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Speaking the Unspeakable: How Children of Militants During Argentina's "Dirty War" Have  
Used Literature and Film to Process Trauma

by

Samantha Strong

Under the Direction of Fernando Reati, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts  
in the College of Arts and Sciences  
Georgia State University

2021

ABSTRACT

It is estimated that between 15,000 and 30,000 people were disappeared (kidnapped and never seen again), during the military dictatorship that gripped Argentina in the late 1970s. Many of these “desaparecidos,” as they are often called, and other militants who were killed while attempting to fight this regime, were survived by their children or “Hijos”. In this thesis, I examine five works (three novels and two films) produced by Hijos in order to demonstrate how they have used their art to express the complex and often conflicting feelings they experienced as a result of their parents’ abductions and/or deaths. I also utilize several psychological concepts to contextualize these experiences and elucidate how the creation of these works may have served as a way of processing their trauma.

INDEX WORDS: Desaparecidos, Argentina, Hijos, Guerra Sucia, Trauma, Literature

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2021

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Used Literature and Film to Process Trauma

by

Samantha Strong

Committee Chair: Fernando Reati

Committee: Annette Cash

Carmen Hermann

Victoria Rodrigo

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Services

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

May 2021

**DEDICATION**

To my loving and dedicated partner, Andrew, who kept me sane and fed while I wrote this thesis.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>		<b>V</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1</b>	<b>Historical Context</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1.2</b>	<b>Psychological Frameworks</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>ANALYSIS OF WORKS</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>2.1</b>	<i>La casa de los conejos</i>	<b>13</b>
<b>2.2</b>	<i>Infancia clandestina</i>	<b>30</b>
<b>2.3</b>	<i>Pequeños combatientes</i>	<b>38</b>
<b>2.4</b>	<i>Los Rubios</i>	<b>47</b>
<b>2.5</b>	<i>Soy un bravo piloto de la nueva China</i>	<b>52</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>68</b>
	<b>WORKS CITED</b>	<b>71</b>



## 1 INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I examine five works (three novels and two films) of Hijos, children of militants during the so-called “guerra sucia” (Dirty War), more accurately described as state sponsored terror, in Argentina in the 1970s, in order to demonstrate the complexity of feelings they were left with in the absence of their parents (whether a literal absence, having been killed or disappeared by the government, or a figurative one, being so engrossed in the cause that they failed to meet the needs of their children). Using several psychological theories as a basis, I analyze the manner in which they use their art, in the case of these works, novels or film, to share their experiences and, in that way, process their trauma so as not to pass it on to the next generation.

In the first section, I provide the historical context that serves as a basis for the narratives that will be explored, as well as an overview of the psychological frameworks through which I will analyze them. In the second section, I analyze each work by examining not only the content of the works themselves, but the stylistic choices that each author or filmmaker uses to express their experiences, as well as how these narratives and choices demonstrate both feelings of admiration and love for their parents and, at the same time, the resentment and frustration resulting from their absences. While it is important to note that not all children of militant parents during this time had the same experiences, nor do they all have the same feelings towards their parents or their actions, throughout the works analyzed herein as well as in much of the research surrounding this topic, similar themes tend to emerge regarding how children perceived the situation with their parents at the time and how those perceptions have shifted over time as they matured.

## 1.1 Historical Context

On March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1976 a military coup took place that sent Isabel Perón, who had assumed the presidency after the death of her husband, Juan Perón in 1974, into house arrest and later exile. She was supplanted by a junta comprised of General Jorge Rafael Videla, Admiral Emilio Massera, and Brigadier Orlando Ramón Agosti. David Kohut succinctly summarizes the preliminary official actions taken by the junta:

Led by Videla, the junta dissolved Congress, provincial legislature, and municipal councils; appointed a cabinet composed of military officers; replaced all members of the Supreme Court and other judges; suspended all political activity and political parties at the national, provincial and municipal levels; took control of universities and trade unions; and censored the media. (Kohut 33)

The new leadership also continued the “state of siege” that had been implemented by Isabela Perón, and broadened its scope to include not only armed organizations and insurgents, but any kind of “subversion,” against which “the state was justified in using any means necessary to defend itself” (Kohut 34). Such “subversion” could include spreading “ideas that fell outside the scope of ‘Western, Christian civilization’” (Kohut 34), any kind of vocal opposition to the new regime and its ideologies, or simply being associated with those who were known to hold such views.

While this new dictatorship openly stated its intention to fight so-called subversive organizations and ideas, it did so not only through “traditional encounters with armed insurgents”, but also through a “clandestine campaign of terror waged against the civilian population” (Kohut 34). During this time, the military and police forces kidnapped and illegally

detained these supposed subversive individuals in Centros Clandestinos de Detención (clandestine detention centers), where they “were kept in squalor and regularly subjected to humiliation, rape, and torture” (Kohut 27). Most of these victims were never seen again and are assumed to have been murdered and “disappeared,” meaning that their remains were discarded in secret, often in mass graves or “thrown alive into the ocean out of navy aircraft” (Kohut 28). It is estimated that between 15,000 and 30,000 people were disappeared during this period, a practice which led to the term “desaparecidos” becoming recognized globally and entering the lexicon of international human rights organizations.

This practice also served to instill an environment of fear and uncertainty in the population. Families and friends were left without any evidence as to the fate of their loved ones, leaving them not only unable to achieve closure, but also in fear that any inquiries or action against the military might result in their own abduction or further violence towards their already missing loved one. Many of these desaparecidos were survived by their children, who then had to process the loss of one or both parents, often amid a climate still tense with the fear of further violence. Even those children whose parents were revolutionaries but were not disappeared, often lived under the constant threat that their parents might be taken from them at any moment. These conditions, paired with the government’s policy of “official silence” regarding these conflicts and disappearances, has resulted in mental health challenges likely for all involved, but for the purposes of this investigation I will be focusing on the plight of these children, now adults, whom I will refer to often as Hijos, as is common in the discourse surrounding this issue.

While the word “hijos” is Spanish for “children,” within the context of this issue it takes on additional meaning. In the 1995, one year prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coup, many children of disappeared parents joined together to form the organization H.I.J.O.S. which stands

for Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio (in English, Children for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence). This organization, whose work strives to ensure that the perpetrators of these crimes against humanity are brought to justice and to ensure that the sacrifices and memories of their parents are not forgotten, popularized the use of the term Hijos, particularly with the capitalized ‘H’, as meaning “Hijos de desaparecidos/detenidos” or “Children of disappeared/detained parents”.

## **1.2 Psychological Frameworks**

In order to understand the plight of these Hijos of militants and/or desaparecidos, it is important to understand several psychological concepts. First, we must define trauma. In the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: Fifth Edition*, the American Psychiatric Association defines a traumatic stressor as: “Any event (or events) that may cause or threaten death, serious injury, or sexual violence to an individual, a close family member, or a close friend.” (830). Further specified within the diagnostic criteria for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder are symptoms and characteristics that we see prominently represented in these works, such as:

Recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive distressing memories of the traumatic event(s). Recurrent distressing dreams in which the content and/or effect of the dream are related to the traumatic event(s). Dissociative reactions (e.g., flashbacks) in which the individual feels or acts as if the traumatic event(s) were recurring. Persistent, distorted cognitions about the cause or consequences of the traumatic event(s) that lead the individual to blame himself/herself or others. Irritable behavior and angry outbursts (with little or no provocation) typically expressed as verbal or physical aggression towards people or objects. (American Psychiatric Association 271-2)

While there is insufficient evidence to provide or suggest any kind of diagnosis, based on these criteria and the experiences presented within these novels and films, we can reasonably suggest that these Hijos did in fact experience trauma and that some, or at least the fictionalized versions of themselves, present one or more of the symptoms and/or characteristics indicative of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.

Argentine psychotherapists Diana Kordon and Lucila Edelman, who have done extensive research on the psychological effects that this dark period in Argentina's history has had on its population, in *Por-venires de la memoria: Efectos Psicologicos Multigeneracionales de la Represion de la Dictadura: Hijos de Desaparecidos*, focus specifically on the impact it has had on those who were children at the time. At the beginning of their chapter on grief, they explain that any traumatic situation is accompanied by some form of loss and that this loss “puede ser de una persona significativa, de parte del propio cuerpo, de objetos, de habitat, de trabajo, de tiempos, de objetos imaginarios como las ilusiones, de objetos abstractos como los ideales” [can be of a significant person, of a part of their own body, of objects, of time, of work, of imaginary things like illusions, of abstract things like ideals”] (Kordon and Edelman 71, translation mine). They then go on to define grief as “el proceso posterior a una pérdida significativa...[un] proceso cuyo objetivo es metabolizar el sufrimiento psíquico” [“the process after a significant loss...[a] process whose objective is to metabolize psychological suffering”] (Kordon and Edelman 77, translation mine). The purpose of grieving, then, is to process the overwhelming feeling of loss in a way that leaves an individual able to “inscribir como recuerdo al objeto perdido y recuperar interés en el mundo externo” [“inscribe the lost object as a memory and regain interest in the outside world”] (Kordon and Edelman 77, translation mine). However, the lack of information

and the fact that the “discurso oficial desmentía la existencia misma y el destino de los desaparecidos” [“official discourse denied the very existence and fate of the disappeared”], (Kordon and Edelman 77, translation mine), impedes the grieving process by not allowing the loss to gain a “cualidad definitiva” [“definitive quality”] (Kordon and Edelman 77, translation mine) and causing those suffering to question reality, thereby extending the initial grief stage of denial to an indefinite feeling of uncertainty. This “vivencia de incertidumbre: ‘no se sabía’ apoyada en la falta de información, reforzaba el dolor y la angustia, [y] producía un efecto desestructurante en los familiares” [“experience of uncertainty: ‘no one knew’ supported by the lack of information, reinforced the pain and distress, [and] produced a dysfunctional effect in the family”] (Kordon and Edelman 77, translation mine).

Given this environment of ambiguity, even aside from the consequences of specific, impactful, traumatic events, the circumstances in which many of these children grew up could also be considered detrimental to their development. It bears mentioning that not all children of militants or desaparecidos personally witnessed acts of violence, nor did they all end up in situations of neglect as a result of their parents’ abduction or participation in revolutionary activity. However, even in cases where children were quickly taken in by loving family members, there were often difficulties in determining what to tell them about their parents or about the larger situation at hand. Children were frequently not told the truth about their parents, partly because the truth was often unknown, and partly because their guardians (in most cases their grandparents), who were likely also suffering due to the trauma of these events, were unsure to what degree it would be healthy for them to be aware of the distressing reality of their circumstances. In the absence of information or the willingness to share it, many Hijos were told lies about the fates of their loved ones. Citing the work of Claudine Vegh, whose research

centered on descendants of people who died in concentration camps during World War II, Anne Schützenberger, whose work focuses on the practice of transgenerational psychotherapy, explains that, “the secret, the unspoken truth about death is such that it impedes normal mental functions: it is better to know a truth, even if it is difficult, shameful or tragic, rather [than] to hide it, because what we hide, others pick up on or guess (because we are not all professional actors) and this secret, this unspoken truth, becomes a more serious trauma in the long run” (52). As we will see in several of the works analyzed herein, children can be incredibly perceptive, and even when they cannot determine the truth on their own, they can often eventually sense when they are being deceived or when something is not quite right about what they are being told. On this topic, Schützenberger recalls the phrase that sparked her work with transgenerational trauma, spoken to her by French psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto: “In a family, children and house dogs know everything, always, and particularly when it’s left unsaid” (61).

In *The Ancestor Syndrome*, Schützenberger explains that there is a “*transgenerational transmission* of unresolved conflicts, of hatred, revenge, vendettas, of secrets, of what is ‘unspoken,’ as well as of premature deaths and choice of profession” (7, emphasis original), and that if these remain unresolved, unspoken, or not dealt with in some way, they will continue to be passed on to future generations where they can manifest in inexplicable behaviors, repeating patterns of accidents or events within families, and feelings of emotional debt, among others. Through therapy and use of the genosociogram, a process in which a therapist works with a client to draw a diagram of their family tree that includes any major events, births, deaths, illnesses, and professions of family members, Schützenberger claims that one can “discover where you come from and who you are and what you inherited – your identity...” and that “[y]ou can expose and express real or fantasized memories and then, at last free of them...you

find your place in the lineage, and you can broaden your horizons, think of yourself in the future and your own hopes, needs, and life project” (90). With the process of exposing the truths and secrets of one’s family history and exploring difficult memories, “we see traumas, illnesses, somatic manifestations, or psychosomatic manifestations which often disappear when you talk about them, cry scream or work them out” (Schützenberger 92). Diana Kordon and Lucila Edelman, utilize this idea within the context of their work with Hijos and specify that “[l]a ausencia de los progenitores, por desaparición, el duelo difícilmente elaborable de los abuelos por la pérdida de sus hijos, las vivencias desestructurantes y depresivas del entorno familiar, son algunas de las gravísimas situaciones que imprimieron huellas traumatizantes que trascienden las generaciones” [“the absence of progenitors, by disappearance, the difficult to process grief of the grandparents over the loss of their children, the dysfunctional and depressing experiences in the family environment, are some of the incredibly grave situations that have left traumatizing imprints that transcend generations”] (112, translation mine). They go on to further echo Schützenberger’s assertion of the need to “work them out,” because when “un estímulo traumático no puede ser elaborado, la situación traumática queda encapsulada, cercada y enquistada como una piedra en el psiquismo” [“when a traumatic stimulus cannot be worked through, the traumatic situation remains encapsulated, fenced in and embedded, like a stone in the psyche”] (Kordon and Edelman 112, translation mine).

As previously mentioned, the processing of these memories and unspoken truths about one’s past and family not only reduces the likelihood of passing them on to the next generation, but also helps the individual to find their identity and separate themselves from their parents so that they can forge their own path. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the search for identity is a



common theme in the works of Hijos who write about their experiences. Kordon and Edelman explain that:

El trabajo de investigación, de búsqueda, de construcción del padre o madre desaparecidos, constituye una necesidad identificatoria. Es un trabajo intersubjetivo de construcción de memoria, que ocupa centralmente el interés del sujeto en ese periodo de la vida. Este proceso es bifronte: por un lado, construcción necesaria para el armado del yo y por el otro, material atractivo para el despliegue de los aspectos fusionales jugados en lo intrapsíquico y en lo vincular. [The work of investigating, of searching, of constructing the disappeared father or mother, constitutes a necessity in the process of identity formation. It is a labor of intersubjective memory construction that occupies the central interest of the subject during this period of their life. This process consists of two parts: on one hand, the construction necessary for the assembly of the self, and on the other, engaging material for the unpacking of fusional aspects at play in the intra-psychic and the connective.”] (62, translation mine)

Being that the “núcleo más primario de la identidad se conforma en la familia o grupo primario que ubica a cada uno en una cadena genealógica” [“primary nucleus of identity is defined by the family or the primary group that locates one in a genealogical chain”] (Kordon and Edelman 48, translation mine), the interruption of that genealogical chain, and the lack of complete information, has resulted in difficulties for many Hijos with regard to feeling as though they have their own actualized identity rather than just being an “hijo de desaparecidos o militantes”. Some have expressed feeling freed from their identity as “hijo de” (son or daughter of) once they became parents themselves.

The works of psychologist Abraham Maslow are also relevant to the issue of finding one's identity. According to what is often referred to as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, as first presented in his work *A Theory of Human Motivation*, individuals must have four levels of necessities fulfilled in order to achieve the actualization of their identity. These levels are: first, physiological needs such as food, clothing, and shelter; second, security needs, both physical and emotional; third, needs of affiliation, such as belonging and love; and fourth, those of recognition, including self-esteem and feelings of achievement and success. The first and second levels are those of survival, without which one would not be able to achieve the subsequent ones, which are those of personal growth (Crandall online). If we accept the experiences in the works analyzed herein as more or less representative of the experiences lived by Hijos during this time period, we can see the levels in which some of these children did not have their needs fulfilled, most notably, the level concerning physical and emotional safety.

If safety needs, as indicated by Crandall, "involve protection, living without fear, and having a sense of boundaries and limits" (online), then it is clear that these needs are not fulfilled in situations such as many of those presented in these works, in which, as children, some of these authors lived under constant fear of being discovered by the police. In addition to the threat of physical violence and of losing their loved ones, the protagonists of these stories, due to the need for secrecy, the imposed silence within the larger community at the time because of the inherent danger, or the inability, unwillingness and/or discomfort of their caregivers in tackling these difficult and upsetting subject matters, often lacked the emotional support that would allow them to share their feelings or to process their grief. A grief that can stem, not only from the loss of loved ones as was the case for many of these children, but also from the loss of what would be considered a "normal" life and the ability to achieve actualization and define their own identity.

This lack of basic needs being met, “place[s] an individual at higher risk for depression or increase[s] the rate of growth of depressive symptoms,” and furthermore, “it may be said that depression hinders the growth of self-actualization, which includes self-regard and self-acceptance” (Crandall online). The development of these mental health problems and the difficulty in achieving self-actualization could possibly turn into feelings of anger and resentment, in that they can be seen as resulting from choices, made by the parents, over which these children had no control. While their opinions may change as they grow older and come to understand the full nature of the socio-political environment at the time, from the perspective of these children in the moment, their parents chose to be revolutionaries rather than have a safe and “normal” life in which they could have better cared for their family and provided them with the stability needed for their development. As children, they exist in a passive position in which they cannot make the decisions, but they can, and do, still suffer the consequences of decisions made on their behalf.

While there is no official standard of a “normal” life or childhood, I will often use this term in order to demonstrate the contrast between what an individual is experiencing versus what their expectations might be for their circumstances. It has been suggested that we all carry in our minds some basic ideas of what the roles and responsibilities are within families. Perhaps this stems from what Carl Jung referred to as the “collective unconscious,” an “unconscious transmitted from generation to generation in society [...] that accumulates human experience,” and is “inborn and therefore exists outside of any personal experience” (Schützenberger 6). Additionally, as most children are perceptive of their surroundings and constantly learning from their experiences, they develop an idea of “what should be” or “what is ‘normal’” and can tell if their experience differs drastically from the established standard or this “inborn” understanding

of the structure and function of familial units. That being said, this inborn or socially inherited concept of normalcy is not shared by everyone, and for militant parents who were trying to provide as best they could for their children, their circumstances may have seemed “normal” within the context of their experiences. For the purposes of this thesis, however, I intend it to highlight the difference between such experiences as a child going to school, feeling carefree, playing games, and talking and sharing secrets with friends, versus those of a child going to school under a false identity, where they must not slip up and reveal their true name or any information about their family. This is but one of many examples seen in these works.

## 2 ANALYSIS OF WORKS

### 2.1 *La casa de los conejos*

In the autobiographical novel *La casa de los conejos* (2007), Laura Alcoba presents her experiences from the perspective of the seven-year-old girl who lived them, but also framed within the awareness of her adult self, beginning the novel with an explanation of her purpose in writing the novel and closing it with a narration of her return to Argentina to investigate the events that took place after she left. The majority of the story, however, reveals the point of view of a young girl whose impressive awareness of the circumstances is intertwined with the inherent naiveté one would expect from a child her age. This combination creates a dramatic irony which highlights the tragedy of her situation as she must follow her mother into a life in hiding when they move into a house disguised as a rabbit breeding operation, that will actually be home to a printing press that produces materials for the cause. This “casa de los conejos” or “house of rabbits” is far from “la casa en que hubiera querida vivir, una casa con tejas rojas, ...y un jardín, una hamaca y un perro” [“the house in which she would have liked to live, a house with a red-tiled roof,...a garden, a hammock, and a dog”] (Alcoba ch. 1, translation mine) that she had dreamed of and whose stereotypical image, like those often drawn by children with crayons, serves as superficial representation of the kind of life she desires which primarily consists of her parents being present and spending time together as a family. Living with them in the titular house are two other militants, Daniel and Diana (Cacho and Dídí, for short) a young couple with a baby on the way, whose appearance and status function to further disguise the home as one that could not possibly be the coverup for any revolutionary operations.

Throughout this period of her life, young Laura must endure the typical challenges of childhood, with the added complications of having to conceal her identity, being unable to have

the freedom of a non-clandestine life, and bearing the weighty knowledge that any small mistake on her part might put the lives of herself and her loved ones at further risk. Eventually, her mother chooses to flee the country, with Laura following separately at a later time. Shortly thereafter, however, the house is attacked and the couple who lived there with them killed, leaving their newborn daughter likely appropriated, a common practice in which the military forces that committed these attacks would take the babies they found and give them to military families.

Alcoba begins the first chapter of *La casa de los conejos* with the declaration: “Todo comenzó cuando mi madre me dijo: ‘Ahora, ¿ves?, nosotros también tendremos una casa con tejas rojas y un jardín. Como querías.’” [“It all started when my mother said to me: ‘Now, see? We, too, will have a house with red tiles and a garden. Like you wanted.’”] (ch. 1, translation mine). This leaves the reader wondering what it was that had started. The events of the novel, yes, but perhaps what had also begun was her understanding that her mother “no ha comprendido bien” [“had not understood well”] (Alcoba ch 1, translation mine). Her desires are superficially represented by “a house with red tiles” while, as she soon explains, “lo que...quería era la vida que se lleva ahí dentro,” [“what...she wanted was the life that took place inside”] things like “[p]adres que vuelven del trabajo a cenar, al caer la tarde. Padres que preparan tortas los domingos siguiendo esas recetas que uno encuentra en gruesos libros de cocina, con láminas relucientes, llenas de fotos. Una madre elegante con uñas largas y esmaltadas y zapatos de taco alto” [“parents that come home from work to eat dinner at the end of the day. Parents that make cakes on Sundays, following those recipes you find in heavy cookbooks with glossy pages full of photos. An elegant mother with long, painted nails and high-heeled shoes.”] (Alcoba ch. 1, translations mine). In other words, what she truly desires is a normal, stable life, and she wonders

“cómo hemos podido entendernos tan mal; o si en cambio ella se obliga a creer que mi único sueño, el mío, está hecho de jardín y color rojo” [“how could we have understood each other so poorly; or if, instead, she had forced herself to believe that my only dream, mine, was made up of gardens and the color red.”] (Alcoba ch 1, translation mine). Furthermore, the use of “see?...Like you wanted.”, carries perhaps the implication of disinterest or a dismissive tone on the part of the mother, and Laura’s reaction in saying “how could we have understood each other so poorly” suggests the question: *How is it possible that my mother cannot see what it is that I really want and need?*

Beginning the story in this way introduces, early on, the tone of complaint and frustration about the blindness, or worse, indifference, of the adults in Laura’s life to her needs and wishes. Later, we see that this separation between mother and child grows further after the mother changes her appearance and becomes single-mindedly committed to her work with the printing press, which leaves Laura and therefore the reader with a feeling that Andrea Cobas Carral synthesizes well in the question “[¿]qué queda de su madre en esa mujer apenas reconocible y cada día más ausente que se esconde en el embute [el espacio oculto donde guardaban la imprenta] [?]” [“what remains of her mother in that barely recognizable woman, who becomes more absent each day that she hides herself in the *embute* [the hidden area where they keep the printing press][?]”] (online, translation mine).

In several scenes, Alcoba demonstrates the disparity between her own childhood experience and that of a “normal” child through the description of dolls and the juxtaposition of this typical interest with the context in which they are part of her experience. The first is when she visits with her mother for the first time after having lived with her grandparents for a time. Her mother, who she hardly recognizes when she approaches their meeting place in the park

because she has dyed her hair to avoid detection by the authorities, takes her to buy a doll from the toy store. She precedes the scene itself by explaining “[c]omo cada vez que me reencuentro con mi madre después de una larga ausencia, tengo derecho a una muñeca” [“how each time I am reunited with my mother after a long absence, I have the right to a doll”] (Alcoba ch. 3, translation mine). This line reveals to the reader that the absence of her mother is a common and recurring theme and the use of “I have the right” gives a dry and transactional feeling to her receipt of these dolls, as if she is owed something for having endured without her parents. The idea that a doll or any material possession could make up for lost time and foregone experiences between mother and child, mirrors the lack of understanding expressed at the start of the novel in that, while she certainly enjoys the dolls, what she would like more is for her parents to be present. During this period of time, before she moves with her mother to *la casa de los conejos*, Laura’s physiological and safety needs are being met, but despite the physical presence of adults in her life, her social and emotional needs are left largely unattended.

Young Laura experiences violence and trauma not through direct attacks against her loved ones by their enemies, but rather through the harsh reactions she receives from the adults she lives with whenever she does something that might put them in danger. However, these actions that invite ire from the adults in her life tend to be innocent mistakes or simply the actions of a child playing without any intention to cause problems. Unfortunately, due to the clandestine nature of their lives and the resulting tension, these small, seemingly ordinary childhood behaviors evoke extreme responses. We see one such example in a scene where Laura and her mother are in the back seat of a car on their way to a meeting. As was common practice among militants, her mother has her eyes closed to prevent her from seeing their route so that if she is caught and interrogated, she won’t have any information to give. Laura does not have her



eyes closed however, and as they pass by the toy store where she chose the aforementioned doll, and as would be an expected reaction of a seven year old girl, she is excited to see the dolls in the window and wants to show them to her mother. Her enthusiasm about the dolls, another representation of a typical childhood, is met not with interest from her mother, but rather with a “muy disgustado” [“very displeased”] shout from the driver: “¿Pero te podés callar? ¡Callate de una vez, che!” [“Can you shut up? Shut up already!”] (Alcoba ch. 5, translation mine). When Laura points out the toy store, she reveals their location, and thus defeats the purpose of her mother having her eyes closed, and draws the ire of the driver. Our young narrator then specifies though, that she is not only “herida por [los] gritos [del hombre que maneja]” [“hurt by [the driver’s] shouts”], but also by “el silencio persistente de [su] madre” [“the persistent silence of her mother”] (Alcoba ch. 5, translation mine). When she realizes, in this same sentence, that her mother’s eyes are closed and that she cannot see how her child has been hurt, Laura wonders, “Que mi madre cierre los ojos, ¿me protegé, también?” [“If my mother closes her eyes, does that protect me too?”] (Alcoba ch. 5, translation mine). The fact that Laura was not asked to close or cover her eyes indicates that no one has considered that she is also capable of retaining this information, and so her question is a way of asking “what about me?”, but in its immediate proximity to her being yelled at, it perhaps also carries the implication of, *The fact that my mother can’t see my pain, doesn’t protect me from feeling it. And who will protect me from this emotional harm, if not her?* Meanwhile, she is being punished for breaking rules that no one bothered to explain to her.

Another notable example of this harsh treatment, and its juxtaposition with toys and play, is a scene in which she pretends to take a picture of “el Ingeniero.” Before discussing that scene, however, it is important to establish Laura’s relationship to this man. “El Ingeniero” as he is

always referred to, is the engineer and fellow member of the guerilla group who has built the *embute*, or hiding mechanism, which is the wall that slides into place to hide the room with the printing press. Laura has formed a connection with this engineer, who has been kind to her, talks to her about his work, and entertains her desire to hang around asking him questions. Within the context of her life, such kindness and attention from a man is uncommon and she develops a crush on him, explaining with apparent affection how she “[n]unca había reparado en lo hermoso que es” [“had never realized how handsome he is”] (Alcoba ch. 7, translation mine), and describing his appearance with special attention, and the poetic detail of a young girl in love, to his eyes:

En cuanto a sus ojos, no sabría definir exactamente el color. ¿Gris-azul, gris-verde? Porque ese color de sus ojos cambia según el tiempo, según la luz y también según el brillo que su ánimo les presta: cuando está, como ahora, vuelto sobre sí, sus iris se recubren de una suerte de velo opaco con reflejos negros. [As for his eyes, I didn't quite know how to describe the exact color. Gray-blue? Gray-green? Because the color of his eyes changed with the weather, and with the light, and also with whatever shine his mood gave them: when he is, as now, turned introspective, his irises seem covered by some kind of opaque veil with black reflections.] (Alcoba ch. 7, translation mine)

Here, Alcoba has established these feelings seemingly just to, shortly after, demonstrate how foolish they are or must seem to an adult. After the engineer has finished his work, Laura wants him to stay, so she suggests that he build another *embute*, a request that is met with a dismissive laugh and an explanation that he has other things to do elsewhere. While the engineer's response

isn't cruel in itself, and there was no way for him to know her true feelings, to her, it is cause for great shame and she feels “verdaderamente ridícula por haberle podido eso” [“truly ridiculous for having asked that of him”], but pretends to not care while she retreats to her room “falsamente indiferente” [“falsely indifferent”] but “profundamente herida” [“profoundly hurt”] (Alcoba ch. 7, translations mine). In this scene, and throughout the length of the novel, Alcoba shares her experiences in such a way that captures some of the most challenging, painful, and relatable experiences of childhood in general, such as the embarrassment of rejection, and then demonstrates how the stakes of their clandestine lifestyle further complicate and worsen what, to a child, can already feel like catastrophic events.

Laura, “[t]urbada por la escena con el Ingeniero” [“distracted by the scene with the Engineer”], and lacking anyone to talk to about her feelings, “[finge] poner orden mientras esper[a] olvidar hasta qué punto [ha] hecho el ridículo con [sus] proposiciones” [“feigns tidying up while hoping to forget to what extent she had made fool of herself with her propositions”] and engages in negative self-talk, saying: “He querido jugar a la adulta, a la militante, a la ama de casa, pero sé bien que soy pequeña, muy pequeña, increíblemente pequeña incluso, y que si el Ingeniero parece interesarse en nuestras conversaciones, es sólo porque siempre estoy allí, rondándolo, y sobre todo, para no ser descortés conmigo” [“I had wanted to play adult, to play militant, to play housewife, but I know very well that I'm little, very little, incredibly little even, and that if the Engineer seemed interested in our conversations, it's only because I'm always there, hanging around him, and above all he didn't want to be rude to me.”] (Alcoba ch. 7, translation mine). While we know that the story is being written by the adult Alcoba who is possibly here showing criticism of her younger self, the fact that these surprisingly self-aware thoughts are presented as the thoughts of young Laura further emphasizes her feelings of shame

and draws a contrast between her desire to “play” while also wanting to be perceived as a smart and mature “adult”. It also highlights her inability to merge these normal childhood instincts with a militant life. Despite this, she continues to try, and the following scene finds her rediscovering an old camera that had been gifted to her. She also finds “dos ranas de tela” [“two cloth frogs”] (Alcoba ch. 7, translation mine) that were created for her by her grandmother. She attempts to look at them through the camera, but she can hardly see them through “esta máquina de adultos” [“this machine for adults”] (Alcoba ch. 7, translation mine) in the dark and seemingly oppressive room that she shares with her mother, perhaps indicating that, from the adult perspective she wishes to inhabit, they are of little interest and therefore the life in which she played with toys, especially toys that were lovingly crafted for her, with her happiness in mind, is disappearing and nearly out of reach.

However, even playing with this “machine for adults” invites punishment. She turns away from her frogs and aims the camera out the window, noting that with the camera, “uno ve mucho mejor lo que se encuentra afuera” [“one can see much better what’s found outside”] (Alcoba ch.7, translation mine). While this could symbolize that an adult perspective can better understand what is going on out in the world, we are quickly reminded that Laura is not an adult, and her attempts to feign maturity by playing with a camera, instead of toys, is not enough to save her from the harsh repercussions often incurred by her innocent actions. She feels happy and protected behind the camera and is able to watch el Ingeniero without staring at him “como una idiota” [“like an idiot”] (Alcoba ch. 7, translation mine), and we nearly forget that she was just feeling terribly ashamed. With her new-found confidence and cheer, she waits until el Ingeniero walks by and, with “la caja negra pegada contra [su] cara, [y] una enorme sonrisa” [“the black box stuck against her face, [and] an enormous smile”] (Alcoba ch. 7, translation

mine), pretends to take a picture of him, assuming that he will be as amused as she is. Instead, he responds with rage, storming into her room, tearing the camera from her hands, and shouting: “¡Pero te volviste completamente loca! ¿Qué estás haciendo, me quieres decir?” [“Have you gone completely mad? Do you want to tell me what you’re doing?”] (Alcoba ch. 7, translation mine). Even after he recognizes that the camera had no film, he continues scolding her: “¿Cuál es la gracia, eh? ¡No tiene nada de gracioso! ¡Y sabés bien que nosotros no podemos sacar fotos! ¿Qué te creés que es esto? ¿Una colonia de vacaciones?” [“What’s so funny, huh?! There’s nothing funny about this! And you know full well that we can’t take photos! What do you think this is? Summer camp?!”] (Alcoba ch. 7, translation mine). Naturally, she begins to cry, and despite wanting to hide her tears from this man who she had admired, “[c]uanto más intent[a] reprimir [sus] lágrimas, más intensamente se sacude [su] cuerpo” [“the more she tries to hold back her tears, the more intensely her body shakes”] (Alcoba ch.7, translation mine). While he eventually seems to have a moment of empathy for her and adjusts his tone, she perceives it still to be “una voz demasiado brutal y artificialmente enternecida como para que pueda calmar[la]” [“a voice too brutal and artificially softened so that he could calm [her]”] (Alcoba ch. 7, translation mine). Throughout this chapter, Alcoba demonstrates, within the events of one day, young Laura’s challenging emotional journey from the shame of being rejected by a childhood crush, to the self-satisfaction of seemingly finding a way to bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood, through playing with the camera, only to have that joy and contentment both literally and figuratively ripped from her grasp by the very object of her affection, leaving her shaking with sobs, and his feeble attempt to comfort her with “palmadas timoratas” [“cautious pats [on the knee]”] only serving to “corona[r] [su] humillación” [“crown her humiliation”] (Alcoba ch. 7, translation mine).

Laura is unable to express and work through these troubling experiences, which Rocio Fit aptly synthesizes in saying: “Ante descuidos en apariencia inofensivos, como simular que saca fotos con una cámara sin rollo, consigue la violencia y la incomprensión de los mayores y con ellos, la sensación de vergüenza, humillación y culpa de ser chica en una guerra de grandes” [“In the face of seemingly inoffensive mistakes, like pretending to take pictures with a filmless camera, she is met with violence and incomprehension from adults, and with them, the sensation of shame, humiliation, and guilt of being a little girl in a grown up war”] (Fit 5, translation mine). This consistent “incomprehension from adults” would likely deter her from sharing her feelings with the adults in her life, even if they were to make themselves available, but even with other children of militants, she is unable to connect and form the sense of belonging that is so vital to the development of identity. This is demonstrated in a scene in which Laura is playing with the children of another militant couple. She notes that she and these boys “jamás habla[n] de lo que está pasando, ni de la clandestinidad” [“never talk about what’s going on, nor of living in secrecy”] (Alcoba ch. 5, translation mine), and she wonders if the situation has been explained to them as it has been to her. In this same paragraph, Alcoba, in the midst of expressing the children’s silence around the subject, includes, through her word choice, commentary that is revealing of the frustration she feels at her circumstances and the lack of control that she wields in determining them: “ni de la guerra en que *nos obligaron a entrar*, aun cuando la ciudad esté llena de gente que no participa de ella...” [“nor of the war *that they forced us to be a part of*, even though the city is full of people who don’t participate in it”] (ch. 5, emphasis and translation mine). These children did not choose to be part of the war, and there are plenty of people in the city who aren’t involved and/or behave as if it isn’t happening, and yet, they find themselves in situations in which they must maintain secrecy, and even among others in their

same situation, they don't know what the others know and they do not share their feelings. After that paragraph, Alcoba leaves a space, and then, standing independently before another paragraph begins, is the sentence: "No hablamos del miedo, tampoco." ["We don't talk about fear, either."] (ch. 5, translation mine). This formatting choice causes the reader to pause and contemplate this line, which appears amid a scene that, if someone were present in the space, would seem an innocuous image of children playing together. The line evokes the power of things left unsaid while also revealing that, despite her tough exterior and apparent confidence that her awareness and intelligence will protect her, our narrator does in fact experience fear and perhaps is curious if the others feel it as well, and yearns to connect over shared experiences and feel a sense of belonging and comfort.

At the same time, however, she expresses relief that they don't ask her any questions about herself, likely because it would be difficult to discuss, and instead they simply play together. Their game consists of maneuvering toy cars around and imitating traffic noises, but the younger brother is using the underside of the table as his roadway "como si el conductor pequeñísimo que hay dentro del juguete hubiera conseguido transgredir las leyes de la gravedad" ["as if the tiny conductor inside the toy would have been able to violate the laws of gravity"] (Alcoba ch. 5, translation mine). It is notable that the boy is playing in such a way, as if this transgression of the laws of gravity is his way of breaking from the tense and dangerous reality in which he exists, and his position below the table, a way of hiding him from potential dangers. Laura, on the other hand, does not "entiend[a] muy bien el interés de este juego" ["understand well the interest in this game"], perhaps because she has lost her sense of imagination and innocence in her desire to appear mature, and yet she "trat[a] de demostrar buena voluntad, y tanta aplicación como pued[e]" ["tries to demonstrate good will, and as much effort as she can"]

(Alcoba ch. 5, translation mine). It is also possible that her imagination has not been lost, but that she is feigning disinterest to, again, make herself seem more mature, when really, she wants to play pretend just as much as they do.

We see another attempt at connection in Laura's interaction with the woman who lives next door. This woman is described as "una muchacha corpulenta y rubia de largo pelo lacio. Ella es esbelta, va casi siempre ceñida en pantalones que le resaltan las formas, e infaliblemente encaramada a unos tacones altísimos" ["a curvaceous, blond girl with long, straight hair. She is slim, and almost always goes around in skin-tight pants that emphasize her features, and unfailingly perched on incredibly high heels."] (Alcoba ch. 8, translation mine). She is representative of the feminine ideal, "el sueño en estado puro" ["the dream in pure form"] (Alcoba ch. 8, translation mine), admired by all the men in the neighborhood who gather on the corner to watch her pass, and with all of the material trappings that Laura cannot enjoy due to her clandestine life, and all of the characteristics that she wishes her mother had. Therefore, it is certainly no coincidence that Alcoba begins this chapter with "Mi madre debe tratar de no salir de casa: su foto ha aparecido publicada en los diarios" ["My mother must try not to leave the house: her picture has appeared published in the newspapers"] (ch. 8, translation mine), followed by the description of her photo in which she has "una cabellera de un rojo furioso, muy distinta del pelo castaño discreto de los tiempos en que tenía, verdaderamente, la cabeza de [su] madre..." ["a head of furious red hair, very distinct from the discrete brown of the time when she, truly, had the head of [her] mother"] (ch. 8, translation mine). This description, and the fact that her mother's picture has been published in the paper, which would seem to be a significant occurrence, occupies, however, only a brief paragraph at the start of the chapter before Laura's



focus shifts to the detailed and lengthy description of the neighbor woman and their interaction, in which she glimpses the possibilities of another lifestyle.

The neighbor invites Laura into her home, gives her milk and cookies, and shows her “un armario viejo destinado exclusivamente a innumerables pares de zapatos” [“an old wardrobe destined exclusively for innumerable pairs of shoes”] (Alcoba ch. 8, translation mine). A lengthy paragraph follows in which the shoes are described in detail by our awestruck narrator, who has never seen such beautiful and impressive things and “[duda] de ser digna, algún día, de calzar semejante maravilla, pero [se] sient[e] inmediatamente orgullosa de haber tenido el privilegio de haberlo visto de cerca” [“doubts she will, one day, be deserving of wearing such beauty, but immediately feels proud to have had the privilege of having seen them up close”] (Alcoba ch. 8, translation mine). She does not feel herself worthy of such fine things, and yet the neighbor asks for her input in choosing a pair of shoes to go with one of her dresses. In this interaction, the neighbor not only shows Laura another possible way that people can live, but also shows interest in her opinions, giving her thoughts and feelings attention and a sense of importance that they had not often been given before.

Unfortunately, even this pleasant new experience is met with anger from her mother, who furiously questions her about the interaction, despite Laura not understanding what she’s done wrong. It comes to light that the neighbor had asked what her last name was, and Laura, paralyzed by fear, had responded that she didn’t have one. It is notable that she thinks she must have “entrado en pánico, porque [ella sabe] muy bien que sobre [su] madre pesa un pedido de captura, y que [están] esperando que [les] den un apellido nuevo y documentos falsos” [“entered into a panic, because [she knows] very well that over [her] mother weighed a warrant for her capture, and that [they] are waiting to be given a new last name and false documents”] (Alcoba

ch. 8, translation mine). What would, for a “normal” child, be a simple and straightforward question, sent her into such a state of fear that she could hardly remember the conversation, and later, upon remembering, recalls that she “[sintió] como si hubiera caído en una trampa, en esa casa con esa magnífica criatura rubia de los mil zapatos divinos...” [“felt as if she had fallen into a trap, in that house with that magnificent, blond creature of the thousand divine shoes...”]

(Alcoba ch. 8, translation mine). While she is being confronted about the situation by her mother and Diana, Alcoba brings us into the mindset of her younger self by structuring her thoughts in long paragraphs, composed by stringing together short phrases separated by a great deal of various punctuation marks, that evoke both a lengthy and rambling attempt to justify, understand, and apologize for her actions, and, at the same time, the jumpy and panicked thoughts of a child who is experiencing extreme fear. The content of these long stretches of introspection show Laura spiraling into catastrophic thought as she imagines all of the terrible things that could have happened due to her “estupidez” [“stupidity”] (Alcoba ch. 8, translation mine), and scolding herself for her behavior, punctuated by apologies to her mother and Diana, although none of it spoken aloud.

This returns us to the issue of identity. As Mariela Peller suggests, “[l]a cuestión del nombre de la niña es central en la novela de Alcoba” [“the question of the girl’s name is central in Alcoba’s novel”], and during her reaction to being confronted about what she told the neighbor, in a “momento de angustia pierde la certeza sobre su identidad y se pregunta: ‘¿Cuál es, al fin y al cabo, mi nombre?’”. Pregunta que instala la vacilación sobre la identidad y la conciencia del peligro de pronunciar su nombre” [“moment of distress she loses certainty about her identity and asks herself: ‘What is my name, after all?’”. A question that sets up the hesitation about her identity and her awareness of the danger of uttering her name.”] (17, translation mine).

She knows her name and her identity, but she is unable to share it with others and must pretend to be someone else.

In another unfortunate encounter with el Ingeniero, she has left her jacket draped over a chair after returning from school and the engineer sees that there is a name written inside the collar and proceeds to scream at her for her carelessness: “¡Pero puta madre, esta pendeja nos va a hacer cagar a todos! Los compañeros se juegan haciendo documentos falsos y la señorita va a la escuela con un saco en el que cualquiera puede leer escrito con marcador negro el nombre de su tío. ¡El nombre verdadero de su tío...!” [“Fucking great, this idiot kid is going to fuck everything up for us. Our friends are putting their lives on the line making false documents and the little miss here goes to school with a jacket where anyone can read the name of her uncle written in black marker. The real name of her uncle...!”] (Alcoba ch. 14, translation mine). Even her uncle’s name is too much of a risk for people to see, and so she must continue to distance herself from any outward expression of who she and her family are. We see here, too, further harsh treatment in response to a mistake that she wasn’t even aware of, and even though Diana tries to defend her, el Ingeniero continues to angrily interrogate her on how she would respond if questioned about her identity. When she is unable to provide a response, they decide that she will not return to school. While her experiences at school were consistently unpleasant, we see that when “[e]sa misma noche se toma la decisión” [“that same night the decision was made”] (Alcoba ch. 14), she is not given a choice, and she is yet again distanced from possibilities for connection and belonging.

Laura expresses early on, as part of her description of her ideal life, her desire to have a pet. A symbol of normalcy and the “complete” image of a family home, a pet would also provide her with consistent companionship, and something to care for that would always be excited to

see her. However, we see that, after she is gifted a kitten, “a veces pierd[e] la paciencia” [“she sometimes loses patience”] and “lo atrap[a] por la cola y lo lanz[a] con todas [sus] fuerzas contra el muro del patio” [“catches it by the tail and throws it, with all her strength, against the wall of the patio”] (Alcoba ch. 9, translations mine). This brutality against the kitten is shocking, but if we recall that Laura is consistently scolded for innocent behaviors, for wanting attention or connection, for simply playing, we can see how she might become bitter and think: *Why is the kitten allowed to be playful and innocent and I’m not?* And thus, she recreates the trauma of the reactions she has received from adults on the kitten. Mariela Peller conjures the ideas of Freud in explaining that “el niño no solo repite activamente lo que debía sufrir cotidianamente de forma pasiva sino que lo realiza una y otra vez, como empujado por revivir esa penosa experiencia” [“the child not only actively repeats what he has had to passively suffer on a daily basis, but recreates it over and over again, as if compelled to relive this painful experience”], and that “[m]ediante la repetición de la vivencia desagradable en el juego” [“through the repetition of the unpleasant experience in play”], in this case her manner of “playing” with the kitten, “el niño realiza un pasaje de un estado pasivo a uno activo” [“the child creates a path from a passive state to an active one”] (14, translation mine). Thus, it is possible that these acts of cruelty serve to provide her with a sense of agency and control that she does not have in any other part of her life. And perhaps the ability of the kitten, despite the abuse it suffers, to bounce back and “ponerse en pie, siempre con la misma facilidad” [“get back on its feet, always with the same ease”] (Alcoba ch. 9, translation mine) is representative of the resilience of children despite suffering the terrible conditions imposed upon them by forces outside of their control. Alcoba finishes the section of the chapter about the kitten with: “Sólo una cosa es segura. No es tan fácil morir.” [“Only one thing is certain. It is not so easy to die.”] (ch. 9, translation mine). This, once

more, is an unsettling statement from a child, and we see again later in this chapter how her attitude towards animals has shifted.

While generally considered cute pets, the titular *conejos* (rabbits) are described here only in the context of their function as a cover for the *embute*, and later, in this same chapter, as one struggles to escape while Laura assists Diana in killing it so that they can cook it for dinner. In this scene, while they do find it difficult to kill, neither she nor Diana seem upset by the rabbit's struggle to survive. While they talk about techniques to accomplish their task in casual and unemotive language, Laura does betray a moment of hesitance when she allows the rabbit to escape just after Diana says "lo matamos juntas" ["we'll kill it together"] (Alcoba ch. 9, translation mine), but she regains her concentration and they are able to pin down the frightened creature and kill it. Later, when she encounters Tula, the dog her parents had given her several years prior, Laura is surprised that the dog is so happy to see her, saying, "Rarísimo, sí, pero me había reconocido. Como si yo fuera la misma de siempre" ["Very strange, yes, but she had recognized me. As if I were the same as always."] (Alcoba ch. 11, translation mine). Alcoba uses this sentence to end that section, with the following space before the next section again allowing for a pause to consider its gravity. Laura is aware of how drastically she has changed, and how far she must seem from the child she was when she first met Tula: a child who once longed for an animal to care for and keep her company, who was now capable of killing a rabbit, and of grabbing a kitten by the tail and throwing it against the wall.

In her untitled introduction to the novel, Alcoba confesses that "si al fin hago este esfuerzo de memoria para hablar de la Argentina de los Montoneros, de la dictadura y del terror, desde la altura de la niña que fui, no es tanto por recordar como por ver si consigo, al cabo, de una vez, olvidar un poco" ["if at last I make this effort of memory to talk about the Argentina of

the Montoneros, of the dictatorship and of the terror, from the perspective of the girl that I was, it is not so much to remember, as it is to see if I'm able, in the end, for once, to forget a little.”] (Alcoba pre-chapter 1, translation mine). Thus, she expresses her desire to work through these memories in order to finally forget and move past these experiences. This form of forgetting is not the same as the “olvido” that H.I.J.O.S. works against, but instead, as described by Kordon and Edelman, this forgetting, “puede ser comprendido así como un fenómeno necesario, como una pérdida de eficacia de lo traumático cuando es tramitado sin obligatoriedad o violencia impositiva en esta relación entre el recordar y no recordar” [“can be understood as a necessary phenomenon, as if the traumatic loses its effectiveness when it is processed without obligation or imposed violence, in this relationship between remembering and not remembering”] (41, translation mine). Through the telling of her story, she has, in a sense, neutralized the harmful effect of her troubling memories, while at the same time cataloguing them so that they can serve as a connection point for other Hijos as well as a reminder and legacy for future generations, without directly passing the trauma on to future generations.

## 2.2 *Infancia clandestina*

In *Infancia clandestina* (2001), Benjamín Ávila the writer and director of the film, presents a fictionalized version of his own experience as the son of militant parents. After the family suffers an attack by paramilitary thugs that leaves the father wounded, and the son, our protagonist, Juan, laying frightened on the sidewalk in a pool of his own urine, they leave the country and move to Cuba to receive guerrilla training and re-group to plan their return. When we next encounter Juan, he is now going by the false name Ernesto and is on his way back to Argentina, where his parents have planned their next activities in their fight against the military

junta as part of the *primera contraofensiva montonera* [first Montonero counteroffensive]. This counteroffensive action by the guerrilla group took place in 1979, and consisted of roughly 100 fighters returning to the country under the mistaken assumption that the military regime was experiencing a moment of weakness that would allow these revolutionaries to finally gain the upper-hand. Operating under the guise of a small, family-run, chocolate-covered peanut business, and individually under false identities, the adults distribute materials promoting the messages of the Montoneros and are constantly under threat of being discovered. Meanwhile, Juan/Ernesto, at age 12, attempts to live as a normal boy his age, making friends, having a crush on a girl, Maria, going on class trips, while also keeping his true identity a secret and attempting to not draw attention to his family's activities or affiliations. Just when he has made a connection and found a sense of belonging in his relationship with Maria, he returns home to find that his uncle Beto, with whom he had a close relationship, was killed in an encounter with the police. His family must then relocate in order to stay out of harm's way and he is torn from his new love. When they eventually return, he is not allowed to go back to school for fear of endangering the family, and one day, while he is home caring for his baby sister, he sees on the news that his father has been killed. Shortly afterwards, their home is discovered, his mother killed as well, and he and his baby sister are taken. Juan/Ernesto is interrogated and later left with his grandmother, while his sister is presumably appropriated by a military family.

The movie begins with a scene that juxtaposes the urgency that young Juan feels when he needs to go to the restroom, a very basic physiological need, with the danger that the family finds themselves in due to the political choices of the parents. In that moment, Juan's need is dismissed by his parents, which seems a reasonable reaction as they've just arrived at their destination, but the events that follow prevent his need from being met. Just as his mother is

unlocking the door, a car approaches and the family is attacked by paramilitary thugs who are trying to kill them because of their involvement in revolutionary activity. Cristina, the mother, pushes Juan to the ground, pulls out a gun, and she and Horacio, Juan's father, engage their enemies in a shoot-out as the car drives away. Just before the car screeches out of sight around the corner, they manage to hit Horacio in the leg. In the last shot of this scene, we see, from an overhead perspective, an animated image of the family in the aftermath of the attack they have just experienced. The film lingers on this image, in which Juan's urine slowly mixes with his father's blood on the sidewalk. The yellow of the urine, likely representing Juan's fear, and red of his father's blood, representing the parents' sacrifice, stand out against the otherwise muted colors of the image, and introduce the core theme of the film: Juan's struggle to exist comfortably in an environment of fear, where his family's lives are always at risk. Additionally, the aerial perspective perhaps serves to provide a more objective view of the tableau and highlights the notable physical distance between the parents and their son. The fact that the mother, after a violent, though not lethal, event, is at the side of her husband and not her child, is perhaps demonstrative of her priorities. While the parents clearly love their child and want a better future for him, the fact that the film lingers on this image possibly foreshadows that they will choose loyalty to the revolutionary cause, and therefore to each other, over the needs of their son.

Throughout the film, the most violent scenes are depicted as series of still, illustrated images, much like comic book pages. María Ghiggia suggests that the use of comics and animation "illuminates the memory processes at work in the construction of this posttraumatic cinematic narrative," and that "[t]he switch from photographic film to the animated comics calls attention to the gaps between the frames, and by doing this, it hints at the traumatic in what is left



out, repressed, or silenced in the violent scenes” (2). Therefore, it is possible that this technique serves to address these elements that are “left out,” such as the lack of consolation or empathy for Juan after the attack that left his father bleeding onto the sidewalk, and perhaps the resentment or frustration that Juan might feel as a result of that lack. At the same time, it also provides a way to show that which might not be possible to show otherwise, such as the perspective of a young boy, for whom this level of violence would likely not be seen outside of comic books and movies. Translating the action and aftermath of the attack into a series of still images and “the ‘jumpy’ feel of the animated frames” (Ghiggia 2) mirrors the suddenness of the event as well as the way in which traumatic memories can often re-appear in sudden, intrusive bursts.

Later in the film, after experiencing the trauma of the death of his uncle Beto, who had been his primary outlet for talking about his daily life and feelings, Juan/Ernesto expresses his feelings of resentment and indignation very directly in saying: “¿Quién se cree que es?” [“Who does he think he is?”] (*Infancia clandestina*, translation mine). He needs his uncle and the support and companionship he provided in his life, but, from Juan/Ernesto’s view, Beto was not considering the needs of his nephew and, in a “cuestion de segundos” [“matter of seconds”] (*Infancia clandestina*, translation mine) he was gone, through the incredibly violent means of jumping on a grenade and taking a police officer out with him, rather than being captured. Later, despite the fact the he was not present for the event itself, Juan/Ernesto has a dream in which he experiences the death of Beto. Again, Avila shows the boy’s experience of this trauma through the use of comic pages. We can interpret this, also, as a way of fictionalizing this brutality in order to deal with these extreme occurrences “desde una perspectiva extrañada de la realidad” [“from a perspective that is distanced from reality”] (Fit 6, translation mine). This association of

sad or traumatic events with the fictitious or unreal can also be seen in the use of green lighting throughout the film, which is an effect often used to suggest illness or the supernatural and which appears quite significantly in the dream in which Juan/Ernesto talks with his uncle Beto as if he were still alive. The symbolism of this color is further underlined in this scene by the fact that, despite the entirety of the set being washed in this sickly and surreal green light, the photo of Juan/Ernesto and Maria, a memory of happiness and wholeness, entirely lacks this effect and appears as it would in natural light.

Another example of Ávila's use of color and lighting to demonstrate the contrast between parts of Juan/Ernesto's life in which he feels supported and fulfilled, against those in which he is afraid or feels ignored, can be found in a scene which finds Juan/Ernesto, his mother, and his baby sister laying on a blanket in the park. In this scene Juan/Ernesto asks his mother about how she knew she was in love with his father, and she accurately assumes that her son has developed feelings for someone at school. Throughout this interaction, the colors are bright, and the family is bathed in natural sunlight as they discuss love and connection. The scene ends with Juan/Ernesto and his mother giggling as she teases him about his new crush, a pleasant image that is interrupted by a sudden cut to a new scene in which we see uncle Beto entering the house with a sense of urgency, slamming the door behind him, shutting out the bright light that had shone in from outside and leaving them in a darkened room with green tones. This dramatic shift in lighting, color, and mood draws into sharp relief the difference between the moments of normalcy experienced by Juan/Ernesto and the ever-present reality of the danger they are always facing.

In another striking series of events, Juan/Ernesto is at school when the whole class begins singing happy birthday. Only after a few refrains does he recognize that they are singing to him

because that day is listed as his birthday on his fake documents. Under pressure from his friends, he says that there will be a party that weekend and must then tell his parents. The idea of a party within the context of their clandestine life is very risky, but his uncle Beto reassures Juan/Ernesto's parents that everything will be alright and sets off to plan the party. The following scenes show the conflicts that occur between the varying and complex viewpoints held by the adults in Juan/Ernesto's life. These occur as arguments that he witnesses about what is best for him and for the family in general, but none of which ever directly consider his opinion.

This first of these conflicts occurs just after uncle Beto has returned from picking up a surprise for Juan/Ernesto's birthday party: his grandmother. Juan/Ernesto is thrilled as he has not seen his grandmother in many years, but his father is furious with uncle Beto for risking their safety by bringing an outside adult to their home. Here, uncle Beto's argument is that they must take opportunities to celebrate and be grateful that they can be together with family, that Juan/Ernesto deserves to have these kinds of happy childhood experiences, and that these things that his brother sees as luxuries they cannot afford are the exact things that they are fighting to preserve. Horacio, in a voiceover later in the film expresses how proud he is of his son and we can see how deeply he cares for him, but in this moment he feels that uncle Beto's romantic heart has made him careless and put them all at risk. Before walking out of this argument however, uncle Beto expresses a sentiment that we see echoed in many of these works saying, essentially, "If it bothers you, you could've gone without a family." Here he is directly referring to Horacio being upset about the presence of his mother-in-law, but it can be extrapolated that the larger issue at hand is that if Horacio, who is a leader within the Montoneros, is not willing to take the risks necessary to provide his family with some sense of connection and normalcy, then he should either not have a family or not be a militant.

While a simple birthday party and the presence of the boy's grandmother have made his parents incredibly nervous, they continue on with the party and we see Juan/Ernesto happy and forming connections with friends, particularly with Maria, for whom he has developed feelings. During this scene, we see further use of green lighting which seems to delineate those who are living in fear and secrecy and those who are not. All of the children in attendance, with the exception, later, of Juan/Ernesto and Maria, are shown in the warm lighting of the overhead bulb outside the home. Meanwhile, his parents as well as his grandmother and baby sister are bathed in green lighting throughout the party. Later as we see Juan/Ernesto and Maria slow dancing and growing closer, their faces are shown half in green light and half in the normal lighting as if to suggest that Juan is in this moment caught somewhere in-between a militant childhood and a normal one and by connecting with Maria, he is pulling her into this realm with him.

After the party, we see a scene that depicts a conflict between Juan/Ernesto's mother, Cristina, and his grandmother, Amalia. This second conflict that has resulted from the party has been noted by Ávila, in an interview with Oscar Ranzani, as "la escena troncal de la película" ["the core scene of the movie"] (online, translation mine). In it, Amalia confronts her daughter about her choice to come back to Argentina and put herself, and particularly her children, in danger, and suggests that they make an arrangement where she will take care of the children until the situation becomes less dangerous. Cristina responds, enraged, by shouting at her mother, using expletives, and calling her a coward. Ávila explains, however, that both represent real and valid positions: one "[d]el 'no te metás' y también del genuino miedo" ["of 'don't get involved' and also of genuine fear"] presented by Amalia, and the other "del dogmatismo, pero por otro lado, la valentía y el coraje de ser fiel a una idea" ["of dogmatism, but on the other hand, the bravery and courage of being devoted to an idea"] (Ranzani online, translations mine) of

Cristina. He also notes that, at the end, they still embrace and express their love, and for him, “la película es ese abrazo” [“the movie is that embrace”], in that it symbolizes the complexity and humanity of the people involved and that “‘no es una cosa o la otra’, sino que es ‘todos juntos formamos parte de esto y, de algún modo, hay que llegar a ese abrazo’” [“‘it’s not one thing the other,’ but that it’s ‘all of us together form a part of this, and in some way we have to arrive at that embrace’”] (Ranzani online, translation mine).

While the film is a work of fiction, Ávila has based it loosely on his own experiences but clarifies that “no lo vivió como algo traumático” [“he didn’t live it as something traumatic”] and that going to school under another name and with falsified papers “era absolutamente normal...[I]a vida clandestina-militante era un estado de normalidad total. No era algo diferente de los demás” [“was absolutely normal...the clandestine, militant life was a state of total normalcy. It wasn’t something different from the rest.”] (Ranzani online, translations mine). Within the fiction of the film, on the other hand, he does call into question the normality of this lifestyle when, during the aforementioned conflict between Amalia and Cristina, uncle Beto suggests that the children are fine and live a normal life, to which Amalia responds with an incredulous “¿¡Normal!?”, and goes on to imply that living under a false identity and having to celebrate a fake birthday are not “normal” circumstances for a child.

Despite not viewing his childhood as generally traumatic, Ávila does admit that he knew from a young age that he would “realizar una película inspirada en su infancia, porque tenía la necesidad de contar esa historia” [“create a film based on his childhood, because he had a need to tell that story”] and that “[n]o fue fácil enfrentar[se] a [su] propia vida, a [sus] propios fantasmas, a [sus] propias obligaciones históricas, etcétera” [“it wasn’t easy to face his own life, his own ghosts, his own historical obligations, etcetera”] (Ranzani online, translations mine). Through the

creation of this film, Ávila was able to confront his past and, in the story of Juan/Ernesto, we are able to glimpse a version of his experiences and those of other children who lived in similar circumstances, as well as the nuanced way in which, as Araceli Arreche explains, “[e]n esta obra lo bello y lo feo se yuxtaponen” [“in this work, the beautiful and the ugly are juxtaposed”] (Arreche 160, translation mine) reinforcing the complex “visión humana” [“human vision”] that he wanted to present, and revealing that “[e]l horror es una de las tantas cosas de esta historia, pero no es eso solamente” [“horror is one of the many things in this story, but it’s not only that”] (Ranzani online, translation mine).

### **2.3 *Pequeños combatientes***

*Pequeños combatientes* (2013) tells the story of a young girl and her journey to process the loss of her parents, who were taken by the military. She awakens one day to find that they have been abducted in the night and must then experience not only incredible sadness at the absence of her parents, but also “la impotencia y la culpa por no haber combatido para salvar a sus padres” [“the helplessness and guilt of not having fought to save her parents”] (Fit 5, translation mine). In her efforts to carry on in their footsteps, as well as protect and comfort her younger brother, she insists that they are “pequeños combatientes” or “little combatants,” and the two children practice hiding both their physical presence as well as their thoughts and feelings, and generally plan for how they can aid the revolutionary cause and be ready when it comes time to fight. While they wait for their parents’ return, or for their fellow militants to call them to action, they live with their aunt and uncle and their two grandmothers, all of whom avoid speaking directly of the parents’ disappearance. Meanwhile, they must attend school, interact with various family members with a variety of stances on the state of the nation, and determine which facet of their identities to display in various settings, that of “ser militantes montoneras

disciplinados, pequeños combatientes – en la intimidad filial – y ser ‘niños cualquiera’ – en todas las demás relaciones” [“being disciplined, Montonero militants, little combatants – in their filial intimacy – and of being ‘any old kids’ – in the rest of their relationships”] (Fino online, translation mine). Throughout the novel, we follow our unnamed protagonist as she gradually comes to terms with the fact that her parents are most likely dead and begins to develop an identity separate from that of the pequeña combatiente that she had constructed in order to honor them and carry on their work.

In this work, Robles writes from the perspective of a little girl who is relatively well informed about the socio-political situation at hand, but whose understanding is limited, to an extent by her maturity level, but mostly by the environment of silence in which she finds herself after the abduction of her parents. Annelies Wijnant describes their home life as follows:

La niña vive en una familia disfuncional y todos contribuyen recíprocamente a la permanencia del trauma. Los tíos están traumatizados por la pérdida de sus familiares y no acostumbrados a cuidar niños pequeños porque sus hijos ya son adultos. Por lo tanto, no cumplen bien con el papel de ser padres. Al mismo tiempo, deben cuidar a dos abuelas también traumatizadas...[y] veremos que todos los personajes reaccionan al trauma de la pérdida de los seres queridos de una manera distinta. Un factor que realmente agrava el trauma y lo hace omnipresente es su represión y el silencio que le rodea. [The girl lives in a dysfunctional family, and everyone contributes reciprocally to the continuation of the trauma. The aunt and uncle are traumatized by the loss of their family members and are not accustomed to caring for small children, because their children are already adults. Therefore, they don't well fulfill the role of parents. At the same time, they must care for

two grandmothers who are also traumatized...[and] we see that all of the characters react to the trauma of the loss of their loved ones in different ways. A factor that really aggravates the trauma, and makes it omnipresent, is its repression and the silence that surrounds it.] (45)

This absence of information is the core around which the story revolves. The children go about their everyday lives, but their experiences are all framed within the idea that either their parents might return, or that the other resistance fighters might call on them to join the fight at any moment, and they must therefore always be prepared. Thus, when our protagonist reads a book about World War II, she becomes fascinated by a story in which a German social worker helped children escape from the Warsaw ghetto, and begins planning ways she can potentially utilize a social worker to help them reunite with their parents. She is surprised that this heroic figure was a social worker, because the term “‘asistente social’ era la sombra que permanentemente estaba encima” [“‘social worker’ was the shadow that permanently hung over them”] because “[I]a asistente social podía venir en cualquier momento y si no estaba conforme con lo que viera podía mandar[les] al orfanato” [“the social worker could come at any moment, and if they didn’t like what they saw, they could send them to the orphanage”] (Robles 18, translations mine). Because of this fear that her guardians have of the social worker, she makes sure to train her brother to say the right thing if one ever shows up: “Le hacía repetir que éramos felices, que nuestros tíos eran muy buenos – lo cual era bastante cierto – y que no teníamos miedo porque sabíamos que nuestros padres vendrían de un momento a otro” [“I made him repeat that we were happy, and that our aunt and uncle were very good – which was true enough – and that we weren’t afraid because we knew that our parents would come home at any



moment”] (Robles 19, translation mine). However, when her brother repeats this to their aunt and uncle, he is met with “unas caras tan descompuestas” [“faces so unsettled”] (Robles 19, translation mine) that they decide to leave out the last part. Here, we can see that the children understand that their family members are upset when they bring up the idea of their parents coming home, but it is only shown through their expressions, and they never attempt to correct the children’s misplaced expectations.

Later, in the story of the social worker, named Irina Sandler, it describes how she was captured and tortured by the Gestapo and then left alone in a forest with her arms and legs broken. Despite this, Irina manages to survive and continue her work reuniting children with their families. This leads our narrator to ponder, in the absence of facts, the manner of her parents’ abduction, and she wonders: “¿En qué bosque tendría que buscar a mis padres? ¿Cómo sabría en qué momento buscarlos?” [“In what forest would I have to search for my parents? And how would I know at what moment to look for them?”] (Robles 20, translation mine). The story has given her hope that, even though her parents were captured and presumably tortured, perhaps they are still alive somewhere waiting to be saved or regaining strength for their return. Again, when she brings these concerns to her relatives, “como siempre, se alarmaron,” [“as always, they were alarmed”] and, showing her naiveté, she is confused as to why they are more concerned about her than her parents “que podían estar en ese mismo momento con las piernas y los brazos fracturados esperando en un bosque que alguien llegara a rescatarlos” [“who could be, at that very moment, in a forest with broken legs and arms, hoping that someone will show up to rescue them”] (Robles 21, translation mine). Furthermore, instead of explaining why these hopes are unrealistic, “[p]usieron la cara que ponían siempre: ‘hay que consultarlo con la psicóloga’” [“they made the same face as always: ‘we have to consult the psychologist’”] (Robles 21,

translation mine). It is notable that, even though nothing is said aloud, the girl is perceptive and understands the meaning of “sus gestos mudos que se trasladaban de una cara a la otra” [“their muted gestures that transferred from one face to the other”] (Robles 21, translation mine), but does not understand why they believe they need to consult a psychologist.

While it may actually be beneficial for the children to speak openly to someone about their experiences, because the family never explains to them that their parents are almost certainly gone forever, “la dejan en la oscuridad de la mentira que impide su entendimiento y aceptación” [“she is left in the dark because of a lie that impedes her understanding and acceptance”] (Wijnant 36, translation mine). Our protagonist’s inability to fully recognize this loss as a reality, leads to her assumption that her parents are alive, and therefore she does not understand what she would need to talk about. And yet, we see further evidence that she has, in fact, experienced trauma in a scene in which she experiences an “involuntary, and intrusive distressing [memory]” (American Psychiatric Association 271) similar to those experienced by persons with PTSD.

In this scene, she sees a girl with a purple balloon, an image which triggers an intense reaction that she then describes: “Fue como si me hubieron tirado de un empujón hacia el centro de mi recuerdo y de pronto me encontré en el cuarto de mi mamá y mi papá, viendo cómo se pegaba al techo un globo violeta” [“It was as if I was thrown forcefully into the center of my memory, and suddenly I found myself in my mom and dad’s room, watching how a purple balloon stuck itself to the ceiling”] (Robles 70, translation mine). This memory is a “dissociative reaction” or “flashback,” also characteristic of PTSD, in which she feels as if she is present in her parents’ room, re-living that experience and therefore not present in her physical state. This is also evidenced by the fact that she has lost time and “[c]uando [su] mente volvió al

cumpleaños la nena ya no estaba y había un payaso hacienda tonterías en el medio del patio” [“when her mind returned to the birthday party, the girl was no longer there, and there was a clown doing silly things in the middle of the patio”] (Robles 70, translation mine). The presence of the clown is an additional trigger, and she is brought back to another memory that leaves her crying “de una manera tan inesperada para [ella] que [se cayó] al suelo” [“in a manner so unexpected for [her] that [she] fell to the floor”] (Robles 71, translation mine). Even in this moment of crisis, she still remembers that she must hide her identity, and pretends that her sudden outburst is due to a terrible stomach ache - a lie that leads to a hospital visit and extreme guilt for having worried her brother so much. And still, instead of admitting what happened to her brother or talking to anyone about her experience, the lesson she takes from this is: “me prometía no dejarme sorprender por un recuerdo” [“I promised myself I would never let myself be surprised by a memory”] (Robles 72, translation mine). This is a promise she cannot keep though, because, despite being “toda una artista” [“a complete artist”] (Robles 37, translation mine) at hiding her emotions, “los recuerdos son jodidos, hacen lo que quieren” [“memories are fucked, they do what they want”] (Robles 72, translation mine).

Shortly after the incident at the birthday party, we see the arrival of a friend, and fellow militant, of the children’s parents. Only ever referred to as “la amiga de mi papá y mi mamá,” [“the friend of my mom and dad”], this friend initiates the shift in the children’s ability to process the loss of their parents by explaining to them that “lo importante era decir la verdad” [“what’s important is to tell the truth”], and that “[I]a verdad es que no sabemos nada” [“the truth is that we don’t know anything”], including “a dónde [se los llevaron] ni si están vivos o cómo están” [“where they were taken, or if they are alive, or how they are”] (Robles 73, translations mine). The children are shocked and angry, and our narrator is particularly upset that this friend

would mention this possibility in front of her brother and the rest of the family, not knowing if they were ready to hear it. She explains that “[t]odos sabíamos que Lo Peor podía implicar la muerte, pero ninguno de nosotros lo había dicho así tan claramente nunca” [“we all knew that The Worst could imply death, but none of us had ever said it so clearly like that”] (Robles 74, translation mine). While having finally heard out loud that their parents could be dead does allow them to recognize it as a concrete possibility, and therefore consider their lives and future choices within the context of that circumstance, they still have no actual information and continue to live with the ever-present uncertainty around their fate. This uneasy existence is aptly described by Diana Kordon and Lucila Edelman:

En estas condiciones que vivieron su infancia los hijos de desaparecidos: una familia que esperaba y simultáneamente desesperaba, en un contexto de silencio y ocultamiento por parte del Estado. Esta condición de espera, con las modalidades que asumió en cada familia, marca profundamente el periodo de constitución del yo en la mayor parte de los hijos de desaparecidos. [These are the conditions in which the children of disappeared lived their childhoods: a family that simultaneously hoped and despaired, in a context of silence and concealment on the part of the State. This condition of waiting, with the modalities assumed by each family, profoundly marked the period of the constitution of the self in most children of disappeared.] (78)

During a period of time in which they should be forming their identities, our protagonist and her brother are not only missing their parents, who would normally be the basis around which they identify, but are also unable to even speak of their parents for fear of upsetting their

aunt and uncle, or of revealing their connection to the revolutionary cause, whose adherents are being actively hunted by the police. Kordon and Edelman take into account, in reference to this inability to speak of the family ties with which one identifies oneself, “el papel de los enunciados que funcionan como palabras de certeza” [“the role of statements that function as words of certainty”] and suggest that, “[e]n un clima de terror, cargado de ambigüedad, las familias se encontraron en una difícil situación en cuanto a la formulación de enunciados identificarios claros” [“in a climate of terror, heavy with ambiguity, the families found themselves in a difficult situation with regard to enunciating clear, identifying statements”] (57, translation mine). It is perhaps notable, then, that throughout the entirety of the novel, Robles chooses to almost never identify any character by name. The only names we see are those of the social worker from the history book and of characters from stories and tv shows, whereas nearly all other characters are identified by their relation to others (“la amiga de mi papá y mi mamá” [“the friend of my dad and mom”]), or by other characteristics, whether physical or related to their actions, profession, religion or personality (“la abuela judía” [“the Jewish grandmother”], “la abuela de la ventana” [“the grandmother of the window”] etc). The lack of names could also be a way to anonymize the story so that others who have had similar experiences can more easily see themselves in its characters.

In instances where the children interact with the “friend of [their] dad and mom”, they learn more about their parents from this woman who was close with them. Our young narrator explains that, despite the painful truths that they receive from her, “se siente bien estar con ella” [“it feels good to be with her”] (Robles 75, translation mine). On more than one occasion she states that the times spent with this friend “[e]ra lindo y era feo” [“it was beautiful and it was awful”] (Robles 96, translation mine), or “[e]ra feo pero era bueno” [“it was awful, but it was

good”] (Robles 106, translation mine). With these interactions, they must process painful truths and memories of their parents, but they also are able to speak openly with her about their parents, and they feel understood and at home with her in a way that they do not with their aunt, uncle, and grandmothers.

These conflicting feelings coexist in these children much in the way that the conflicting feelings of admiration and resentment often intermingle in the works of Hijos. While, in this particular work, we see much more of the former than the latter, there is one clear instance in which an aunt (not the one she lives with) expresses that she had warned her brother, their father, “un montón de veces” [“a ton of times”] and wonders aloud: “¿por qué no se fueron? ¿por qué no se escaparon?” [“why didn’t they go away? why didn’t they escape?”], and later reiterates that “[e]so fue un suicidio, una irresponsabilidad total, con dos nenes chiquitos, se tendrían que haber ido cuando todavía podía” [“that was a suicide, a total irresponsibility, with two little kids, they should’ve gone while they still could”] (Robles 112, translations mine). Upon hearing this, our protagonist explains that, while she doesn’t like the way this aunt was talking about her father “como si él tuviera la culpa de que [les] hubiera pasado Lo Peor” [“as if he were to blame for the The Worst having happened to [them]”], she also admits that “la verdad es que [se] había preguntado lo mismo algunas veces” [“the truth is that [she] had asked [herself] the same thing a few times”] (Robles 112, translations mine).

Through the telling of this story, which is based upon her own childhood experiences, Robles, in the words of Adriana Badagnani, “recurr[e] voluntariamente al arsenal de los recuerdos de su infancia, amalgamados seguramente con sueños y narraciones familiares, para elaborar un duelo que ante la ausencia de materialidad solo puede realizarse con palabras” [“returns voluntarily to the arsenal of memories from her childhood, surely amalgamated with dreams and

family stories, to work through a grief that, in the face of the absence of materiality, can only be realized in words”] (12, translation mine). At the end of the novel, our young protagonist is finally able to accept that her parents are not coming home, and speak aloud the painful “palabra fantasma” [“phantom word”] in telling her brother that “seguramente [sus padres] habían vivido cosas horribles, pero que ahora estaban [...] *muertos*.” [“surely [their parents] had survived terrible things, but that now they were [...] *dead*”] (Robles 151, translations and emphasis mine). She insists, however, that she and her brother continue fighting for the revolutionary cause because “qué otra cosa podíamos hacer” [“what else could we do”] (Robles 152). Robles has, in fact, continued that fight in her work as one of the founding members of H.I.J.O.S. in which “quiere luchar contra la impunidad y hacer que los padres desaparecidos vuelvan a incorporarse al escenario público como guerrilleros en vez de como víctimas” [“she seeks to fight against impunity and ensure that the disappeared parents are reincorporated into the public scene as warriors instead of as victims”] (Wijnant 41, translations mine). In her acknowledgements at the end of the novel, Robles thanks her own children for showing her “cada día que la infancia no es un combate, sino una aventura de amor y belleza” [“each day that childhood isn’t a battle, but an adventure of love and beauty”] (Robles 153), demonstrating that while she continues to fight for others (she has also been recognized for her work with at-risk youth), she herself has realized her identity as a mother and activist and is no longer a “pequeña combatiente” in the struggle to process her past and define her place in the world.

#### **2.4 *Los Rubios***

In *Los rubios* (2003), Albertina Carri documents the process by which she attempts to navigate her feelings and find information about the abduction of her parents, as well as the social context in which it occurred. The film plays with documentary technique and narrative

structure in a way that subverts the expectations of such films “to sift through memories and traces in search of facts and clarity,” and, in exchange, it “interrogates the process by which the character of Carri articulates a multi-faceted subjectivity in her relation with the legacy of the past” (Yozell 49). One of these unexpected techniques is that she hires an actor, Analía Couceyro, to play the part of herself. In this way, Carri doubles her presence in the film and also emphasizes her role in the investigation and the importance of her perspective, while at the same time placing herself at a removed position of directing the action of the film. This puts her in a position where she can control the narrative, rather than inhabiting the passive position that is so common among children of her generation, which, as Erica Miller Yozell explains, is a generation “that slips through the cracks: one that grew up with the effects of the violence and disappearances, but that was too young to actively participate in cultural politics and, as a consequence, has had little voice in the contemporary social codification of memory” (54). During her search for information, she interviews friends of her parents, as well as people who still live in the neighborhood where her parents were taken and who were present during that time. While the testimony of their friends and fellow militants are fairly superficial and align with the well-tread ground of lauding their commitment and sacrifices, Carri is more interested in exploring, as Yozell suggests, “questions of subjectivity in relation to the seminal and absent figures of [her] parents, the current debates surrounding memory and representation, and generational tendencies in approaching the legacy of the dictatorship.” (45).

Thus, the film is constructed in a somewhat disorienting way that mirrors the difficult work of searching for and reconstructing one’s identity from fragmented memories, subjective testimonies, and ideas inherited from public discourse. According to Yozell, “[t]he stitching together of traces, photographs, bits of information, and related stories is frequently organized



around narratives of memory and identity, with privileging of testimony” (46), but Carri, instead, revokes the authority of the testimony she receives by transforming it “into tangible material that can be mapped out” (48). We see this in Carri/Couceyro’s manipulation of the video recordings which results in a “fragmentation of the testimonies [which] de-naturalizes the dominant cultural narratives as they are articulated in this specific case of Carri’s parents,” a process which also signifies a “shift in agency from Carri’s parents’ generation to Carri’s own generation, a shift that is explicitly linked to the act of mapping out narratives and composing the film” (Yozell 49).

This generational shift meets resistance when, roughly 25 minutes into the film, Carri/Couceyro receives a letter from the Pre-classification Committee of the National Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual Arts (INCAA, by its initials in Spanish) in which they express that the film is worth making, but that if the committee is to support it, it needs to be revised and needs to include “more direct testimony from her parents’ friends” (Yozell 52). These views, again, “privilege testimony by friends and fellow militants, as well as the development of a film structured around the narratives used by her parents’ generation to make sense of their world”, rather than accepting Carri’s approach and perspective which are valid manifestations of her experience and express a mixture of complex feelings that are not limited to respect and admiration (as would be expected and seemingly preferred by the INCAA committee), but include frustration, resentment, and incredulity at the naivete of her parents.

Through the title of the film, *Los rubios* or *The blonds*, Carri makes reference to this naivete in that, when she interviews a family who were their neighbors at the time of this traumatic event, they remember the family as “los rubios,” their blond hair referenced as something that made them stand out as “others” who did not fit in to the neighborhood, despite the fact that they did not all have blond hair as one neighbor described. Here, Carri

reveals that her parents were naïve in that they thought they could blend into the “working-class neighborhood where [they] went to *proletarizarse*” [“...to proletarianize themselves”] (Blejmar 70, translation mine), despite being “well-known middle-class intellectuals” (Blejmar 66) whose behavior, clothing, and appearance (whether blond or not) were clear indicators that they did not belong there. These characteristics were, in fact, used by this same neighbor to identify them when she “did not hesitate to betray them to the military, stating that after the abduction everyone in the neighbourhood felt an ‘enormous relief’” (Blejmar 70).

The experience of the abduction itself is related on camera by Couceyro as Carri, but, as she reminds us at the start of this monologue, she was only three years old and hardly remembers and explains that she doesn’t know how much of what she remembers are her own experiences or images constructed from what her sisters have told her. Thus, lacking a clear and consistent memory of the events, she constructs images representative of her experiences through use of Playmobil toys. This technique of using toys to represent tragic historical events has sparked a great deal of controversy in that some believe that “playful memories of the Holocaust and Latin American dictatorships have violated something too sacred, too ‘serious’ to play with” (Blejmar 55). Yet, in using toys to represent these traumatic events, Carri is able to reveal a child’s perspective and appropriate these “sacred” and “serious” occurrences, that are often represented only as the plight of her parents’ generation, as if to say “I was there too, and my experience matters.” This use of toys and play in *Los rubios*, as in the other works analyzed here, serves to remind the audience that children were also victims of state terror and that, as children with limited information and understanding of what was happening around them, they had to find ways to process, rationalize, and fill in the gaps of their knowledge so that they could attempt to understand the absence of their parents. Mariela Peller suggests that “es sólo a través del recurso

a este juego infantil que la realizadora puede representar el secuestro y desaparición de sus padres, bajo la fantasía de una nave espacial que los ‘chupa’” [“it is only through the means of this childish game that the filmmaker can represent the kidnapping of her parents, under the fantasy of a spaceship that ‘sucks them up’”], and that, through the use of this “mirada infantil” [“childlike view”], this film, as well as other stories that use similar techniques, “se atreven a reflexionar acerca de las relaciones complejas entre niñez, violencia política y desapariciones, pero además lo hacen desde los puntos de vista de quienes fueron infantes en aquellos años.” [“dare to reflect on the complex relationships between childhood, political violence, and disappearances, but also, they do so from the point of view of those who were children in those years”] (8, translations mine).

Albertina Carri creates, in *Los rubios*, an expression of the complexity of her feelings around the abduction of her parents, as well as the difficulty of, as we hear narrated over the image of a Playmobil toy that remains still as its hat rapidly changes to represent various professions and identities, “construirse a sí mismo sin aquella figura que fue la que dio comienzo a la propia existencia” [“building one’s own identity without the figure of the one who gave beginning to your very existence”], and that this reconstruction of one’s identity “se convierte en una obsesión” [“becomes an obsession”] (*Los rubios*, translations mine). She also cites Régine Robin in saying that the need to create one’s own identity emerges when that identity is threatened, and that, in her case, “el estigma de la amenaza perdura aquellas épocas de terror y violencia, en las que decir [su] apellido implica peligro y rechazo” [“the stigma of threat endures those periods of terror and violence, in which speaking [her] name implies danger and rejection”] (*Los rubios*, translation mine). Thus, we can see that, during a time when she would have been naturally developing her identity around “biological connections, the composition of identity

based on genetics and familial connections” (Yozell 51), this development was interrupted by the trauma and violence of losing her parents and further impeded by the inability to speak her own name without fear. Despite the efforts documented in this film, or perhaps through those efforts, Carri demonstrates that neither memory nor identity are static experiences, but ones that shift and distort over time, and are often supplemented by fictional or imposed ideas when there are gaps. Still, through it, she is able to speak her name aloud, and those of her parents, and to give voice to her own experience and construct her narrative as she chooses.

### **2.5 *Soy un bravo piloto de la nueva China***

In *Soy un bravo piloto de la nueva China* (2011), by Ernesto Semán, we find Rubén Abdela, our narrator and Hijo whose experiences are based on those of Semán, in early-2000s Buenos Aires where he has returned from the United States after hearing the news that his mother, Rosa, will soon die from cancer. While there, he spends time connecting with her and with his brother, Agustín, processing not only Rosa’s imminent death, but also the loss of their father who was disappeared by the military in the 1970s, when they were quite young. This novel takes quite a different approach than the ones previously analyzed in that, rather than the story being told from the perspective of a child faced with the challenges imposed by both the loss of a parent as well as the overall oppressive state of terror and silence, the perspective is that of the adult Rubén confronting the memories and legacy of his father some thirty years after his death and after the collapse of the military regime that caused it. However, the book features not only this perspective, but that of his father’s killer, Capitán, who we see humanized in his depiction, but also punished for his actions.

The book is divided into five parts, each containing three chapters, with one corresponding to each of the following settings: “La Ciudad” [“The City”], which takes place in

Buenos Aires and recounts Rubén's current day interactions with his mother and brother during his visit; "El Campo" ["The Camp"] here referring to the *centro clandestino* where his father was held and tortured in the 1970s, and in whose section we see the perspective and life of Capitán, the police officer who is his torturer and eventual killer; and "La Isla" ["The Island"], chapters in which our protagonist travels to a surreal and mysterious, fantasy island, whose inhabitants and geography defy reality in order to help Rubén deconstruct his memories and assumptions, facilitating his comprehension of the perspectives of both his father and Capitán, and thereby allowing him to come to terms with the events surrounding his father's untimely death.

Semán begins the novel with a scene in which Rubén returns from the United States for a temporary visit and enters his childhood home to find a body hanging from the ceiling in the center of his living room. What would normally seem to be a shocking and traumatic discovery, though, is presented almost as an afterthought as our narrator spends the majority of this first paragraph poetically describing the quality of light in the room and how "el reflejo de la ciudad sobre las nubes bajas daba un resplandor claro y artificial, naranja como en las noches calurosas de tormenta" ["the reflection of the city on the low clouds gave a clear and artificial glow, orange like on hot stormy nights"], then adding: "Así que las piernas del cuerpo que colgaba en el centro de la sala dejaban una sombra estirada, que se arrastraba por el suelo hasta la pared y se me pegaba al cuerpo, a mí que estaba ahí parado, sin terminar de entrar ni de cerrar la puerta" ["So the legs of the body that hung in the center of the living room left a stretched shadow that crawled across the floor and stuck to my body, to me standing there, without finishing entering or closing the door"] (Semán 13). Immediately after, he goes on to describe the many ways he has imagined his father's suicide over the years, thus revealing that the hanging body in his home is yet another one of these hallucinations. He supports his calm and unaffected tone by

explaining that “[d]e tanto haberlo imaginado, todo parecía más normal, a su modo” [“having imagined it so much, it all seemed more normal, in its way”], but then introduces the fact that “el hombre colgado en el living de [su] departamento, [su] padre, el Camarada Luis Abdela, había muerto treinta años atrás” [“the man hanging in the living room of [his] apartment, [his] father, Comrade Luis Abdela, had died thirty years ago”] (Semán 15).

This first, brief chapter immediately introduces the core issue of the novel: Rubén has lived the last thirty years of his life always touched by the shadow of his father’s absence. His position, paused in the doorway, is also perhaps an indication that he feels in-between two realms, not only between Argentina where he was raised and the United States where he now lives and works as a geography professor, but also between admiration and resentment towards his father, between his own life and identity, and that which has been defined by his loss. The reader later discovers that Luis Abdela was kidnapped, tortured, and thrown alive from a plane into the ocean, his remains never found. Thus, Adriana Badagnani suggests that these imagined suicides are representative of the impetus experienced by many Hijos to search for “el cuerpo ausente en su familia” [“the absent body in their family”], and that “[e]sta imagen horrorosa [del cuerpo colgado en su hogar] sirve, sin embargo, para visualizar otra muerte que le restituya la corporalidad” [“this horrifying image [of the body hanging in his home] serves, nevertheless, to visualize another death that restores its corporality”] (8, translations mine). By describing these different, imagined versions of his father’s death, as well as by detailing in later scenes the physical experiences of Luis in el campo, he seeks to “restituir el cuerpo del padre” [“restore his father’s body”] (Badagnani 8, translation mine) and imagine circumstances wherein, despite still experiencing the trauma of his death, there would at least be more possibility for closure and finality rather than an ongoing search and uncertainty.

There are, however, many versions of death that would leave the body intact and retrievable, but for Rubén, the fantasies of his father's death are always associated with suicide, even if on some occasions "la escena del suicidio tampoco era clara, ni siquiera podía verla, pero se producía como tributo personal a una causa mayor, inenarrable, dejando un legado heroico y abrumador" ["the scene of the suicide wasn't clear either, nor could [he] even see it, but it always happened as a personal tribute to a greater cause, inexplicable, leaving an heroic and overwhelming legacy"] (Semán 14, translation mine). In this instance, he reveals the sentiment that seems most accurate to his experience as we see it play out in the novel. Here, the father's "suicide" is presented as a "personal tribute to a greater cause" and is described as "inenarrable," which can be translated as "inexplicable," and leaves a legacy that is both heroic and "abrumador," which can be translated as "heavy", "oppressive", or "overwhelming" (Semán 14, translations mine). This demonstrates that the narrator, and by extension the author, understands that his father was heroic and fought for a noble cause, but still feels that his sacrifice was inexplicable, and perhaps therefore indefensible, and is weighed down by his legacy. Regardless, this initial scene presents the idea that Rubén, in one way or another, sees his father's death as a suicide, implying that it was his own choice, and introducing the feelings of resentment and abandonment that we see elaborated and processed throughout the length of the work.

The insinuation that Luis chose his fate is undermined, however, by the inclusion and complex exploration of the perspective of Capitán, the man who captured, tortured, and killed him. In providing this uncommon glimpse into the life of the perpetrator of this horrific act, Semán gives name and humanity to the entity that took Luis' life, thereby showing that, while Luis may have made choices that led to his capture, he did not, in fact, take his own life, nor did he decide the manner in which it was taken from him. Through scenes in El Campo and

conversations between Capitán and Abdela witnessed on La Isla, Semán is able to deconstruct both figures and deemphasize their status as “evil, enemy, torturer” and “hero, martyr, father” respectively, and instead display them both as men with a variety of complex feelings, experiences, and influences. By way of witnessing these memories and conversations, Rubén is able to, in the words of Badagnani, “trascender su propio dolor de la pérdida, del sentimiento de abandono, al lograr visualizar el cuerpo sufriente de su padre” [“transcend his own pain about the loss, from the feeling of abandonment, to succeeding in visualizing the suffering body of his father”] (Badagnani 8, translation mine). This ability to visualize the body of his father and understand his suffering is a revelation to Rubén:

Hasta ahora no había pensado en el dolor de mi padre, así de simple. En lo terrible que tiene que haber sido para él. Siempre lo supe, siempre estuvo ahí, claro, pero para darme cuenta de cómo la pasé yo, del padre que *yo* no pude tener. Nunca paré un segundo para ponerme en su lugar, para sentir el dolor desgarrador que tiene que haber sido su partida, para tratar de imaginar que estaría sintiendo, en qué infierno estaba cuando se fue para siempre, en dónde nos tuvo a nosotros en ese momento. Y ahora lo veo acá, con todas las secuelas, un tipo que ha pasado por tanto, y me siento un idiota por no haberlo pensado antes. [“Until now I hadn’t thought about my father’s pain, as simple as that. About how terrible it must have been for him. I always knew, it was always there, sure, but only as a way of seeing how it affected me, reminding me of the father that *I* couldn’t have. I never stopped for a second to put myself in his place, to feel the heartrending pain that must have been his leaving, to try to imagine what he was feeling, what hell he was in when he went away for good, where he had us in that moment. And now I see him over there, with all the consequences, a guy who has gone through so much, and I feel



like an idiot for not having thought about it before.”] (Semán 272, emphasis original, translation mine)

This re-contextualization of his father’s death is made possible by the surreal and dreamlike way in which the island transforms to accommodate Rubén’s emotional process, removing walls, both the literal walls of the apartment in which he resides on the island, and the figurative walls of the pre-conceived ideas that limit his understanding. In this way, he can be audience to the impossible, post-mortem conversations between Luis and Capitán (or rather, since they are both dead, the manifestations of their spirits conjured by the island) and yet still remain a distant observer of the interaction rather than an active participant in the discourse. This distance allows him to disconnect from his personal feelings about how he was affected by the actions of these men, and, instead, bear witness to their humanity and to the suffering that they, in a sense, caused each other.

The island also provides Rubén with the capacity to review old memories through scanners, devices that can play back memories of events as they happened. Badagnani asserts that these devices “permiten al sujeto verse desde afuera” [“allow the subject to see themselves from outside”] (9, translation mine) and that, similarly to the technique used in *Los rubios*, in which Carri’s use of an actor to portray herself allows her to view her own experience from an exterior and distanced perspective, Rubén can, here, view events of his childhood “con la distancia de las décadas” [“with the distance of decades”] (Semán 74, translation mine). This distance, at which he re-experiences these memories, again allows him to gain a new perspective with which he can better understand the man who was “secuestrado, torturado y asesinado por las fuerzas armadas y de seguridad de su país – llevándose todo, llevándose para que se lleve

todo, dejando de este lado del mundo la frase infame” [“kidnapped, tortured, and assassinated by the armed security forces of his country – taking everything away, taking it away until everything was taken, leaving on this side of the world the infamous phrase”] (Semán 74).

The “infamous phrase” referenced in the previous citation comes from one such projected memory in which we see, from the anonymous and objective perspective referred to by the narrator as “Nobody POV” (Semán 73), an interaction between Camarada Luis Abdela and his young son in which, as Maarten Geeroms describes, “[s]e observa cómo el dogmatismo intransigente del primero se halla cuestionado por la confrontación con la lógica ingenua del niño” [“it is observed how the uncompromising dogmatism of the former is found in question by its confrontation with the naïve logic of the boy”] (Geeroms 163, translation mine). Rubén has been playing with a friend and approaches his father, distressed that his friend has taken his toys:

-[...] él me robó el autito y siempre me saca todos los juguetes. ¡Los juguetes son míos!

-No, vení acá, Rubencito. Escúchame bien: los juguetes no son tuyos. Los juguetes *son*.

[-“[...] he stole my little car from me and he always takes all my toys. The toys are mine!

-No, come here, Rubencito. Listen to me well: the toys are not yours. The toys just *are*.”]

(Semán 74, emphasis original, translation mine)

Shortly after witnessing this interaction from his past, Rubén, who has been established as the narrator and protagonist of chapters taking place on La Isla, describes his experience and resulting realizations in the third person, further emphasizing the analytical capability and objective perspective provided by this distanced take on memory:

Leyendo el guion, repasando los diálogos con la distancia de las décadas, todo es tan obvio y no por eso es más banal: la relación entre Luis Abdela, su hijo Rubén y los juguetes está levemente desplazada, el audio llega después de la imagen y termina por referir al objeto equivocado, perdiéndose de vista que lo que Rubén reclama no es la posesión de Los Juguetes sino su propia pertenencia a Luis. [Reading the script, reviewing the dialogues with the distance of decades, it's all so obvious and that doesn't make it more banal: the relationship between Luis Abdela, his son Rubén, and the toys is slightly displaced, the audio arrives after the image and ends by referring to the wrong object, losing sight of the fact that what Rubén claims is not possession of The Toys, but his own belonging to Luis.] (74)

Rubén sees, now, that what his younger self wanted was for his father to show ownership of him, to be responsible for him, and come to his defense when he was being treated unfairly, but what he got instead was that “infamous phrase”: “The toys are not yours. The toys just *are*.” (Semán 74, translation mine, emphasis original). It is an abstract lesson on the nature of property and ownership that is demonstrative not solely of Luis’ communist ideals, but of his incomprehension of the fact that his son needed to feel supported. And so, the complaint voiced by Alcoba’s protagonist in *La casa de los conejos*, that her parent “had not understood well” (ch. 1, translation mine) is quite applicable here as well. Both children have attempted to communicate with their parents, only to receive responses that leave them feeling unheard and as if their needs and desires have taken a backseat to their parents’ political ideals.

Rubén emphasizes the bitterness he feels over this incident when a few sentences later, he returns to speaking in the first person, saying: “Entreguemos la propiedad, eso es lo de menos.

Pero un poco de tradición y familia no nos hubiera venido mal” [“Let’s surrender our property, that’s the least of it. But a little tradition and family wouldn’t hurt.”] (Semán 74, translation mine). Geeroms interprets this as an expression of “su anhelo de una historia familiar en que inscribirse, y la medida en que la obstinación de Luis impide la realización de este deseo” [“his longing for a family history in which to inscribe himself, and the degree to which the stubbornness of Luis impedes the realization of this desire”] (163, translation mine). What follows after this statement of frustration, is Rubén’s idea for how to deal with the past:

Si uno es mínimamente consecuente con sus ideas y preocupaciones, lo mejor que puede hacer con el pasado es destruirlo, juntar lo que queda y tenerlo debidamente catalogado, para no olvidarlo ni tener que pensar en ello, porque los que viven, y nos importan, están acá, aquí y ahora y todavía sin llegar. [If one is minimally consistent with one’s ideas and concerns, the best that can be done with the past is to destroy it, gather what remains, and have it appropriately catalogued, in order to neither forget it, nor have to think about it, because those that live, and they are important to us, are there, here and now, and yet to arrive.] (Semán 75, translation mine)

Here, he insists that one must destroy or deconstruct the past, rendering it inert and catalogable so that it remains accessible if needed, but doesn’t plague one’s thoughts, and, therefore, frees mental and emotional space that can be dedicated to connecting more deeply with the loved ones who still remain and who have yet to arrive. In this, we see evidence of Geeroms analysis that “la reelaboración del trauma de la desaparición corre pareja con otro cambio de posturas: la reanudación de los vínculos familiares en el mundo real” [“the reworking of the trauma of the

disappearance goes hand in hand with another change of position: the resuming of familial bonds in the real world”] (159, translation mine). Over the length of the novel, we see that Rubén grows closer with his mother and brother as he navigates the process of confronting his feelings about his father. Additionally, the inclusion of “yet to arrive” is perhaps foreshadowing of the fact that, at the end of the story, he finds out that his wife, in the United States, is pregnant, and that the journey he has undertaken to put his past behind him has left him more able to be present for his own child than his father was for him, thus preventing the transmission of his trauma to the next generation.

However, La Isla is not the only place where Rubén confronts and rebuilds his father’s memory. In a scene that takes place in “La Ciudad”, in their mother’s apartment, Rubén and his brother read a letter that their father wrote to her before they were born. In it, they witness the extremity of his beliefs and his naivete, and each brother has a different reaction to this new glimpse into his mindset. Agustín calls him “un psicópata” [“a psychopath”] and says “Decime quién mierda escribe una carta de amor que menciona a todos y cada uno de los genocidios de la humanidad” [“Tell me who the fuck writes a love letter that mentions each and every genocide in human history”] (Semán 194, translation mine). Rubén, despite the criticism and resentment he has already displayed, defends his father’s letter as one of “un psicopata enamorado, al menos” [“a psychopath in love, at least”] (Semán 194, translation mine) adding that “aun con todas sus vueltas, sus perversiones infatuadas y su pasión fundida entre el futuro y la muerte, la del Camarada Abdela era una carta de amor, y eso es más que lo que podemos decir de buena parte de la humanidad” [“even with all its twists, its infatuated perversions, and its passion caught between the future and death, Comrade Abdela’s letter was one of love, and that’s more than we can say for the better part of humanity”] (Semán 196, translation mine). It is notable that his

defense of his father is spoken aloud, in argument against his brother who he says is “demasiado enojado como para leer la carta. [Está] enojado por toda la situación, y eventualmente por el hecho de que [su] mamá haya atado su vida a esa carta” [“too angry to read the letter. [He’s] angry about the whole situation, and eventually about the fact that their mother had tied her life to that letter”] (Semán 195, translation mine). Rubén later reveals, after their argument has ended and the text has shifted back to his interior thoughts, that he agrees with his brother’s sentiment more than he let on, saying:

Como él, yo también estaba seguro de que la vida misma en esa jungla le había permitido a Rosa rescatar *la materia humana de la que estaba hecho el mocoso insolente que había escrito esa carta*, a amarlo hasta los huesos en su descomunal imperfección y no en la chatura de los héroes. [Like him, I, too, was sure that her very life in that jungle had allowed Rosa to salvage *whatever human material made up the insolent brat who had written that letter*, and love him to the bone with all of his colossal imperfections, and not in the superficial way that one loves heroes.] (Semán 197, emphasis and translation mine)

The fact that he, in his internal dialogue, still refers to his father as “the insolent brat”, even after arguing in his defense, exemplifies a reluctance to speak, out loud at least, ill of his dead father. Instead, he wrestles with his conflicting feelings on his own, commenting that “El Camarada Abdela sabía mucho mejor por qué morir que cómo vivir, eso fue algo que siempre habíamos intuido, pero la carta era la evidencia que nos había dejado por escrito.” [“Comrade Abdela knew much better what to die for than how to live. That was something we had always intuited, but the

letter was the evidence he had left us in writing.”] (Semán 198). Kordon and Edelman describe a form of grief often experienced by Hijos when confronted with new information about their disappeared loved one, information that contradicts the idea of the person that they had formed in their memory:

No se trata en este caso de un duelo por la pérdida real de progenitor, sino de un duelo por la imagen previa que se tenía de él, este padre o madre que se sale a encontrar, no será el mismo que el imaginario a lo largo de toda la vida de su hijo. Hay diferencias de rasgos, características generales, ideas, valores. Se da un movimiento simultáneo de encuentro y de pérdida. [In this case, it has nothing to do with the grief over the real loss of the progenitor, but of a grief over the prior image that they had of him, this father or mother that they go out to find, will not be the same as the one imagined throughout the entire life of the child. There are differences of traits, general characteristics, ideas, values. This produces a simultaneous movement between discovery and loss.] (65, translation mine)

It is perhaps, then, because Rubén has already criticized his father so much in his own mind, or because his experiences on La Isla up to this point in the novel have already led to a better understanding of Luis, that this information is less contradictory to the “prior image that they had of him” (Kordon and Edelman 65, translation mine), and therefore less shocking to him than it was to Agustín.

Along with the letter, in the box that their mother gifted them just before her death, was a family photo (in the book, Semán inserts a real photo of his family from the time described, further reinforcing his connection with the character of Rubén), some money that she had set

aside for them, and *Chinastro*, “el regalo mítico que Luis Abdela había legado a sus hijos” [“the mythical gift that Luis Abela had bequeathed to his sons”] (Semán 186, translation mine). This toy airplane, that Luis had brought home from China for his sons, is the image represented on the cover, and also where the novel it derives its title:

[...] adentro de la cápsula seguía Chinastro, esa versión retro de Capitán Escarlata del otro lado de la cortina de hierro, con su mirada triunfal y sonriente hacia adelante, la bufanda blanca volando hacia atrás, y la gorra roja con la inscripción en mandarín que habíamos aprendido de memoria: “Soy un bravo piloto de la nueva China.” Los juguetes son, pero Chinastro es mío. Y te sobrevivió, a vos y a tu desafortunada frase, Camarada Abdela. [...] inside the capsule, Chinastro was still there, that retro version of Captain Scarlet from the other side of the Iron Curtain, with his triumphant, smiling expression looking forward, his white scarf flying backwards, and his red cap with the Mandarin inscription that we had learned by heart: “I am a brave pilot of the New China.” Toys are, but Chinastro is mine. And it survived you, you and your unfortunate phrase, Comrade Abdela.] (Semán 186, translation mine)

In this description of *Chinastro*, we can see how much the toy meant to Rubén, and even though he assumed it had been lost in a move, he admits that “ya en ese entonces lo extrañaba” [“even then [he] missed it”] (Semán 186, translation mine). The toy represents that, while Luis was committed to communism, he also cared for his sons enough to bring them a gift he thought they would enjoy. We also see Rubén’s defiance of those communist principles and his father’s previous declaration that “The toys just *are*.” (Semán 74, emphasis original, translation mine), in



his assertion that “Chinaastro is *mine*” (Semán 186, translation and emphasis mine). There is a mixture of resentment, gratefulness, and triumph present in the phrase “And it survived you, you and your unfortunate phrase, Comrade Abdela.” (Semán 186, translation mine). The fact that the toy survived, and he has reclaimed it, feels like a victory, and yet we still see his frustration that his father, through that “infamous phrase”, would have had him surrender this last symbol their connection. And perhaps Rubén, after having made the long journey through his memory, will be like that “brave pilot”, with a “triumphant, smiling expression”, looking forward into a new stage of his life.

At the end of the novel, after Rubén has made the breakthrough of imagining himself in his father’s position and the pain he must have felt, he is talking with Raquel, an ex-girlfriend who has been his companion on La Isla, who explains to him that he can’t stay behind on the island and that “[u]no necesita un lugar así al que poder volver siempre. Y a veces el descubrimiento más importante no es tanto reconocer ese lugar, como darse cuenta de los que van quedando atrás” [“one needs a place like that to always return to. And sometimes the most important discovery isn’t so much recognizing that place, as much as noticing those who stay behind”] (Semán 274, translation mine). Yet Rubén feels as if his connection to his father, by definition, keeps him in the past, saying: “Pero yo también soy eso que queda atrás. Yo soy Abdela.” [“But I’m also one of the ones who stays behind. I’m an Abdela.”] (Semán 274, translation mine). She then responds in a way that both confirms his connection and his identity as his father’s son, while at the same time pointing him towards the future: “Y tus hijos serán Abdela, como que hay Dios. Pero tenés que saber cuál es *tu* puerto, adónde vas a desembarcar con toda tu Abdelez a cuestas. Si no vas a ser siempre el equipaje de algún otro viaje” [“And your children will be Abdelas, you can bet on it. But you have to know which is *your* stop, where

you're going to disembark with all of your Abdelanness in tow. If you're to not always be the baggage of some other journey.”] (Semán 274, emphasis original, translation mine). In order to avoid being the baggage of someone else's journey, he must accept his identity as an Abdela, with all of its implications, and carry it back into the real world, into a future that he defines. In this vein, she adds: “Ruby, esto que estás viendo acá [la conversación entre u padre y Capitán en otro edificio adyacente] es tu pasado, pero no es tu historia. En el pasado no hay lugar para tu historia, Ruby.” [“Ruby, this that you're seeing over there [the conversation between his father and Capitán taking place in an adjacent building] is your past, but it's not your story. In the past, there's no room for your story, Ruby.”] (Semán 274, translation mine). In framing these statements with this affectionate nickname, she emphasizes a caring and personal tone, but also his agency in his own life, that his story begins and ends with him and that he must move forward in whatever way he sees fit, leaving the past behind, inalterable. After this conversation, La Isla, having served its purpose, shrinks and disappears.

In the Epilogue, we find Rubén closing up his affairs in Buenos Aires and planning his trip home after the death of Rosa. While on a bus across town, he receives the call in which his wife reveals that she is pregnant, thus shifting his identity from “hijo de” to “padre de” and symbolizing the new story and future that he will create for now that he has come to terms with his past. Semán then ends the novel in almost the same way it began, with Rubén entering his apartment to find:

[...] la sombra de un cuerpo colgado en el centro del living. Era extraño, la luz entraba en diagonal por la ventana enfrente a la puerta, con la intensidad de un reflejo claro y artificial, naranja como en las noches calurosas de tormenta. [...the shadow of a

body hanging in the center of the living room. It was strange, the light entered on a diagonal through the window facing the door, with the intensity of a clear and artificial reflection, orange like on hot stormy nights.] (283, translation mine)

He differentiates this instance, though, with the fact that, this time, the body has “las formas de alguna foto familiar, pero vestido apenas con una manta sucia y manchada de sangre” [“the shapes of a familiar photo, but barely dressed in a dirty and blood-stained blanket”] (Semán 283, translation mine), showing evidence of the suffering he has endured. Rubén is startled, drops his bag and falls against the wall “sin que [él] pudiera terminar de entrar ni de cerrar la puerta” [“without being able to finish entering or closing the door”], but, after taking a moment to compose himself, is able to “levantar la vista con tranquilidad mientras recuperaba la respiración” [“calmly lift his gaze while [he] regained [his] breath”] to find that “[e]n el living no había cuerpos, ni padres, ni hijos, y por la ventana entraba toda la luz del día y el ruido de los autos que a esa hora buscaban las calles con menos tránsito para salir cuanto antes de Buenos Aires” [“in the living room were neither bodies, nor fathers, nor sons, and through the window entered the full light of day and the noise of cars that, at this hour, searched for the roads with the least traffic to leave Buenos Aires as soon as possible.”] (Semán 284, translations mine). In this ending that so mirrors the beginning, Semán shows the journey that Rubén has undertaken and the growth he has accomplished. He does see the body of his father again, but this time he understands the pain his father endured and is able to gather himself, and even though in this moment he has still yet to “close the door”, when he looks up he is no longer haunted by his father’s death but sees the brightness and noise of the outside world and is eager to “leave Buenos Aires as soon as possible” to continue living out his own story.

### 3 CONCLUSION

The exploration of these works created by Hijos demonstrates the complex mixture of feelings they experienced as a result of their parents' absence. In these novels and films, we see the inherent love that children feel for their parents, as well as the admiration for their courage in fighting against an oppressive, terrorist regime, but we also see their resentment, frustration, and feelings of abandonment when their needs are not being met or when they realize that the people whose responsibility it was to care for them, willingly and knowingly dedicated themselves to a cause, which, while noble, would likely get them killed.

Anne Schützenberger explains that this resentment for “suffered injustice” can manifest as problems that are “passed on from generation to generation” (18). She goes on to explain that these suffered injustices can be at the individual level of a “lack of emotional attention” or “to be an orphan”, as we have seen in the lives of the protagonists in these works, but that they can also occur on the national level of “wars, massacres, oppressions, diverse genocides” which constitute the larger context in which these stories are situated (Schützenberger 24).

In examining these works, we can see that the protagonists of these novels and films experienced the trauma of their loved ones being taken from them at a young age, whether by the direct brutality of being disappeared and/or killed by the military regime, or, in the case of Alcoba's novel, by the steadfast commitment to struggle against it, which indirectly resulted in neglect. In the works of Alcoba, Ávila, and Robles, their child protagonists also experienced trauma through the environment of fear and tension that caused the adults in their lives to react with aggression or avoidance when faced with common childhood behaviors and inquiries, leaving their needs for physical and emotional safety largely unmet. Furthermore, their inability

to speak of their trauma, whether due to fear or lack of support, hindered their ability to process and move past these difficult experiences. This unprocessed trauma combined with, in the works of Robles, Carri, and Semán, the uncertainty and lack of closure about their parents' fates, and lack of information about the parents themselves, impeded their ability to construct and actualize their own identities.

The creators of these works have used their art to make their voices, which, prior to the founding of H.I.J.O.S. had been largely missing from public discourse about the so-called “dirty war”, heard. In doing so, they have also transformed the landscape of that discourse, expanding its scope to explore the lingering effects that this period had on the children who lived through it, as well as the flawed humanity of their parents. Indeed, their parents were courageous, but they were also human: they made mistakes; the ferocity of their idealism may have blinded them to the responsibility and everyday work of raising children; they put themselves in harm's way, and without ever intending it, left their children to suffer in their absence. In elaborating on these themes using autobiographical fiction, they are able to distance themselves from their own painful experiences allowing them to more easily access and express their often conflicting emotions. The use of fiction in general, along with unusual narrative structures, and creative film techniques, allows these authors and directors to more accurately and impactfully emphasize the *feelings* of their childhoods in addition to the elusive and unreliable nature of memory. These abstract concepts and emotions that rest at the core of these works are also, in a sense, “the unspeakable” in that they would be, if not impossible, at least challenging or impractical to represent in traditional documentary style, or through purely factual and linear descriptions of events.

Schützenberger explains that, at times, “[p]eople hold onto a resentment that works away at them and undermines their health, sometimes leading to cancer and death” (25), but suggests that a solution to cure this resentment would begin with “being able to speak the unspeakable and unthinkable, making oneself heard, having the facts and the wrongs done acknowledged” (55). In the process of creating these films and novels, these Hijos went through the process of elaborating the details, whether supplemented by fiction or not, of their experiences, memories, and feelings. They have spoken the unspeakable, broken with the tradition of simply praising the heroic sacrifices of their parents, and chosen to see them as they were. This process has allowed them to express their grievances and frustrations, “reclamar su propio protagonismo” [“claim their own place as protagonists”] (Peller 20, translation mine), and, perhaps in that way, let go of their bitterness, while at the same time leaving their stories and experiences available to future generations without also passing on the burdensome weight of trauma and resentment.

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