based on the leadership style and hierarchal structure of the organization, the Mothers separated permanently over conflicting ideologies related to the forensic excavations of the bodies of disappeared victims, and the political meanings attributed to the remains once they were uncovered (see chapter four for further details on the ideologies which underpinned the rupture between the Mothers' groups). The same multifaceted polemic that originally separated the women into two organizations continues today.

## Continuing the struggle - the respected elders of the Argentinean human rights movement

Today, the Association of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo (*Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo*), use the political aspirations of their disappeared children to work for social transformation in the community. While the Mothers maintain their demands for justice

for the disappeared, they claim to have 'socialized motherhood' by converting it into a collective rather than personal experience. In this context, the Mothers regard new generations as their 'collective children' and have created projects that aim to educate and socially engage new generations. These initiatives include the foundation of a university, radio station, bookstore and education programs for schoolchildren in Buenos Aires. The organization has also established social inclusion projects throughout Argentina whose central objective is to strengthen dignity in the lives of unemployed and marginalised people by capacitating and integrating them into the formal workforce (Bosco, 2004, pp. 388, 391).

The breakaway Mothers of Plaza de Mayo–Founding Line (*Madres de Plaza de Mayo–Línea Fundadora*), on the other hand, continue to actively pursue governmental, legal and social accountability for the crimes of the civil-military dictatorship. Beverly, an activist closely associated with the Mothers, explained to me that the organization believes a social and economic 'debt' resulted from the dictatorship era. It argues on ethical grounds that the debt should be repaid to Argentinean society. The organization calls on the government and the Catholic Church to 'open their archives', which have been withheld since the dictatorship, so that families are able to source vital information which would reveal the fate of the disappeared. Access to the archives would also enable stolen grandchildren to be located because the records provide details of the 'adoptive' parents and the church and state institutions that handled the cases. The Mothers–Founding Line also lobby for the social, legal and economic rights of the disadvantaged, retirees and indigenous communities in Argentina as well as displaced peoples throughout the world from Haitian refugees to Palestinians in Gaza. With the objective of reinforcing the collective memory of all of Argentina's disappeared, the organization has successfully lobbied the government for the construction of memorials, museums, commemorative landscapes and parks, and the preservation of buildings

which were used as illegal detention centres during the years of the dictatorship, seeking to convert them into productive public spaces.


The weekly marches of the Mothers–Founding Line in the Plaza de Mayo in central Buenos Aires

## The Plaza de Mayo – a place of memory and political power

The Plaza de Mayo in downtown Buenos Aires has been a site of public protests and political expression for more than two centuries. As such, it is charged with historical significance and layers of meanings and memories. The struggle for human rights during the Argentinean military dictatorship (1976-1983) contributed yet another level of meanings, that was added through the performative marches of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo. While the painted designs of the Mothers' white scarves are visible on a daily basis on the pavements of the plaza, what is also made visible and re-enacted each week is the significance of 'place'. Each week and anniversary of the dictatorship, participants remember through their bodily gestures and utterances, the absent bodies of the disappeared (Jelin, 2007, pp. 150-151). As Edward Casey (1996, p. 26) notes, 'place'

generates collection as well as recollections of all that occurs in our lives. Its power lies in "gathering these lives and things, each with its own space and time, into one arena of common engagement". The Plaza de Mayo is the emblem of resistance to the Argentinean dictatorship. Equally, the site conveys the temporal nature of the memories of the plaza itself, of the violence that occurred there, of the people who converged and participated in the rallies and protests. Older activists such as the Mothers' organizations convey, through their sheer physical endurance and presence by turning up each Thursday, the memories and violence of the past to newer generations. And through these complex processes of gathering and engagement in the Plaza de Mayo, a sense of community is potentially created and reinforced for those who care to respond.

## Ritualized performances of memory

Paul Connerton (1989) argues that images, knowledge and recollections of the past are transferred and sustained by ritual styles of performances. His theories on habit-memory are particularly relevant to the women's ritualized modes of memory activism. While individual or personal habits can be interpreted as meaningful behaviour, Connerton suggests that social habits are essentially legitimating performances which rely on the conventional expectations of individuals and groups that their codes and rules will be performed (Connerton, 1989, pp. 34-36). Connerton contends that it essential to focus on particular types of repetition, found in both modern and traditional societies, in order to understand the efficacy of communal memory. Although he also cites informal and quotidian narrative histories as examples of social memory, he regards commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices as exemplary models of ritualized performances through which recollected knowledge and images of the past are clearly conveyed and maintained (ibid, pp. 39-40).

By analysing the mobilization of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo as ritualized performances, we are able to understand how the modes of transmitting social memory

are embodied in the individual participants and social bodies of each of the groups. In 2014, I witnessed the gatherings of the now elderly Mothers. Each Thursday, both groups of women gathered at 3.30pm in the plaza facing the presidential palace, the *Casa Rosada*, just as they have for the last 39 years. They march in ritual mode today, just as they have over this long period of time. In mid 2014, a crowd of 300 to 400 spectators would gather each week to bear witness to the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo. Since the dictatorship, the women have consistently worn the white headscarf that identifies them as mothers of the disappeared. While the Association of Mothers walked silently in remembrance of their children, followed by a large group of singing and chanting supporters, the smaller Mothers–Founding Line group recited a roll call of the individual names of disappeared persons. Their combined positive affirmation of 'present' reaffirmed the continuity of their emotional relationships with their own children, and with all of the disappeared of the dictatorship.

Yet I was able to observe the fact that these performances were not universally shared in terms of their meanings – even in the immediate vicinity of the women themselves. Viewing the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo each Thursday, I was often reminded of the similarities between the public's reactions to the women today, and their first demonstrations in the plaza in the 1970s. Many people ignored the Mothers as they marched or appeared to show little understanding or knowledge of the significant role the women played in opposing the dictatorship. Office workers from the surrounding government agencies and financial institutions traversed the Plaza de Mayo, oblivious to the women's presence. Priests and monks from the nearby Catholic Cathedral often crossed the plaza in the same manner, which was reminiscent of the Church's passive stance during the dictatorship. Numerous tourists, who didn't comprehend the commemorative aspects and political nature of the Mothers' performative protests followed the women with cameras, or stood in front of them to secure the best photographic angle for their holiday snapshots. Each Thursday, the plaza was filled with

local vendors selling lapel pins, small Argentinean flags and other memorabilia to the large crowds. Some hawkers attempted to sell politically skewed magazines or collect donations for charities or causes unrelated to the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo.

But there were also numerous Argentineans who had lived through the years of the dictatorship who attended the Mothers' marches. Although they didn't actively participate in the marches, they felt a bond with the Mothers' political cause through the shared memories and experiences of personal trauma, or the loss of family and friends. As part of the crowd observing the weekly marches, I often engaged in informal conversations with people around me. They explained that they felt deeply affected by their traumatic experiences during the dictatorship. Some were unable to articulate their pain admitting that it still felt very raw. Sometimes women cried and hugged me in a warm and lingering manner when I explained that I had come to Buenos Aires to study human rights organizations such as the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo.

Many supporters displayed a genuine sense of camaraderie with one another, and an obvious affection and deep respect for the elderly women who led the ritualized marches. Numerous faces amongst the loud, chanting supporters following the Association of Mothers group seemed familiar from my previous visit to the Plaza de Mayo in 2011. The fact that the activists spanned more than one generation always reinforced the memories, struggles and aspirations of the plaza. The elders of the human rights organizations consciously encouraged the younger generations who attended the marches, especially young activists and groups of school children, knowing that they represent an important vehicle for the transmission of memory of the dictatorship, and the continuing demands for justice.

Most of the mothers from both the Association of Mothers and the Mothers–Founding Line groups and are now aged in their 80s and 90s. Although they appeared to be physically frail, I learned during my numerous conversations with the women just how

intelligent, politically savvy and driven these women really were. Many of the women actively participated in the organizations' socially oriented projects on a daily basis, in claiming rights for indigenous communities and increased funding for poor and disadvantaged sectors of society. The most prominent members of both groups of Mothers regularly appeared in interviews and debates on the nation's television and radio networks.

At the conclusion of the Thursday marches, the two Mothers' groups always congregated on opposites sides of the Plaza de Mayo to address their supporters. The silent crowds gathered tightly around the mothers as they spoke. The current social projects would be discussed, but the call for justice for the disappeared victims of the dictatorship, and accountability for the crimes, were always the core theme of the speeches.

Connerton (1989) draws our attention to the performative repetition of bodily gestures and certain styles of encoded language as effective modes of reinforcing and transmitting social memory. The public discourses of Nora, the principle spokesperson of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo–Founding Line, were replete with such repetitions. The visual imagery of Nora's diminutive stature, her advanced years, the repetitions of her weekly presence in the Plaza de Mayo, the persistent continuity in wearing the symbolic white headscarf, all gained further force by the contrast with the political nature and objectives of her addresses. A vibrant and intelligent woman of 83 years of age, Nora had two honorary doctorates from universities in Argentina and Belgium. She still taught political science at one of Buenos Aires' most prestigious universities. Although she actively supported causes related to indigenous rights and political refugees in the public arena, her addresses in the Plaza de Mayo reinforced the essence of resistance to the dictatorship, which was embedded in the activities and meanings of this specific site. The speeches and encoded linguistic styling repeated a rich vocabulary that has grown around the lexicon of memory. Terms such as *verdad, memoria, justicia, impunidad,*

*complicidad* (truth, memory, justice, impunity, complicity), and *olvido* (oblivion), have all become integral to the vernacular of Argentinean human right organizations. Nora's speeches were often directed towards the younger generations, from school children to youthful activists:

> Our time is nearly up. It's up to you, the younger people, to continue the demand for truth, justice and memory when we are gone….. to keep the fight alive and to take it forward (speech, 21 August, 2014).

After one of the Thursday marches in the plaza, I approached Mirta, a founding member of both the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo organizations. A passionate but gently spoken woman in her late 80s, Mirta still campaigned every day in the streets of Buenos Aires for the Mothers–Founding Line socially focused projects. When I introduced myself as Ana María (the Spanish equivalent of my English name) Mirta shuddered, gasped slightly and grasped my hand very tightly. It was also the name of her disappeared daughter. A black and white photograph of Mirta's youthful smiling daughter hung around her neck, protected by a well worn but carefully sealed plastic cover. Mirta proudly explained that her daughter worked as a sociologist with the Argentine Treasury Department. Ana María was 28 years old and five months pregnant when she was disappeared with her husband by agents of the military regime during an early morning raid on the family's home as they prepared to leave for work. They were both political activists engaged in social reform projects in the Buenos Aires' slums.

During the course of my fieldwork, I developed a warm bond with Mirta and enjoyed many conversations with her about the human right projects of the Mothers–Founding Line and about family life in general. Perhaps she saw something of her daughter in me. When I first enquired how old Ana María would be today, Mirta immediately responded:

> No….she is 28 years old……. she will never be more than 28 years old.
>
> Our disappeared children always remain at the same age.


Mirta's daughter, Ana María

Mirta with Anmarie, the researcher (2014)

Although Mirta's daughter Ana María was born in 1948 and disappeared in 1977, she constantly referred to her in the present tense. She often used phrases such as 'when my daughter appears', almost in anticipation of her returning home after a long absence. Mirta spoke with passion about her daughter's life and political activism as an inspiration for her own involvement in human rights projects:

> When she disappeared, I thought 'either I die or I fight'. That desperation was unbearable. I decided to fight….. because I knew that if I started crying I would never stop. Ana María was a militant and she knew what she wanted from life. We've become militants through our disappeared children (interview, 12 September, 2014).

The sentiments expressed by Mirta, and modes of speaking about their disappeared children in the present, are common practices of the members of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo groups. These practices also reaffirm the women's concrete and ongoing emotional relationship with their disappeared children, which give meaning to their organizational projects for memory and justice for all victims of the dictatorship.

# Chapter 2:

# New modes of memory activism in current Argentinean society

**The Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo – a search for the 'living disappeared'**

Amongst the women who marched with the Mothers Plaza de Mayo during the early years of the military dictatorship were those who were looking for both their missing adult children and their grandchildren. These women established the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo (*Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*) with the specific demand that their grandchildren, who were abducted as a method of political repression, be returned to their legitimate families, and that those responsible for the kidnappings were found and prosecuted. The organization estimates that there were close to 500 missing grandchildren, many of whom were illegally adopted by military or police families affiliated with the dictatorship. These children, who the Grandmothers consider as the 'living disappeared', were given false identities and documentation and were denied all knowledge of their true history or family origins. The reinstatement of the legitimate identities of the missing grandchildren therefore became the central objective of the Grandmothers' organization. They emphasised that the children were at risk on physical and psychological levels resulting from their forced separation from their mothers, the continuing lies on which their new family lives were based, and their deliberate exclusion from any information or social networks in which they could learn about their own suppressed history in the context of the nation's recent violent past (Arditti, 2002, pp. 21-22).

In the decades since their inception, the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo have become the most proactive and progressive of the Argentinean human rights organizations that seek justice for the crimes of the dictatorship. They focus on 'identity', rather than memory, because they firmly believe their disappeared grandchildren are alive and living under false identities in Argentina and other Latin American countries. The organization uses the term 'restitution' to describe the processes in which they reunite their missing grandchildren with their biological families, and the healing effects that result from the recuperation of their identities. This is a complex and multifaceted procedure that requires careful consideration on individual, familial and broader social levels. Hence, the Grandmothers have mounted an interdisciplinary team of professionals including psychologists, lawyers and doctors to assist in the ongoing search and restitution of the missing grandchildren. The organization has lobbied on a national and international level, achieving legal and social reforms relating to the transparency of adoptions and the restitution of children taken out of Argentina with falsified documents (Arditti, 2002, pp. 32-33).

When genetic testing became available in the early 1980s, the Grandmothers played a pivotal role in the creation of the National Genetic Data Bank (*Banco Nacional de Datos Genéticos*), which enabled families to provide blood samples with the hope of being DNA matched and reunited with their missing children or grandchildren. One of the most successful actions in the organization's pursuit of justice has been their successful legal bid to overturn the amnesty granted to the dictatorship's most senior officials on the grounds of new evidence that demonstrated that they had, indeed, carefully planned the kidnapping of children as means of punishing the families of the nation's 'subversives' (Arditti, 2002, pp. 31, 35-36). The case, widely known as the 'theft of babies' (*robo de bébes*), marked one of the most significant legal challenges to the pervasive impunity in Argentina, leading to the 2008 reconviction and incarceration of several formerly

pardoned military commanders, including their leader General Videla, and opening the way for further trials.

The president of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, Estela de Carlotto, explains that as soon as the organization realized that the missing grandchildren had grown into adults they changed their 'search' to a new strategy aimed at drawing young people to them through a series of targeted informal campaigns. The organization now focuses on the production of television documentaries and commercials, public mural and poster campaigns, rock concerts, music and theatre productions, promotions with celebrated Argentinean footballers and most recently, an extensive twitter campaign (Dandan, 2014 in *Página 12*). These creative strategies are all directed towards people who were born between 1976 and 1983, and who have doubts about their identity, urging them to present themselves to the Grandmothers organization, or the National Genetic Data Bank, for DNA testing.

## A resurgence of memory

One of the most significant and spontaneous public manifestations of 'memory production' in recent years occurred in August 2014 while I was conducting fieldwork in Buenos Aires. This resulted from the identification of the grandson of the president of the Grandmothers' organization after a 35 year search. It brought about a 'resurgence' of collective memory in a social climate where many people today want Argentina's violent past 'forgotten', and often reject the work of human rights organizations centred on the pursuit of truth, memory and justice pertaining to the dictatorship's crimes.

Estela de Carlotto has always, in accordance with the philosophy of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, made public the circumstances of her personal history and search. Her daughter, Laura, had been disappeared with her partner into one of the dictatorship's principal clandestine detention centres, *La Cacha*, where she later gave birth to a son. In her testimony to the CONADEP truth commission after Argentina's return to democracy,

Estela de Carlotto related the traumatic experiences of her daughter's death and subsequent search for her grandson:

> It had been cold-blooded, premeditated murder by the Army. My daughter had been killed on the morning of 25 August, so went the monstrous lie: she was in a car at the time, and did not obey an order to stop, so she was shot.
>
> My husband and my relatives said I should live with the memory that I had always had of her. That happy face, the face of a young, vigorous Argentine, idealistic and brave. They didn't let me see her because she had had her face destroyed by gunshot at point-blank range. And her stomach was also destroyed, to ensure that I could never prove the birth of my grandson. When I asked about the child, the officer told me that he knew nothing whatsoever about the existence of a child. According to released prisoners, we know it was a son, that it was born on 26 June 1978…… I am still looking for him. And I will go on looking for him all my life (nuncamas.org, 1984).

Since the assassination of her daughter, Estela de Carlotto has maintained the search and continually claimed, "I don't want to die without hugging my grandson".

In mid 2014, the now adult grandson presented himself for DNA testing after many years of feeling a sense of doubt about his origins. The results confirmed that he was a genetic match to a family seeking a child stolen during dictatorship era and that he was, in fact, the biological grandson of Estela de Carlotto, the president of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo. Extensive investigations conducted following the identification of Ignacio Montoya Carlotto reveal that, after a doctor falsified his birth certificate, he was raised by a farming family in a provincial area near Buenos Aires, unaware of his true identity or history. At the time of writing this thesis, the Argentine Judicial Courts are investigating the persons implicated in this case, and others similar cases of falsified adoption (Bertoia, 2014 in *Buenos Aires Herald*).

After searching for 35 years, Estela de Carlotto finally hugs her grandson

The high profile identification of Estela de Carlotto's grandson, and the numerous media interviews, photos and video footage of the grandmother and grandson 'finally embracing', have reignited questions and doubts about 'identity' in the hearts and minds of numerous young adults throughout Argentina. This series of circumstances and events have incited up to 300 new enquiries per day to the Grandmothers, and other human rights organizations, seeking advice on current identification procedures relating to themselves, or relatives who were disappeared during the military regime's rule.

I argue that the identification and appearance of this young man, Ignacio Montoya Carlotto, is important because it shows that 'memory' is embodied in society. The outpouring of public joy, the extensive coverage that dominated the nation's media for more than a month, and most political addresses and private discussions, clearly demonstrated that Argentina is still emotionally very connected to the injustices of the past dictatorship era.

## The right to identity

The most definitive success of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo lies in the positive results they have achieved from their strategic campaigns to identify stolen grandchildren. In contrast to the high profile case of Ignacio Montoya Carlotto, many of the recovered grandchildren prefer to maintain their anonymity while they negotiate the emotional highs and lows of reimagining their lives and renegotiating their personal relationships, which is often a stressful and lengthy process. Some of these children have been completely integrated into their legitimate families; others have chosen to remain part of their adoptive family while keeping in close contact with their biological family. In these circumstances, the Grandmothers still consider that, "by being part of two families, the children have recovered their identity" (Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, 2014).

In early December 2014, the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo announced the restitution of their 116th grandchild who had been illegally removed from its birth parents during the dictatorship era. As part of my research I interviewed Manuel, who is the only recuperated grandchild on the directive commission of the Grandmothers' organization, which he explained is *pro bono* and done 'from the heart'. Additionally, he was employed fulltime in the area of human rights, with the government-initiated National Commission for the Right to Identity (CONADI - *Comissión Nacional por el Derecho a la Identidad*), which was specifically created to aid young adults who have doubts about the legitimacy of their identities by investigating all avenues pertinent to their history, including hospital records and national birth registries.

In terms of his personal history, Manuel explained to me that he had always known that he was adopted although he believed that he was abandoned at birth, and placed in state care. At 19 years old, he discovered that he was the son of political activists who had been disappeared by the military regime when the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF) approached him after investigating the case of a young woman who had

been killed during a targeted raid. Manuel has since learned that 40 military agents armed with machine guns, grenades and poisonous gas attacked the home that he and his mother shared with another family. At five months old, he was the only survivor of the attack after his mother placed him in a cupboard for protection. Later, Manuel was discovered by the military agents and taken to a nearby hospital where he spent several months recovering from toxic gas inhalation before the Children's Court allocated him to a new family for adoption.

Unlike many other cases of stolen grandchildren, Manuel believed that his adoptive family were not complicit in the dictatorship's illegal acquisition of babies and children because they had no connections to the regime. However, after extensive investigations, in collaboration with the Grandmothers' organization and their associated forensic anthropologists, he was able to piece together numerous details about his true identity, including his date of birth and real name, which he has since assumed. He knew that his activist father was disappeared, presumed murdered, on the first day of military coup that initiated the dictatorship era, the 14th March 1976. This was three months before his birth. He learned that the Children's Court failed to search out his remaining biological family after the murder of his mother, and he believed that Court officials were party to the substitution of his identity because of the irregular way they handled his adoption process.

Although he had numerous details about his personal history, and maintained a close relationship with his biological and adoptive families, Manuel viewed the recovery of a person's identity as a complex process:

> For me, identity is about recuperating a history and recreating ties so that you begin to feel part of someone. It's not that they returned my name and then the matter was finished… in fact, I don't know if I will ever finish reconstructing my history. They could have said to me, "you are 'this' person so we're giving you new documentation", but I needed to know who my mother was, who my father was, where they came from, what

> they did, and why they did it. And, this is something that never ends (interview, 12 September, 2014).

Manuel emphasised to me that, while the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo positioned their ongoing work in terms of the restitution of the 'identity' of the stolen grandchildren, the organization's projects were also an essential component in strengthening collective memory in Argentina:

> It's clear that the Grandmothers, and the recuperation of the grandchildren have a special place in the history of Argentina, and its memory. Society recognises us in a distinct or special in some way… and a great responsibility falls on us because of this. Obviously, we are children of a history that is enormous, and that is the history of your mother, your father and the other 30,000 disappeared. And I think we, the grandchildren, are the absolute representation of the right to memory and identity. If we didn't now know our true history we wouldn't be able to have memory of our own past, because that's exactly what we were denied. This means that the recovery of our identity is also a healing of Argentinean society in which the dictatorship disappeared a generation, silenced a nation, and withheld our truth and our right to be with our families (interview, 12 September, 2014).

Manuel had a treasured necklace of his birth mother tattooed on his right wrist, which he considered to symbolise his mother's continuing presence at his side. This gesture reaffirmed Connerton's theory (2011, p. *x*) that tattoos are 'memory codes' that literally embody, on the skin's surface, highly expressive cultural values and interests that exist on institutional, governmental and genealogical levels. Although Manuel had no personal recollections of his disappeared mother, he explained that his tattoo reinforced the relationship he felt with her, which he attributed to the work on the Grandmothers' organization.

### New ways of performing memory – the H.I.J.O.S.

The H.I.J.O.S. organization, whose acronym means Sons and Daughters for Identity and

Justice against Forgetting and Silence (*Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia Contra el Olvido y el Silencio*) is one of the most dynamic human rights organizations working in Argentina today (Kaiser, 2005, p. 8). The organization, which was founded by young adults whose parents had been persecuted during the military dictatorship, developed a new and aggressive form of protest in the 1990s. The H.I.J.O.S. *escrache* campaigns, derived from the Argentinean slang meaning 'to uncover', are aimed at publicly exposing and humiliating the hundreds of military torturers and civilian accomplices who were either pardoned by the post-dictatorship amnesty laws, or who have avoided trial and prosecution.

The H.I.J.O.S. *escrache* campaigns

Marchers converge on the repressors' neighbourhoods where they parade through the streets with protest banners, sing derogatory slogans and distribute leaflets to the community bearing the names, photographs, occupations and addresses of these people as well as list of the human rights violations in which they were implicated. The demonstrators stop in front of the accused perpetrators' homes, conduct speeches and a brief ceremony then complete the ritual with music and street theatre performances before painting slogans on the footpaths and walls. Red paint, as a symbol of blood, is usually thrown at the building in a practice reminiscent of the ways lepers' houses were marked during medieval times (Kaiser, 2002, pp. 499-500). The success of the

performative *escraches*, however, lies in their capacity to shake the broader community out of their apathy and dispel the belief that that dictatorship is in the past, and that impunity is permanent (Lessa & Levey, 2015, p. 223).

Since 2005, the H.I.J.O.S. slogan, 'If there is no justice, there is *escrache*' (*Si no hay justicia, hay escrache*), has evolved to another level. The organization has taken protests to the Argentinean Courts to expose the shortcomings of the judicial system. As part of their performative trial activities, the H.I.J.O.S. erect huge television screens outside the courts so that anyone who is not able to enter the courts can view a perpetrator's trial. A stage is constructed in the street, music is performed and speeches are given by mothers of the disappeared, detention centre survivors and political activists. The public is encouraged to attend the trials and artists are invited to create drawings of the proceeding within the courtrooms, especially portraits of the defendants. While *escraches* are aimed at outing and metaphorically jailing perpetrators in their own neighbourhoods, the purpose of the trial activities is to support the relatives and survivors of the dictatorship's crimes so that they do not have to confront the judicial process alone. There is also a continuity between the *escraches* and the trial activities where the streets function as 'transitory sites of memory'. Through these public spaces, the collective memory of Argentina's recent traumatic past is concurrently reactivated, recreated and articulated in the present (Lessa & Levey, 2015, pp. 216-222).

While Robben (2005, p. 121) argues that the H.I.J.O.S. have "no experiential recollection of the dirty war, yet they are its living victims", the organization perceives itself in a different manner. They use social trauma as a proactive force in the transmission of memory throughout Argentinean society. Their website, hijos.org.ar, categorically emphasises:

> We do not want an abstract and comfortable memory, but a memory in action, one that is active in all of society. It must begin from the present..... Otherwise, we run the risk

> of 'cadaverizing' memory, of drying it, of believing that it is part of an unquestionable past, unable to create a relationship with the present. It is the risk of denying history as a process, and social construction.

I interviewed Miguel, a founding member of the H.I.J.O.S. organization and close associate of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo. His surname is linked to one of the most politically active families of the dictatorship era, and also one of its most persecuted. Amongst his fourteen family members targeted by the military regime was his mother who, at the time of her disappearance, was in the early stages of pregnancy. Miguel explained to me that the military police raided the family home looking for his political activist father. Not realizing that his father was in Europe on business they abducted his mother instead and abandoned the couple's small children in the house. Miguel's father remained in political exile in Italy for almost two decades, leaving the children to be raised by their maternal grandmother. She became an active member of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, dedicating the remainder of her life to the search for her disappeared daughter and the grandchild the family believes was born in captivity. Miguel's mother and unknown sibling both remain missing. He expressed his disappointment at not be able to share some important life experiences:

> I'm now 38 years old and I've know for the last 30 years that I have a brother or sister that I haven't met, but hope to one day. When that day comes I'll be able to embrace them, and to close a search that has been so painful. But, then comes the difficult and very complicated process of establishing a relationship with that person who is your brother or sister.
>
> I found out when I was eight years old and I used to imagine playing with my sibling. Later, when I was a teenager, I thought 'if they appear', we could go to parties or on outings together. When I had my family, I wished they could meet my children or come to family gatherings. As the time passes, I don't know if I'm going to have much more to share? I hope they meet my grandchildren some day… I don't know (interview, 29 August, 2014).

Miguel explained that he was reunited with his exiled father in Italy, however they both returned to Argentina in the early 1990s. Miguel was determined to continue the search for his missing sibling and the political activist traditions of his family:

> I came back to Argentina to reconstruct part of my history and the history of an entire generation, of my mother and father. I'm sad that my grandmother died without being able to find her grandchild. And I'm sad that she's not the only one…. many of the 'grandmothers' are now elderly.
>
> But, we have to seize the moment! During the 1990s there was a push for reconciliation, for 'forgetting'… to stop talking about the things that happened. I think memory has to do with consciousness. Wouldn't it have been useful for people to come to schools, and say to the children, 'that boy sitting beside you could be the child of a 'disappeared'? Those responsible for killing our parents and stealing our brothers and sisters are still walking free. For me, joining the H.I.J.O.S. was about fighting the silences, and the impunity (interview, 29 August, 2014).

## The forces of forgetting

Societal 'forgetting', argue Jelin and Kauffman (2000), is a collective intersubjective issue that indicates a societal break between individual memory and public or collective ritualized practices, or a fracture line in the modes of the intergenerational transmission of memory. However, to forget does not imply a void, it represents something that was once present but is no longer, or something that has been silenced, erased or denied. It is not possible to automatically convey interpretations and rationalizations of the past from one generation to the next, nor from those who experienced events to those who didn't, or from one period of time to another. In this sense, "the past has to be actively transmitted to the next generation, and that generation has to accept that past as meaningful" (Jelin & Kaufmann, 2000, p. 106).

While many Argentineans today support the work of human rights organizations, there is also a strong resistance to memory-focused activism. The friction between the forces

of 'remembering' and those of 'forgetting' were evident almost daily during my fieldwork in Buenos Aires, in 2014. During informal conversations, people often expressed to me their desires for Argentinean society to move beyond the nation's traumatic past. Others voiced their discontent or anger at the work of some of the human right organizations, especially after the high profile Association of Mothers of Plaza de Mayo was implicated in internal corruption scandals during 2011 and 2012 related to the misappropriation of funds. A middle-aged woman commented to me in an indignant tone:

> Forget the past, that's gone! I'm tired of talking about the dictatorship…. we have to look ahead! What the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo did in the 1970s and 1980s was valuable but they need to move on. Their children are dead and won't be coming back! And, they are too involved in politics and the current government (informal conversation, September 10, 2014).

Carlos, who was a youth activist during the 1970s dictatorship era, voiced his frustration over the continuing high profile of the Mothers and Grandmothers organizations, and the lack of public recognition of those who actively protested and risked their lives:

> The human rights organizations take advantage of government funds. We were the ones who openly protested against the military government and we haven't formed an organization. And, we were the generation who was disappeared! In fact, the college I attended was the most politically active in Buenos Aires…ten per cent of the students were disappeared. We woke up every day wondering who had been disappeared overnight (interview, September 8, 2014).

Additionally, many people in current society have no recollection or emotional connection to the events of the dictatorship era. Some are either too young to remember, or their families were not directly affected by the dictatorship therefore the subject has not been openly discussed at home or school. There are also people who prefer not speak about the past, especially amongst the middle aged to older generations who

experienced the social repression of the dictatorship. This is either because the period evokes painful memories of lost loved ones or personal trauma, or because it raises feelings of shame or embarrassment when they, like many others in a time of endemic complicity, either ignored the human rights violations that were happening around them or were too frightened to speak out. And there are, of course, still individuals and groups who were involved in some way with the former military regime, who steadfastly remain silent for fear of public exposure and judicial retribution.

# Chapter 3:

# Commemoration practices to honour the disappeared: the ethical power of storytelling

## The Lila Epelbaum Commemoration

During a discussion with some of the women from the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo–Founding Line (*Madres de Plaza de Mayo–Línea Fundadora*) about how human rights' projects represent 'memory', they suggested I attend an upcoming commemoration ceremony dedicated to a young woman, Lila Epelbaum, who was killed during the dictatorship era and whose remains had only recently been identified, after thirty eight years. I had studied the work of various human rights organizations in Argentina for several years. The idea of seeing a representation of 'memory in action' was tantalising. However, I had no idea of the profound impact the ceremony would have on me until I had experienced it first-hand.

The Lila Epelbaum Commemoration Ceremony was scheduled to take place at her former secondary school, the National College of Buenos Aires (CNBA - *Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires*). As I read the event's program online, I wondered why the organizers had planned a seven hour dedication. On the wintry August morning of the ceremony, I stepped from one of the inner city's cobblestone-lined streets into the large heritage building and immediately realised I knew nothing about the college's political or historical significance. I was surprised at the grandeur of its interior and soon found myself ascending a sweeping marble staircase towards the Great Hall, accompanied by a large group of visitors and secondary-aged students who were obviously also attending the commemoration ceremony. I recognised numerous faces from other human rights

events I had attended since arriving in Buenos Aires, and knew that many of these people were not only parents or siblings of Argentina's 'disappeared', they also worked, usually in a voluntary capacity, with one of the human rights organizations in the city.

The Lila Epelbaum Commemoration Ceremony in the Great Hall of the CNBA, Buenos Aires

Although I managed to briefly speak with a few people I knew, the mood of the crowd entering the ceremony was sombre, as at the funeral service of a cherished family member or friend. The hall was soon filled to its peak capacity of around 700 or 800 people. As I sat in the hushed silence waiting for the ceremony to begin, I marvelled at the magnificence of the room's 30 metre high ceilings and ornate classical details which reminded me of the great halls of Hogwarts, as described in J.K. Rowlings' tales of Harry Potter. When the large doors of an adjoining room opened, the main procession of dignitaries entered to begin the dedication ceremony. However, before being seated, a few people broke away from the official party of family members, friends and human rights representatives to gently caress a partly obscured object located near the central

speakers' podium. This was the first time that I realised that Lila Epelbaum's remains were present, and all eyes in the room immediately turned to her modest black casket.

## Lila's story

Lila Epelbaum's story offers a means of understanding the significance of human rights efforts in the production and transmission of memory in Argentina. Lila was born into a middle-class Jewish family in May 1956. She was a student at the National College of Buenos Aires (CNBA) during the 1970s with her two older brothers, Luis and Claudio. Amongst the many students of the CNBA who had been politically active in the years leading up to the dictatorship era, Lila and Claudio were members of the left-wing Peronist Youth movement (*Juventud Peronista*). In August 1976, after the three Epelbaum siblings had graduated from the CNBA, Luis was detained and disappeared by agents of the military regime while leaving the medical school where he was studying to be a psychiatrist. In a later interview, with the *Independent* newspaper, their widowed mother, Renée Epelbaum, tried to convey the political atmosphere in which her son was taken:

> You have to understand… at the time any whisper of criticism of the government was dangerous. Luis attended meetings at the university faculty where politics was discussed, and that was considered subversive (cited by Martin, *The Independent*, 1997).

Lila and Claudio were openly critical of the regime's abduction of their brother. Fearing for their safety, Renée Epelbaum sent her two younger children to the family's holiday home in nearby *Punta del Este*, Uruguay. However, within three months, Lila and Claudio were also captured as part of the military dictatorship's *Plan Cóndor* which was implemented to eradicate anyone, whether in Argentina or other countries, who was suspected of being anti-government or affiliated with left-wing political movements. The siblings were transferred back to Buenos Aires where they were separated, illegally incarcerated in various clandestine detention centres, tortured and eventually executed.

At the time of their disappearances Lila and her brothers, Claudio and Luis, were 20, 23 and 25 years old respectively (Télam, 2014).

Renée Epelbaum, now childless as well as widowed, became one of the original and most proactive members of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo–Founding Line (*Madres de Plaza de Mayo–Línea Fundadora*) (Agosin, 1990, p. 25). A well-educated businesswoman who was fluent in several languages, she travelled the world until her death in 1998 to publicly denounce the human rights violations of Argentina and other Latin American countries. Renée was also a strong advocate for the promotion and transmission of memory. She often expressed in vivid language, the embodied aspects of the traumatic loss of human lives:

> My pain is as great today as the day they disappeared. A mother can never forget her children. We must keep their memory alive (cited by Briley, *The Independent*, 1998).
>
> *Memory….. memory*. The best way to remember the disappeared is to dedicate yourself to the struggle for human rights, to refuse to tolerate injustice or to allow them to strip our dignity, because when people torture, they violate human dignity. You must put yourself in someone else's skin, especially when you think of torture, which is like ripping a person's skin (cited in Agosin, 1990, p. 44).

## Commemorative memory and storytelling

The narration of the disappearances of Lila Epelbaum and her siblings as well as the human rights advocacy of their mother, Renée, laid the foundations of the affective core of the commemoration ceremony. However, the major focus of the ceremony centred on sharing the stories of Lila, not as an absence but as a living person, and the narration of human rights projects and objectives that focus on memory.

Commemorative ceremonies are distinct from other forms of rituals, argues Connerton, because they explicitly refer to particular people and events, as illustrated by the Lila Epelbaum ceremony. By virtue of this reference to concrete and specific details, he

suggests, such ceremonies are a crucial element in shaping collective memory (Connerton, 1989, p. 61). In the context of commemoration, 'memory' functions as a mode of reminding a community of its identity which is represented by and narrated through a master narrative that enables participants to make sense of the past. This master narrative, Connerton argues, is more than a collectively organized variation of personal and cognitive memory. It is a persuasive 'cult enacted' that is transmitted and sustained by ritual (ibid, pp. 70-71).

Michael Jackson (2013) also takes up the theme of narratives and storytelling, relating storytelling to the extension of our lives beyond individuated selves. Each individual, he proposes, has three different lives. The 'first life' is the space between our birth and death, which is occupied by our conscious incarnation. The 'second life' refers to the place we have in the hearts and minds of others which extends from before our birth to beyond our deaths. The third is an 'afterlife' of almost mythical status which "begins with the death of the last person who knew us in life" (Jackson, 2013, p. 243).

Translated into storytelling, the three life phases suggest to Jackson "a vast pool of ever widening intersubjective circles, possessing multiple centres of consciousness" (Jackson, 2013, p. 242). This notion is particularly relevant to the way Argentinean human rights organizations perceive those who were disappeared during the dictatorship era. Firstly, the human rights imperative of 'keeping memory alive' attempts to produce a continuing existential presence of those who were victims of the military regime. Secondly, the ritualized repetition at numerous human rights events of phrases such as '*memoria, verdad y justicia'* (memory, truth and justice) reinforces the dominant place of the missing and deceased in the ongoing objectives of human rights organizations. Thirdly, Argentina's disappeared are perceived as existing in a liminal state of neither dead nor alive, elevating them to a near mythical status as innocent victims of the dictatorship.

In the context of storytelling, the three 'life phases' suggest a blurring of the boundaries between the private and public spheres, and this notion was certainly highlighted at the Lila Epelbaum Commemoration Ceremony by the diverse mix of speakers including friends, family members, educators and public figures from human rights organizations. One of the first speakers at the event, a passionate middle-aged woman, described the determination and involvement of various groups of people, which not only kept Lila's death alive but also outlasted the death of Reneé, her mother:

> After Renée's death in the late 90s, we were determined to continue the search for Lila and her brothers. We wanted to maintain Renée's fight for memory and justice and her philosophy of 'neither forget, nor forgive'. Genetic matching wasn't available when Lila's parents were alive, so we approached the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team to see what could be done. They said they that they couldn't do anything for us, as friends of a victim…. judicially, they needed a relative's approval to investigate further. That's when we started the search (speech, 8 August, 2014).

Taking the podium, Patricia Bernardi, one of the co-founders of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF – *Equipo Argentino de Antroplogía Forense*), emphasised that if it had not been for this dedication on the part of her friends, Lila's remains may never have been identified. She told us how this group began the lengthy process of seeking approval for the exhumation of Lila's parents for DNA testing. They had to locate the Epelbaum children's closest living relatives. After receiving consent from Lila's cousins and final documentation from several social and legal departments, the forensic team was able to proceed. Finally, in May 2014, the graves of Renée Epelbaum and her husband, Raúl, were uncovered and genetic samples were cut and sent to a laboratory for testing. The results immediately confirmed a DNA match with the skeleton of a young adult female who had been held, unidentified and unclaimed, in the storage facilities of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF) for more than 20 years. Lila Epelbaum's remains were exhumed from a common grave in Buenos Aires' *Avellanada*

Cemetery with more than 300 individuals gathered, including 19 foetuses and neonatal infants, who had also been assassinated by the civil military regime (Cohen Salama, 1992, p. 269). But Lila's two brothers, Luis and Claudio, remain, as they were – disappeared.

## Storytelling as an ethical discourse

Michael Jackson argues that "storytelling remains one of our most powerful techniques for healing ourselves and restoring order to a broken world" (Jackson, 2013, p. 23). Based on the kinds of charged performances I witnessed on occasions such as Lila's commemoration, I argue that in addition to its capacity to respond to profound loss, storytelling is able to function as a mode of ethical discourse and reorientate human beings in an illuminating, educative and liberating manner. These features were particularly evident in the complex visual and oral presentation by the EAAF. Along with her verbal address, Patricia Bernardi presented a slideshow of photographic images that featured striking black and white photos of a smiling Lila Epelbaum during her youth, as did previous speakers who focused on Lila as alive rather than as disappeared. These images of a living and youthful Lila juxtaposed starkly with a photo of a wooden box containing her partially-intact aged skeleton, more than 30 years after her death. As the slides of Lila and skeletal remains of other victims of the dictatorship were projected onto a large wall of the Great Hall, the audience watched and listened in an intense and almost breathless silence. Bernardi continued her presentation, explaining the EAAF's ongoing work in relation to the exhumation and identification of Argentina's disappeared:

> How we construct different vehicles to recover what happened is a slow and arduous process. What we exhume are not bones, they are answers…… We know that most of the victims are between 20 to 30 years old and they are often tied up, or their hands are bound. We not only find whole bones but fragments of bones, teeth and fillings. We also find combs, watches, keys and rings.

> However, we (the EAAF) are witnesses to what happened. It is important to know what happened, not to make people fearful, but to deepen the understanding of what happened during the dictatorship era. We not only work with death but we work with life and the stories and histories of people. We make contact with relatives to find out about the physical aspects of the deceased, but we also want stories about their work, where they went, and what they did (speech, 8 August, 2014).

## The performative practices of memory

We saw in chapter one, a description of the weekly ritual performances of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, that memory is taken into our bodies through the repetition of certain styles of language and performative practices. These repetitive practices were also very much in evidence during Lila's commemoration ceremony, as illustrated by the various visual presentations throughout the day, which both captured the audience's imagination and strengthened the construction of collective memory.

The young Lila Epelbaum and her family

The profound images of Lila in death were accompanied by several other visual presentations during the day that showed the same young woman, as a vibrant living person enjoying various stages of childhood, holidaying with her parents and siblings, and at extended family gatherings. These visual elements, which emphasized the definitive separation between Lila's life and death, reminded the commemoration participants of the vulnerability of even the youngest members of Argentinean society during the dictatorship era. The stark images and accompanying speeches also provided a platform for the human rights organizations present at the ceremony to argue for the need to keep the memories of the nation's traumatic past alive as a prelude to justice.

Visual imagery also played a key role in the education and reinforcement of social memory among the college's current students who attended the commemoration ceremony. Directly addressing the group of around 200 teenagers, the headmaster of the National College of Buenos Aires reminded the students of the political history of the 109 students from the CNBA who were disappeared by the military dictatorship, including Lila Epelbaum and her brothers. During the speech numerous images of Lila's school life, class photos and yearly report cards were displayed on a large screen. As the images rotated, the principal explained that the grim toll, which exceeded that of any other school in Argentina, not only highlighted the political consciousness of the students during the dictatorship era, it also demonstrated the ruthless actions of the military regime in robbing youth of their present lives and potential futures.

While the college students were interested in the visual slideshow, they were most affected by several videos that were projected onto a sidewall of the Great Hall during session breaks and at the end of the commemoration ceremony. The striking archive footage of the military's actions during the 'dirty war' era, which graphically illustrated the regime's acts of violence and oppression and the associated public protests and reactions, provided a sense of reality for the students that still photographs were not

able to capture. Even though we had the opportunity to leave the hall during the breaks, I found myself amongst the large number of students and other commemoration participants who sat, mesmerized, watching the videos which were intensified by their dramatic background music and absence of dialogue or narration.

## The political voice of stories

Hannah Arendt (1998) viewed storytelling as inherently political because of the way in which it influences the public domain. She encouraged us to regard stories as a mode of 'situated thinking' that functions within the quotidian world of human struggle, encompassing multiple perspectives and allowing us to gain a broader view of human experiences. She saw stories and storytelling as intrinsic to humans' shared *vita activa*, through which we produce and reproduce ourselves in the world through the interconnection of human activities and human existence (Arendt 1998, pp. 7-8). Our lives, she suggested, are transformed through storytelling because the process enables us to situate, reshape and disseminate difficult personal experiences in a shared manner (ibid pp. 183-184).

The political voices of Argentinean human rights organizations are derived from the sharing of personal experiences and stories, and group objectives. For such organizations, the quest to 'keep memory alive' is ever present, motivating them to continue the demands for the truth about what happened to the disappeared, justice for the victims and their families and conviction of the perpetrators of the dictatorship's crimes. A sense of continuity defying the ruptures of violent extermination was provided at the gathering by more than twenty elderly women wearing the signature white headscarves of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo–Founding Line who sat in the front row. Their presence conveyed, without the need for any words, their solidarity with their former colleague, Renée Epelbaum. They literally embodied the importance of memory as a project.

And this message was further amplified in language and speech. One the most prominent Mothers, Marta Ocampo de Vásquez, eloquently reminded the assembly of the need to continue human rights objectives:

> We are aware that we are arriving at the end of our lives and we continue to demand, 'where are our children?'. Many people know the truth about what happened. And, there are mothers who are still looking for their living children… they are still waiting for them. Waiting, waiting, waiting.
>
> Never again! (*Nunca más*)… we demand that violence does not happen again, that there are never again detained-disappeared people….. and, that we obtain memory, truth and justice. I am fortunate, those who were responsible for the disappearance of my son are now incarcerated! (speech, 8 August, 2014).

Marta Ocampo de Vásquez from the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo–Founding Line addresses the assembly

A student representative from the National College of Buenos Aires took up and reinforced the ritualized vernacular of protest, but far from being blunted by repetition, the rhetoric served to make memory a project of making the dead present:

> I demand truth and justice for Lila and the 30,000 disappeared. The 30,000 disappeared are present, now and forever!

Hannah Arendt's notion of storytelling, as a political relationship between the public and private realms, gains greater force if it is considered in terms of Jackson's language of stories as forms of connection between "the visible and invisible, the familiar and foreign, and the living and the dead" (Jackson, 2013, p. 32). Storytelling is powerful in that it is a purposeful practice that connects us to others and enables us to claim a public world. This intrinsic capacity of storytelling to create shared public worlds plays a central and valuable role as a vehicle for social actors such as the organizations present at Lila's commemoration ceremony, whose objective it is to maintain public awareness of their human rights campaigns. In this context, the organizations' stories about the 'disappeared' not only forge a connection between the storytellers and their audience, they allow, as Jackson points out, a sense in which the dead continue to live as long as their stories are told. In this way, storytelling gives a concrete reality to the otherwise abstract statement of human rights organizations, that the dead will continue as an existential presence until the truth about what happened to them is revealed, and justice is done.

Commemoration ceremonies offer a space to incorporate personal narratives and testimonies about painful events of the past. Storytelling, in the domain of commemoration ceremonies, allows people to share what has been suppressed or forgotten, for narrating previously untold stories, and for recognising stories or events that have been partly or completely negated by the conscious mind. Jelin (2007) tells us that many participants in commemoration ceremonies re-live disturbing fears and emotions, and question themselves on how the deadly military oppression could have co-existed with what seemed at the time to be normal, everyday life. However, such ritual experiences also enable memories to become more inclusive and shared. Facts are

often restructured, existing perspectives and modes of interpretation are destabilized, the voices of new and older generations ask questions, and add a new stock of stories. Commemoration ceremonies provide occasions "where the memories of different social actors are enacted and become the present" (Jelin, 2007, p. 146).

Once the commemoration ceremony drew to a close I lingered in the Great Hall with a large crowd to re-watch the poignant black and white video of the dictatorship era. Like the majority of the participants, I had been drawn into the sense of communitas created by the ritualized aspects of the commemoration ceremony. I felt I had passed through a seven hour transitional phase to re-enter the world as one who was initiated in the modes of Argentinean human rights' projects. As I left the college premises, I noticed several brass commemorative plaques set into the marbled tiled floor at the exit of the college's premises. They were carefully etched with the names, birth and disappearance dates of former CNBA students. For those who filed past, these prominently placed tiles both concretely and metaphorically acted as 'memory markers' of the numerous socially and politically engaged students who, like Lila Epelbaum, had once studied there and been denied their lives by the military dictatorship.

# Chapter 4:

# The material and symbolic recovery of the disappeared

## The Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF)

Patricia Bernardi, one of cofounders of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF), was one of the key speakers at the Lila Epelbaum Commemoration Ceremony. After seeing her presentation, I felt compelled to learn more about the specialised nature of their work in Argentinean society. I was particularly intrigued by the fact that they positioned themselves both as a scientific and as a human rights organization.

On the day of my appointment with Bernardi, I walked several blocks from the *Once* bus terminal to the EAAF's offices which are located in one of Buenos Aires' most ethnically diverse and densely populated *barrios*. Although the area has a seedy reputation at night, during the day the streets were lined with clothing outlet stores, toy and electronics shops and illegal street vendors whose makeshift stalls occupied every available space on the already crowded pavements.

After pressing the security intercom at the entrance of the nameless grey early twentieth century building, I rechecked my diary to make sure I had the correct address and time for our appointment. The young woman who greeted me led the way to the organization's informal book-filled reception area whose tranquil surroundings contrasted with the intense bustle of the street outside. Through a series of glass-panelled French doors, a small group of people were quietly engaged in discussion in one of the many connecting rooms. While waiting for Bernandi, I reminisced wistfully about the years I lived in Barcelona; my own apartment there had many of the well-worn but beautiful European features I saw around me in the architectural styling of the

rooms and ornately tiled floors which echoed the glory of a former era. My perception of the environment soon changed when I learned that the bone fragments and skeletal remains of more than 600 disappeared Argentineans lay stored in the surrounding rooms, waiting to be DNA matched, formally identified and claimed by their surviving families.

I immediately recognised Bernardi when she introduced herself, and the sharp intellect and warm demeanour I noted during the Lila Epelbaum Commemoration Ceremony were, again, palpable during our conversation. As we spoke, I contemplated the graphic posters of human skeletons and anatomical illustrations that lined her office walls, reflecting the marked differences between the scientific approaches of forensic anthropology and the training I was receiving in cultural anthropology. However, these skeletons were also playing a cultural role. The vivid details of flesh and bones were a stark reminder of the human toll of the dictatorship era and the arduous processes involved in identifying the physical remains of its victims.

## The historical framework of the EAAF

When Argentina transitioned to democracy in 1983, the CONADEP truth commission began their investigation into the reported disappearances of thousands of people during the dictatorship era. As part of their initiatives, the commission ordered the excavations of mass graves and cemeteries throughout the nation. The first digs were randomly executed without archaeological consultation and the unearthed bodies could not be accurately identified. When human rights organizations and lawyers demanded that experts exhume the remains, professional forensic anthropologists from the United States were contracted to perform the work and educate local anthropology and medical students in the techniques of forensic excavations. The Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF - *Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense*) was quickly established, and the findings of their excavations were presented at the Federal Appeals Court trials of

the regime's leaders as evidence that the military dictatorship had, indeed, assassinated people who were reported as disappeared (Crossland, 2000, p. 148). In addition to confirming how victims had died – often as a result of several bullet impacts at close range – the forensic team was able to provide the courts with information about births in captivity. After examining the pelvic bones of exhumed women, they were able to indicate whether they had recently given birth (Robben, 2007, p. 328).

In the three decades since its inception, the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF) has continued applying forensic anthropology and related sciences to the recovery and identification of human remains to be provided as evidence for courts, special enquiries and international tribunals into human rights violations. The organization has also collaborated in investigations in more than 40 countries throughout Latin America, Asia, Africa and Europe, and works towards the improvement of forensic protocols and transparency of criminal investigations to strengthen the fields of human rights and forensic sciences (EAAF, 2015).

In terms of their humanitarian work, the EAAF is acutely aware that the identification of remains brings great solace to those who have suffered trauma through having a disappeared loved. As a result, the organization's guiding principles focus on maintaining the utmost respect for the wishes of victims' families and social communities throughout all the stages of investigation, exhumation and identification of their disappeared loved ones so they can initiate customary funeral rites and mourn their dead (EAAF, 2015). The EAAF team also participates in education seminars and remembrance projects, such as the one I witnessed at the Lila Epelbaum Commemoration, as a means of reminding the community of the reality of the human rights violations of Argentina's recent past.

Patricia Bernardi examines the exhumed remains of one of the 'disappeared' victims of the dictatorship

## The EAAF in the context of memory in Argentina

A significant component of the EAAF's work, and one that has drawn widespread attention since the organization's inception in 1984, is its pivotal role in creating an alternative narrative of the years of military repression. Although the CONADEP truth commission had documented over 2,000 oral testimonies from relatives of the disappeared and eyewitness accounts from detention centre survivors, throughout the judicial hearings the former military regime continued to vehemently deny holding political prisoners or violating any human rights. Thus, memory construction and the search for truth shared a discursive domain centred around the testimonial. In response to the military regime's unrelenting stance of denial, the CONADEP commission pitted its determined efforts to document evidence to prove that the disappearances were, indeed, a strategic plan of the military

dictatorship. The regime's deft eradication of most of the material evidence of the disappeared, including their bodies, also dictated many of the features of the counter discourse adopted by the CONADEP. These centred on affording visibility to the obscured, speech to the silenced and witnesses to crimes that had been denied. The testimonies collected by the CONADEP commission shaped a narrative memory and offered emotional substance to traumatic experiences and accounts of clandestine detention centres. However, it was the unearthing and identification of victims' remains that broke the shield of invisibility created by the military regime's discourse of denial and the covertness of its actions (Robben, 2007, pp. 320-321). In this context, the visible and concrete proof of state-sponsored homicide which the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF) provided in the judicial and public domains of Argentina definitively repudiated the denials, silences and rumours about the human rights violations of the 'dirty war' era. It thus contributed to the strengthening of personal and national collective memory.

In her conversation with me, Patricia Bernardi maintained that the EAAF's work exemplifies the construction of memory because it enables the writing of a part of history that was officially denied during the dictatorship era, specifically in relation to what happened to the disappeared people. Through their work in the exhumation and identification of the remains, the forensic team is not only returning the names and histories of each of the disappeared, they are able to supply facts and concretely respond to questions that relatives have persistently asked for more than 35 years. These may include questions such as: "how was my son, sister or husband assassinated?", and "when did it occur, and where?". In this context, the confirmation of history, identity and evidence creates a synthesis between the work of the forensic team and a family's processes of remembering their loved one and accepting the finality of their loss, allowing them to refocus their efforts on the burial of their relative's remains.

## The conflicting discourses surrounding the exhumations

Through the processes of exhumation the dead effectively 'reappear' in the realm of the living. But this reappearance brings its own ambiguities and controversies. Since the 1980s, the EAAF has collaborated in the investigation of the disappeared with other human rights organizations, including both the Grandmothers and Mothers of Plaza de Mayo–Founding Line. Like the EAAF, these organizations share the same objectives of seeking justice for crimes committed during the dictatorship era. Yet, the forensic excavation of the bodies of the disappeared has remained a controversial topic, and, specifically in relation to the political meanings and strategic values of memory.

The controversy surrounding the excavated remains functions on multiple levels. Many human rights organizations, including the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo–Founding Line (*Madres de Plaza de Mayo–Línea Fundadora*) support the exhumations, reburial and commemoration of the disappeared, believing these to be the most appropriate methods of keeping the human rights objectives of truth and justice alive in Argentina's modern democratic environment. The majority of victims' relatives endorse the exhumations, citing them as providing hope for the recovery of lost grandchildren and valuable for re-establishing broken families ties and moving beyond the experiences of traumatic personal loss (Robben, 2007, p. 328). Furthermore, wider Argentinean society views the exhumations as vital for reaffirming the nation's renewed democratic identity and leaving the era of state terrorism behind.

But, one of the most vocal human rights organizations, the Association of Mothers of Plaza de Mayo (*Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo*) disagrees with the unearthing of human remains and does not support the work of forensic anthropologists in attempting to identify the military regime's victims through methods such as DNA matching. These 'Mothers' also reject any form of perceived closure that takes the form of accepting the exhumed bones of their children or agreeing to financial compensation for their loss.

They argue that their demands for truth and justice will not cease until all of the perpetrators of the dictatorship's crimes are brought to trial and are justly punished. They also actively oppose the construction of memorials dedicated to victims of state terrorism and refuse to participate in commemoration practices where individuals are represented as dead or disappeared (Bosco, 2004, pp. 390-391). The organization believes that it is essential for the 'wounds' of the disappeared to remain open to prevent a national forgetting. Their president, Hebe de Bonafini, reiterates these sentiments:

> Many want the wound to dry so that we will forget. We want it to continue bleeding, because this is the only way that one continues to have strength to fight… But, above all, it is necessary that this wound bleeds so that the assassins will be condemned, as they deserve, and that what has happened will not happen again (cited in Robben, 2007, p. 329).

The Association of Mothers of Plaza de Mayo also asserts that, in addition to destroying any sense of 'living memory' surrounding the disappeared, the exhumation and reburial of the dictatorship's victims will de-politicise the organization's demands and instigate a reconciliatory attitude in the group. One of the Mothers claims:

> What are you going to protest when you accept the exhumations and the indemnification? In no way whatsoever, I don't want a dead body, what I want is the murderer! (cited in Robben, 2007, p. 329).

An ambiguity concerning the remains is also relevant here. Are they to be defined as human *subjects*, or as *objects* of judicial evidence? Grieving families and friends relate to the physical remains of the dead through the bonds of emotional relationships, and personal memories and histories. However, the concept of 'bodies as evidence' emerged in the late 1980s as a response to differing or discordant narratives by the relatives of the disappeared, by the courts, and by the Argentinean and international media. The exhumations performed by the EAAF not only captured the imagination of the public and media, they also provided essential supporting evidence in the trials of the leaders of the military junta. The Argentinean courts expected that all details of the forensic

excavations be presented in an independent and unambiguous manner. To fit these requirements of the judiciary, the exhumed bodies were consistently described as 'evidence' by both the judicial system and by the media who reported on the trials. The popular media's conception of the EAAF anthropologists as 'forensic detectives' who excavated 'evidence' also illustrated the emotional distance between those who reported on the crimes and the human victims who were the subjects of those accounts, as well as their affected families. However, the media's portrayal of the EAAF as detached from the exhumations did not correspond to the experience of EAAF members. The forensic team felt a sense of personal connection with the people they unearthed and, as anthropologists, registered emotional and often traumatic experiences themselves (Crossland, 2000, pp. 146, 149-151). The EAAF team lived through the dictatorship era. They are as sharply aware today, as they were in the early years of Argentina's re-democratization process, of the significance of their role in the ongoing judicial trials of the dictatorship's perpetrators and the sensitivity that must be afforded to all aspects of dealing with the exhumed human remains.

## The EAAF, the families, and the materiality of the identified bones

In current Argentinean society, families continue searching for their disappeared relatives and more than 8,500 individuals have provided the EAAF with blood samples in the hope of finding answers about what happened to their loved ones. Although this seems a considerable amount, Bernardi emphasised to me that more blood donations are needed to enable the forensic team to DNA match the hundreds of exhumed bones that remain unidentified. However, even today, many families refuse to present themselves for testing preferring to continue thinking of their relatives as disappeared, rather than confronting the possibility that their loved ones died more than 35 years ago, and may have been assassinated. It is not that families embrace the 'liminality' of the disappeared, but it appears that the ambiguous ontological state of their missing relatives provides families with some sense of hope that their loved ones may be found alive rather than dead. Bernardi maintained that it is often easier for families to come to

terms with a disappearance rather than a death, because death without a body is more difficult to accept. Some families whose relatives have been positively identified, delay collecting the bones because they find the prospects of seeing and accepting the remains, and finally admitting to the death, to be both emotional and confronting. As one of the EAAF team explained to me, "it's as if the person has died all over again".

While the EAAF provides scientific expertise and evidence that underpins the judicial case for a death being categorised as a homicide, Bernardi informed me that it is the Argentinean Judicial System that officially identifies a disappeared person. Once a victim has been identified and matched to their biological family, the EAAF asks the remaining family to come to the organization's office so that a team member can explain how the identification was reached. This includes information about where their disappeared relative was exhumed and the characteristics of the death, such as multiple impacts by a projectile or an entrance and exit point in the cranium suggesting a bullet injury. It is the policy of the EAAF to show all the information they have to the family although, during their first meeting, the team tries to provide the family with a summary so that they have an idea of what happened. Bernardi explained the challenges of providing the families with such explicit and emotive details:

> It's preferable not to supply all the information in the first meeting because it's very hard for them. I am trying to respond to questions that families have been asking themselves, and others, for the last 35 years. Sometimes I think they are going to explode at any moment.
>
> We ask them to read the anthropological report before they leave the office because it often contains graphic details of lesions or impacts sites on their relative's body. It's preferable that they don't read this kind of information on the bus on the way home. We also urge the families to call us anytime if they have any doubts, or if there's something they need to ask, no matter how trivial it may appear to be (interview, 5 September, 2014).

At the end of the first meeting the family is told that the EAAF safeguards their relative's remains once they leave the cemetery or exhumation site, and they have the right to view them whenever they wish. Bernardi's hand casually gestured towards the adjoining offices as she added that the organization holds the bones or skeletal remains of more than 600 disappeared persons on their premises. For a moment, I felt surprised, and imagined the deep emotional impact on individuals and families when they hear that the remains of a loved one, who they have been searching for more than 35 years, may be only metres away in an adjacent room.

Bernardi emphasised that 'bones' are a significant component in the process of moving on from the past:

> The fact of being able to being able to say goodbye and feel the pain of what happened seems to begin immediately after one has the bones. Many family members say, "I can't farewell something I haven't seen". Although there may only be a bag containing a few bones, the process of mourning begins when you have the bones, when the search is closed, and when you have a cause and date of death (interview, 5 September, 2014).

Most people wish to see their relative's remains. However, they are usually apprehensive about how they are going to react to the encounter. Although there is no specific methodology applied to introduce a family to the remains, Bernardi explained that the bones are usually laid out on a worktop and she gently draws the family towards them. She again emphasised the important role of 'bones' in the family's process of *un*-disappearing their loved one:

> I might begin by asking if they want me to explain why we have specified certain injuries, such as three projectile impacts. But, personally, I think that it's very important for the families to see the bones, to approach them, and then touch them. This process of approaching the remains, the acceptance of the scientific and genetic facts is one thing…. but it's precisely when you touch the bones, you feel that your relative has re-entered.

> However, that first contact and even the way of touching the bones is different in each case. In general, children who barely knew their parents and who remember very little are looking at something in which they are reflected, and they are attempting to search for their own identity in the bones. And, in some cases I've participated in, women who feel a deep sense of love for their husbands will kiss the bones, or tenderly caress and embrace a skeleton. They might say to me, "see, I told you he was handsome" or, "isn't he gorgeous!", and I'll respond with 'yes' although I see nothing more than bones (interview, 5 September, 2014).

Family members thus see the bones of their loved one with a transcendence in their vision. Bernardi illustrated various examples to me. For instance, some women visit the hairdresser and wear a special outfit, wanting to look attractive as one would for a greatly anticipated encounter. The contemporary use of mobile phones for photography has also shaped the way in which people record and retain the memories of loved ones who were assassinated during the military dictatorship. In some cases, a close family member, such as a parent, will pose beside the skeleton and ask for a photo to be taken on their mobile phone. Occasionally, this may the family's only photo of their son or daughter because all others records, including photos, were confiscated when military agents raided their homes and forcefully removed their family member some 35 years earlier.

## Reuniting the disappeared with the living

In Anonymous Tombs (*Tumbas Anónimas*), the EAAF's official report on the excavation and identification of victims of the military dictatorship, Mauricio Cohen Salama (1992) stresses that the organization aims to transform the perception of victims' remains. Instead of the remains being seen as 'evidence', one of the major objectives of the EAAF is to return the disappeared to living society and reunite them with the social networks of relationships that were broken when they were seized by the military regime. As such, the process of being *un*-disappeared extends beyond the direct family to include

personal friends, colleagues who participated in political activities with the victim, and even neighbours. However, the re-socialization of a disappeared also extends to sharing the news with wider society, which human rights organizations believe reinforces the collective memory of the dictatorship era, as well as the value of human rights efforts and objectives in the present.

Although forensic proof and the judicial process ratify the person's death as a 'qualified homicide' carried out by the dictatorship, Bernardi maintained that it is the family who has to initiate the socialization process. This can be a very difficult task, which involves the redefinition of a loved one through the acceptance of the reality of what happened to them, how it happened, and when. She recalled the daughter of a disappeared father saying:

> I have to *un*-disappear him. I've carried the weight of being the daughter of a disappeared person for the last 35 years and now I'm the daughter of man who was assassinated. Additionally, my children will no longer be the grandchildren of a disappeared. For the first two months I was fine but by the fourth month, I felt a void.

While families feel immense relief that their disappeared loved one has been identified, sometimes after more that 35 years of searching for answers, there is great sadness that accompanies the confirmation of a death. But it can also lessen the boundless nature of anxiety and bring it down to more empirically grounded fears and grief.

The anxiety of whether their disappeared loved one had been tortured or not is taxing, often going beyond the reality of what actually occurred. This may be replaced by more specific forms of grief, for example when it is explained that their relative died immediately from specific fatal injuries, such as a blow to the head, rather than torture. Many families also express the deep guilt they have carried for the last three decades, imagining being able to protect their family member if the circumstances had been different, or if they had been at home at the time of the military-instigated raid. However,

as Bernardi explained, this sense of culpability is often lessened when parents learn that the forensic evidence reveals that their son or daughter was killed days, or even weeks after their disappearance, and the family could not have prevented the outcome.

The work of the EAAF forensic anthropologists also demonstrates how the same organization is required to mediate between two quite different discourses on justice: a judicial court that requires hard factual evidence, and the identified bones that provide literally materialized evidence. On the other hand, the judicial evidence and scientific facts are secondary for the families who might even see the whole person lying there when they are presented with the bones of their disappeared loved one.

As I farewelled Bernardi at the end of our meeting she stressed that by assimilating the many truths about the disappeared, as arduous as they may be, a domino effect is created in society. In addition to providing answers and solace to the families, the identification of a disappeared person aids society from a social and judicial perspective. It nurtures public consciousness of the value of human rights projects, not only in relation to the EAAF but also for the numerous organizations working in the area of human rights. While the EAAF plays a key role in the redefinition of the dead, the organization also maintains that the search and identification of the bodies of Argentina's disappeared are central to fulfilling the call for truth, justice, memory, repatriation and reconciliation, none of which, they argue, should ever be considered as abstract concepts (Salado, 2008, p. 220).

# Conclusion

In Argentinean society, the 'project of memory' is a conscious construct elicited by the profound traumatic experiences of the human rights violations of the past dictatorship era (1976-1983) and the enforced 'disappearances' of up to 30,000 people. The demands for truth and justice in relation to the dictatorship's crimes – usually voiced by human rights organizations – are, first and foremost, demands for memory. The current literature on the politics of memory in Argentina has described many aspects that are central to this thesis: the changing nature of social and political activism, the reframing of the military dictatorship, and the disappearances, through the narrative of genocide (Lessa & Levey 2015; Valverde & Humphrey 2015, 2008; Feierstein 2014, 2010; Robben 2012, 2007, 2005; Jelin 2007). But the thesis has also sought to demonstrate that for the human rights organizations involved in memory-focused activism in Argentina, memory is made very distinctive by the fact that they deal with people who simply disappeared. As a result, the past, and indeed the disappeared victims of the military dictatorship, are all very much present for participants, and become integral and dynamic forces that drive each group's current initiatives and future plans. This style of activism is an elaboration of an ongoing relationship between the living and the dead or disappeared. The broad range of social and political concerns, and the activities of human rights organizations, are all ways of making visible this relationship between the living and the disappeared. It is a relationship which necessarily unfolds both in terms of temporality and of place. Much of the activism should also be understood as a valiant effort to generalise this 'aliveness' of the disappeared so that it moves beyond those directly concerned to the wider society – so that it too will come to comprehend the significance of maintaining the call for justice and the struggle against endemic impunity. Indeed, this has worked to some extent. The public consciousness and consensus of the significance

of the disappeared in relation to Argentina's recent traumatic history, in turn, has led to further investigations, trials and prosecutions of the perpetrators of the dictatorship's crime despite the fact that many remain, even today, free and unpunished.

The weekly rituals of the Mothers' groups in the Plaza de Mayo, the H.I.J.O.S. performative street and courtroom protests, the creation of memorial sites and plaques, and public commemoration practices such as the one I witnessed for Lila Epelbaum, are all ways in which the human rights organizations at the heart of this thesis maintain the past, and the disappeared, in the present. These efforts are implicit in the bodily gestures of actors and groups, in their encoded vernacular and linguistic styles, and in the symbolic forms of dress and visual imagery they adopt in their ritualised practices. The public sharing of memories and stories about how a loved one died, or disappeared, highlights the vivid existence of that person in the life of the storyteller but reaches all who listen and can respond to what is being told. The identification of stolen grandchildren by the Grandmothers' organization, and the modes in which the EAAF forensic anthropologists reunite exhumed human bones with their families, are profoundly climactic moments in the sense that nurtures participants all along: that the disappeared are in some sense still alive for them. These moments give particularly embodied grounding, whether they are actual grandchildren or even bones, to the return of the disappeared and dead to the realm of the living. For we have seen that bones too are never seen as just bones by those who loved the dead person.

As Verdery (1999, p. 31) has told us, dead bodies are deeply symbolic. This same principle applies to Argentina's disappeared. In Argentina, the notion of 'disappeared' is salient in terms of its liminal state, and its consequent latent symbolic capital as a crucial element of political transformation. As unwitnessed deaths, shorn of culturally appropriate burial rites, they bear a strong relationship with other humans whose lives were unnaturally cut short in situations such as war, suicide or murder (see Enders

2008; Kwon 2008). The sudden disappearances during the dictatorship era left the living community with a feeling of amputation long after the fact. The disappeared, who had already been integrated into the habitual lives of their families and friends, remained a profound presence in those who were left behind (see Merleau-Ponty 2012, pp. 78-89; Carel 2008, pp. 28-29; French 1994). Because the living and the dead are both part of the human community, disappearances and deaths immediately affect relations with and among the living (Verdery, 1999, p. 108). For the same reason, the reconfiguring of social relationships with Argentina's disappeared serves as a way of reordering the living community.

While the immediate objectives of memory-focused organizations varies considerably, and are sometimes in conflict with one another, each one exemplifies the vitality of an ongoing relationship between the living and the disappeared. However, there will always be different perspectives on Argentina's disappeared because disappearance is an even more acute form of the unresolvable existential quality of death itself. Are they dead, or alive but just somewhere else? Thus, some of the women from the Mothers' groups want recognition of their disappeared children but refuse to commemorate them as dead. Others mothers actively pursue accountability and justice as a means of recognising and commemorating their own children, and all the disappeared of the military dictatorship. For some human rights activists the disappeared never age, they will always remain 'static' as they were at the time of their disappearance. There are living grandchildren who want to find their biological families as a live form of identity, and living children of disappeared activists who want to continue the political aspirations of their parents. Some families want the bones of their disappeared loved ones so they can begin the healing process of moving on from the past. Other relatives prefer to think of their loved ones as 'eternally' disappeared, or even alive somewhere else, therefore they do not pursue formal investigations.

For the human rights organizations at the centre of this thesis, whose family members and associates often count amongst the dictatorship's victims, the disappeared have not 'stopped being'. They exist as a vivid existential 'living presence' and focal point of their thoughts, lives and activities. But the circumstances speak to us all, which is what the human rights groups are trading on. If they reach a wider audience, it is because the ambiguous status of the disappeared evokes fundamental concerns and questions that we, as humans, face about what it means to be — and to stop being — human, about where we have come from and where we go after death (Verdery, 1999, p. 31). In looking at the extreme limit case of brutal disappearance, perhaps we can also come to recognise something universally shared about the mystery that is death and dying for the living.

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## APPENDIX 1: ETHICS APPROVAL

**Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research)**

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18 May 2014

Associate Professor Ram
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NSW 2109

Dear Associate Professor Ram

Re: "'Memory', as a potent and constructive force for Argentina's human rights organizations"

Thank you for your recent correspondence. Your response was reviewed by the Executive of the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) (Human Sciences and Humanities).

This research meets the requirements set out in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007) and your application has been approved.

**Details of this approval are as follows:**

**Reference No:** 5201300785

**Approval Date:** 18 May 2014

This letter constitutes ethical approval only.

The following documentation have been reviewed and approved by the HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities):

| Documents reviewed | Version no. | Date |
|---|---|---|
| Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Application | 2.3 | Jul 2013 |
| Appendix B: Research to be undertaken outside Australia | | |
| Correspondence from Ms Dabinet addressing the HREC's feedback | | 13 May 2014 |
| Participant information and consent form (English and Spanish versions | 2 | May 2014 |
| Interview questions: organisations | | |
| Interview questions: individuals | | |

**Please ensure that all documentation has a version number and date in future correspondence with the Committee.**

**Standard Conditions of Approval:**

1. Continuing compliance with the requirements of the *National Statement,* which is available at the following website:

http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/book/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research

2. Approval is for five (5) years, subject to the submission of annual reports. Please submit your reports on the anniversary of the approval of this protocol.

3. All adverse events must be reported to the HREC within 72 hours.

4. Proposed changes to the protocol must be submitted to the Committee for approval before implementation.

It is the responsibility of the Chief investigator to retain a copy of all documentation related to this project and to forward a copy of this approval letter to all personnel listed on the project.

Please do not hesitate to contact the Ethics Secretariat should you have any questions regarding your ethics application.

The HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities) wishes you every success in your research.

Yours sincerely

**Dr Karolyn White**
Director, Research Ethics & Integrity
Chair, Human Research Ethics Committee (Human Sciences and Humanities)

This HREC is constituted and operates in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) (the National Statement) and the CPMP/ICH Note for Guidance on Good Clinical Practice.