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Casas tomadas: Leopoldo Brizuela's *Una misma noche*

As the narrator of Leopoldo Brizuela's 2012 novel *Una misma noche* begins to pen a novel, he mentions "a sort of *casa tomada*," in reference to his home that was broken into by military operatives in 1976. Like Cortázar's "Casa tomada," Brizuela's novel—winner of the 2012 Alfaguara prize—considers divided factions that are vying for their place within political representation in Argentina. *Una misma noche*'s diegesis straddles 1976—the first year of the country's military dictatorship—and 2010—a watershed year for the country's Kirchnerist leadership.¹ The Kirchners' discourse included a condemnation of the dictatorship's human rights violations as well as a celebration of 1970s militant struggle.² *Una misma noche* asks: what is the place of those who were neither victims nor aggressors (and perhaps were even accomplices) in present-day memorial culture? In his attempt to write a diegetic novel about his personal experiences, Brizuela's narrator reflects on the Kirchners' rhetoric as well as existing accounts of the 1970s. The narrative culminates in the narrator-protagonist's visit to Buenos Aires's ex-ESMA (*Escuela Mecánica de la Armada*), a notorious clandestine torture and detention center—now converted into a memory space. ESMA is figured as but one of the novel's *lieux de mémoire* that are the site of contested memories and narratives about the recent past. By exploring the contestation intrinsic to memory work, I argue, Brizuela shows that narratives about memory and recent history reflect Argentina's past as well as the country's present, wherein contested versions of the past continue to inform current politics.

While existing analyses of *Una misma noche* have focused on the complicated issues of culpability at play (Berlanga 2012; Frieria 2012; Ramos 2012; Reati 2015; Deffis 2016), they have eschewed the novel's interrogation of present-day memorial culture and make no mention of Kirchnerist politics, despite the novel's overt references to the Kirchners. These readings, I

maintain, do not take into account Brizuela's treatment of Kirchnerist Argentina and the way in which the legacy of 1970s militancy figures into Kirchnerist politics and memory discourse. Indeed, these readings have tended to overlook the novel's chapters set in 2010 altogether.³ Yet this year was a watershed moment in Argentina for both current politics and narratives about the country's history. In her discussion of the 2010 bicentenary, Cecilia Dinardi notes, "ways of assembling the past intersect in the current [Kirchnerist] national political agenda to reaffirm the national government's ideological views and highlight the crucial role played by Néstor Kirchner's administration in 2003 in the country's recovery from the crises" (223). In this way, the country's bicentenary celebration and Néstor's death, two 2010 events that frame *Una misma noche*'s narrative, are fundamental examples of the ways in which memory and present politics bear on one another in Argentine society.

I begin my consideration of *Una misma noche* with a brief summary of the novel. From there, I take into account prevalent theories on memory in both a global and specifically Argentine context. After a brief contextualization of Brizuela's novel within current Argentine cultural production, I turn my focus to the narrator's self-positioning vis-à-vis literature about the 1970s and social roles in post-dictatorship. My analysis of the novel's intertextuality and its depiction of the ESMA space comprise a two-pronged approach to the novel's treatment of rival interpretations of the recent past within the context of the novel's present for, as I submit, written texts and memorial spaces both constitute contested sites of memory. As I conclude, the novel's engagement with current politics contributes to timely conversations on how ethical categories rooted in recent history continue to inform narratives of belonging and national identity.

In order to consider the novel's emphasis on the interplay between past and present, I offer here a cursory summary of the novel's plot. The narrative thread connecting the year 1976

to the year 2010 is an intrusion into a house on the narrator's street. Over the course of the novel, we learn that in 1976 a *grupo de tareas* first entered the family house of our narrator, then thirteen-year-old Leonardo Bazán—an alter ego of Leopoldo Brizuela—and later the neighbors' house in search of a woman who lived next door with the help of Leonardo's father, who was at that point retired from the Navy.⁴ At the present moment, 2010, a house on the block has again been mysteriously entered. We understand that the earlier event is a traumatic memory that the narrator has repressed as an adult, as I will elaborate later.⁵ This complicated memory includes having been victim, witness, and semi-accomplice to the break-in that occurs to his own house as well as to the neighbors'. In the chapters set in 2010, Leonardo meets with his friend, Miki, whose father was disappeared and who has connections with the group H.I.J.O.S.⁶ Leonardo also seeks out his childhood neighbor, Diana Kuperman, whom the soldiers captured, as he works through his repressed memories of 1976.⁷ At the same time, Leonardo begins to write a diegetic novel about the intrusion, in what we come to understand as an attempt to reconcile divisions between victims, aggressors, and accomplices in the dictatorship's brutality. His efforts are thwarted, however, when he visits the ex-ESMA with Miki and finds that he is incapable of identifying fully with victims of state repression.

As I argue, *Una misma noche* seeks to elucidate the contestation constantly going on within sites of memory. To consider this phenomenon, we may take into account Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, Elizabeth Jelin's emphasis on contestation as integral to memory work, and Andreas Huyssen's idea of "present pasts." Pierre Nora defines *lieux de mémoire* as "any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community" (xvii). Nora delineates between *lieux de mémoire* and *milieux de mémoire*, arguing that societies that

actively remember the past – integrating memory into their whole environment (*milieux*) – have given way to cultures that concentrate memory in specific spaces and sites (*lieux*). In present-day Argentina, however, the recent past pervades living memory and is constantly debated and discussed, so that the lines between *lieux* and *milieux* are often blurred.

Likewise, in a move that acknowledges the conceptual limits of the distinction between *lieux* and *milieux*, Andreas Huyssen posits that Nora's binary needs to be "pushed in a different direction, one that does not rely on a discourse of loss and accepts the fundamental shift in structures of feeling, experience, and perception as they characterize our simultaneously expanding and shrinking present" (24).⁸ As I will show, this shifting discourse that Huyssen proposes corresponds to the narrator's experience that he suggests is not accounted for within civil discourse or existing literature that has focused overwhelmingly on such a "discourse of loss." We may also think of this "fundamental shift" in terms of what Elizabeth Jelin terms the contestation of memory, which she submits is integral to the maintenance of democracy. Jelin posits: "*once sufficient time has elapsed to make possible the establishment of a minimal degree of distance between past and present, alternative (even rival) interpretations of that recent past and its memory occupy a central place in cultural and political debates*" (xvii, italics original). With a similar focus on rival interpretations of the recent past, Brizuela's novel offers various *lieux de mémoire* in order to consider divisions within present-day society owing to rival interpretations of Argentina's recent military dictatorship.

Specifically, Brizuela's narrator seeks to explore and to question the politics of memory through the act of writing. In this regard, the novel recalls Beatriz Sarlo's consideration of postmemory in recent Argentine culture: "postmemory is both an effect of discourse and a particular relationship with materials for reconstruction" (157). In *Una misma noche*, these

“materials for reconstruction” are modes of narrating. Sarlo’s mention of postmemory draws from Marianne Hirsch’s term, which has been popularized in many recent critical interventions on Argentine cultural production. For Hirsch, childhood witnessing has a particularly complicated role in memory function, which bears mentioning here since our narrator’s recall of the break-in next door in 1976 is a repressed childhood memory that, as we will see, compels him to foster solidarity with childhood victims of state violence. Hirsch posits that in the case of children’s “heteropathic recollection,” “the layers of recollection and the subjective topography are even more complicated. The adult subject of postmemory encounters the image of the child victim as the child witness, and thus...memory is triangulated. Identification is affiliative group or generational identification” (166). While postmemory functions in the novel on the level of our narrator’s individual psychological composition, it is also manifest in a more widespread generational aspect that has more political (as opposed to psychological) implications, as I will show in my analysis of the novel’s scenes set in the ex-ESMA.

I argue that the novel evinces the points of contact between the politics of memory, social categories of belonging and exclusion, and the ethics of civilian and state violence. Brizuela presents these ethical dilemmas so as to engage with Kirchnerist discourse surrounding the dictatorship, specifically questions of victimization and heroicity. The narrator reflects on his neighbor’s mistrust of the police after the 2010 break-in occurs: “Robert is right-wing...The fact that even he, who came to this neighborhood at the height of dictatorship, has come to realize the evil of the police, gives me a feeling of victory or revenge. A win for this government that I support” (22). Leonardo derives an odd pleasure from hearing that his conservative neighbor distrusts the police, a sensation he connects to Kirchnerist politics. Akin to his narrator’s assertion that he supports this government, Brizuela himself has indicated, “*Una misma noche* is

a novel very much of the Kirchnerist period, which I support, but it also tries to think through certain issues from a different depth. What I mean here is not judging people from a place of absolute purity and heroism. The most difficult thing to do is to take on the connection with evil, which is in all of us” (“No estoy hablando del pasado”). As Brizuela suggests here and as I will show, the novel posits an interplay between the ethical question of the capacity for evil that exists in all of us, on the one hand, and judgments based on absolute purity and heroism that have come about as a side effect of Kirchnerist politics, on the other.

Leonardo perceives himself as marginalized as he attempts to pen a novel about the past within a panorama of victims, aggressors, and accomplices because he is uncertain of his role. In this sense, *Una misma noche* forms part of a broader constellation of recent Argentine cultural production that engages in complicated ethical questions of social complicity during the country’s dictatorship. Such novels include Luis Gusmán’s *Villa* (1995), Liliana Heker’s *El fin de la historia* (1996), Martín Kohan’s *Dos veces junio* (2002), and María Inés Krimer’s *Lo que nosotras sabíamos* (2009).⁹ While these novels all explore questions of complicity and even willing collaboration with the military regime, they predate the advent of Kirchnerism and do not take into account the political valence of memory within the Kirchnerist era, with the exception of Krimer’s novel, published in 2009 but set entirely in the 1970s.¹⁰ *Una misma noche* is unique in its explicit consideration of individuals who were complicit in the dictatorial regime vis-à-vis the ubiquitous conversations and debates over memory that characterized the Kirchnerist years. The ethical ambiguities that Brizuela’s novel presents correspond to the author’s avowed sense of belonging to a generation of authors afflicted by “a historical conscience weighed down by the guilt of being part of a generation without conscience” (paraphrased in Drucaroff 159). Similarly, Reati submits that *Una misma noche* forces us to think of what those who were not

necessarily torturers or murderers might have done to facilitate the torture and repression that occurred throughout the country during the dictatorship (343). The novel is at times disquieting in its exploration of complicated ethical topics.¹¹

Intertextuality as Contestation

In order to explore these ethical questions, the novel repeatedly references the CONADEP's (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas) report *Nunca Más* and other juridical and testimonial accounts of state terror, crime fiction, Cortázar's "Casa tomada," and national and international novels that emphasize "the ethical conflicts of the internally tortured narrator" (Deffis 14). In this sense, Leonardo engages intertextually with existing stories about dictatorship not by directly naming fictional texts about the time period, but through references to testimonial accounts, crime fiction, a story about a house overtaken, and literary works that consider ethical questions of culpability.

Throughout the novel, Brizuela relies on intertextuality in order to consider the ways in which memory has been treated in existing cultural production. The novel's intertextual elements allow for a degree of self-reflexivity that can largely be considered as autofiction, in keeping with Jordana Blejmar's focus in *Playful Memories: The Autofictional Turn in Post-Dictatorship Argentina*. Blejmar submits that autofiction "can make us better understand, through [...] self-reflexivity, the relations between documentary evidence, recall and imaginative investment that are common to *all* forms of memory" (6). For her part, Leonor Arfuch posits a correlation between the rise in autofictional accounts of the 1970s and a "generational turn" (548) in cultural production, which she also maintains has created space for more points of view. In this vein, the autofictional aspects of Brizuela's novel are integral to exploration of divergent subjectivities that inflect both collective and individual forms of memory. Geoffrey Maguire would analyze a

largely similar corpus of texts to Blejmar and Arfuch in his *The Politics of Postmemory: Violence and Victimhood in Contemporary Argentine Culture*, calling for “distinctly Argentine expressions of postmemory to be read with a heightened theoretical sensitivity towards their intrinsic *political* core’ a politics not simply of memory, but one which also encompasses issues of generational identity, historical representation and the recent institutionalisation of victimhood itself” (3). Yet none of these studies takes Brizuela’s novel into account, likely because they all focus on works that question the ethical and political paradigms of memory and 1970s militancy, but do so from the point of view of children of militants.¹² On the contrary, Brizuela’s narrator reflects on the country’s past (and present) from the point of view of a child whose father was complicit with the regime. This belonging to a different category—which Leonardo makes explicit during his narration of his visit to the ESMA—distinguishes *Una misma noche* from other works. Moreover, it is precisely *why* his narrator perceives himself to be marginalized to Kirchnerist politics and tries to work through his unease by writing.

Brizuela’s consideration of new ways of narrating the recent past recalls literary critic Elsa Drucaroff’s assertion that early 21st-century Argentine fiction—which she dubs “nueva narrativa argentina”—is fraught with the problem of how to tell new stories about the nation’s recent history. Drucaroff submits that these authors wonder: “where is the innovation, their own clarity of their live circumstances, what do they have to contribute to the specific historical moment in which they are living” (53). In this vein, in addition to distancing himself from “lugares comunes,” Leonardo rejects “frases generalizadoras.” As he sits down to write a novel about the 1976 break-in, he reflects: “‘Whoever hasn’t gone crazy is either deaf or senile,’ I jot down in my notebook. But I immediately cross it out: generalizing statements serve no purpose. What I have to do, once and for all, is narrate what happened that night. A novel” (42). From its

inception, Leonardo's diegetic novel seeks to tell a story that differs from clichés and generalizations about the 1970s.

Leonardo positions himself as an heir to twentieth-century Argentine fiction by referring to “a sort of house taken over” (60). Julio Cortázar's “Casa tomada,” like Leonardo's diegetic novel, tells the story of a house taken over by invaders. “Casa tomada” also engages with existing literature. Cortázar was a lifelong reader of Edgar Allen Poe and many critics see “The Fall of the House of Usher” as an intertext for “Casa tomada” (Ferré; Bautista; Rosenblat). As Daniel Bautista has noted, “Although it is impossible to know if Cortázar consciously had ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ in mind when he wrote ‘Casa tomada,’ the stories share enough similarities to make it read like a modern rewriting of the Poe tale” (3). Both “Casa tomada” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” create domestic spaces inhabited by the oligarchical status quo.

For his part, Brizuela depicts the space of a home that was taken over by dictatorial agents and that now, decades later, seems to be haunted by the memory of that takeover. In 2010 the house has been divided and Leonardo lives upstairs while his mother lives downstairs. This division of the house recalls “Casa tomada” in which the protagonists are relegated to an ever-shrinking section of the house before ultimately fleeing. His mother's nearly moribund status recalls Madeline Usher's condition as she verges death and is then buried alive. She lives in a different section of the house that is, for Leonardo, a different reality altogether.

“Casa tomada” has widely been understood to be an allegory of Peronism in which the house represents the nation, as Juan José Sebreli interpreted in 1964.¹ Many subsequent

¹ Juan José Sebreli put forth in 1964, “A story by Cortázar, “Casa tomada,” can be interpreted as an allegory of this anguished sensation of invasion that internal migration [of working-class Argentines from outside of Buenos Aires] provoked among the Buenos Aires middle class” (loc. 1557). Rosario Ferré posits, “in ‘Casa tomada’ it is the descendants of the old landed bourgeoisie that find themselves threatened by the surge of Peronismo in Argentina” (qtd. in Bautista 3).

interpretations would follow suit. Some critics, however, would refute this reading.²

Nonetheless, Brizuela's intertextual reference to "Casa tomada" takes on a patently political valence insofar as the narrator refers to "a sort of house taken over" as he attempts to pen a novel about the country's current political climate. Unlike "Casa tomada" (or "The Fall of the House of Usher," for that matter), Brizuela's novel is not circumscribed to the space of the family's house. In fact, as I will address later, the ESMA functions more as an allegorical space of the nation than the narrator's home. Moreover, Leonardo is a very different type of narrator than Cortázar's. While Cortázar's narrator has been interpreted as opposed to the advent of Peronism, Leonardo, as we have seen, tells us explicitly that he supports the Kirchnerist government. Yet, as a possible accomplice to state terror, Leonardo does not see himself represented within the Kirchnerist discourse of victims and perpetrators. In this regard, we may think of Leonardo's conflicted feelings towards Kirchnerism as analogous to Cortázar's narrator's anxieties over the influx of the "cabecitas negras" that characterized Peronism in the 1950s. The Kirchners, in addition to forming part of the Peronist party, explicitly positioned themselves as purveyors of

Peter Standish would later note, "In discussing 'Casa tomada,' the first story for which he was noticed, I noted that an interpretation of it as political allegory was possible. Similarly, other stories of the early period have been pounced upon by critics eager to read them as veiled allusions to the dominant political and social order in the Argentina of Perón Cortázar himself denied that he had ever had any conscious political intention in writing these but accepted the legitimacy of these critics' readings. There had perhaps been an unconscious agenda at work" (122).

² Carlos Gamerro rejects Sebrelí's reading of "Casa tomada," referring to the interpretation of the text as an allegory of Peronism as a Bloomian "misreading" of the text that Gamerro attributes to Sebrelí's having read "Casa tomada" through the lens of Germán Rozenmacher's story "Cabecitas negras" in which Rozenmacher makes Cortázar's story more about Peronism through his intertextual reference to "Casa tomada." For purposes of my analysis of Brizuela's novel and its intertextual engagement with "Casa tomada," even if we reject the interpretation that Cortázar's story is dealing with Peronism, we may liken Brizuela's use of "Casa tomada" to talk about Kirchnerism (itself an iteration of Peronism) to Rozenmacher's.

the legacy of Juan and Eva Perón. However, like Cortázar's narrator, Leonardo's mindset and his reactions to the advent of new political sensibilities suggest a cynicism towards populist politics.

Brizuela's novel also includes intertextual references to non-fiction texts about recent history. Leonardo reflects, after his neighbor uses the term *zona liberada*, that he must have learned the term from *Nunca Más*. The report was first published in 1984 and re-edited in 2006 to include the advances in human rights that had taken place during the first Kirchner's presidency and to reframe author Ernesto Sabato's prologue which was often accused of propagating the so-called "dos demonios" theory.¹³ Brizuela's mention of his neighbor's reference to the report signals the CONADEP's importance within the habitus of post-dictatorial Argentina.¹⁴ He later remarks to his friend and fellow writer Miki that the accounts included in the *Nunca Más* report, in his estimation, "don't touch on the essential part of that experience" (83). The narrator continues to himself, not aloud to Miki, "Because we, that night, were not good. We *aren't* good. And I couldn't tell him that" (83). Leonardo thus suggests that his novel must be written because it will tell a story that has not yet been told about the dictatorship, specifically, a story about people who were not good. As I will elaborate further in the next section, Leonardo struggles to tell his story because he is not a victim and, by extension, not one of the "good guys."

Despite his direct allusions to existing texts, Leonardo differentiates his novel from accounts of the 1970s that have been represented in previous cultural production. He disclaims, for example, that the soldiers who arrived at his home did so in a Gran Torino and not in a Ford Falcon. He not only insists upon this discrepancy between his and others' experiences with military and paramilitary groups during the 1970s, but also refers to the Ford Falcon as a cliché of historical memory of the 1970s. Leonardo reflects as he begins to pen his novel: "What do we

have?...*A mother. A father. A son.* From there, a bunch of differences. From what? From the clichés of the stories that have been told about that period. I remember it was a Torino—not a green Falcon—that I discovered all of a sudden in front of my house” (42-3). For our narrator, the Ford Falcon constitutes a synecdoche of the 1970s.¹⁵ His insistence that the car that arrived at his home was not a Ford Falcon but a Gran Torino signals that the novel that he seeks to write constitutes, in his own estimation, a departure from the stories that have previously been told about this time period.

Una misma noche also engages directly with testimonial and juridical discourse. Many of the chapters begin “If they had called on me to testify,” the narrator reminds us that his experience has never been incorporated into testimonial accounts, likely because of his possible complicity. Deffis maintains in her analysis of *Una misma noche*: “Brizuela’s novel shows the return of traumatic memory in spirit of the protagonist that demands to be written beginning with a desired and imagined judicial declaration” (10). Leonardo describes the scene he observes while watching a YouTube video of his neighbor’s trial: “In the first row, underneath the signs with emblems, *Madres, Abuelas, HIJOS*, those whose claims the government had made their own. Farther back, of course, academics, militants, politicians, watching the parade from a strange height, proud of themselves” (165-66). The trial to which he is referring here involves his neighbor who was taken as a political prisoner; despite his having witnessed (and even facilitated) her kidnapping, he was never called on to testify. He is therefore left to watch the trial belatedly on YouTube; this mediated witnessing makes the trial another intertext of sorts with which he engages as he pens his novel. We may think of his provocative mention here of “those whose claims the government had made their own” in relation to intertextuality insofar as

here the narrator suggests that Kirchnerist politics appropriates the stories of the dictatorship's victims.

In addition to the repetition of "If they had called on me to testify," Brizuela intercalates parts of the neighbor's sworn testimony in the ESMA trials. In this regard, *Una misma noche* recalls Salvadoran author Horacio Castellanos Moya's intercalation of excerpts of testimonio in *Insensatez*, which has been termed "a post-testimonial narrative" (Sánchez Prado 2010) or "testimonio once removed" (Kokotovic).¹⁶ Testimonio thus becomes another intertext for the narrator in his creation of his own narrative modality for recounting the past.¹⁷ As he begins writing, he proposes to do so "not as someone who informs but rather as someone who discovers" (43). His assertion that he—as a writer—is not an informant but a sort of explorer would appear to contradict his repetition of "if they had called on me to testify." Just before he receives the transcript of his neighbor's sworn testimony, however, he proposes to himself: "Now I only had to confront it; to try to disarm it, saying everything, understanding everything. To write, finally, as a person who testifies" (155). That the narrator should shift his mission as a writer from discovering to declaring as a way of introducing his neighbor's testimony suggests a sort of appropriation of transcribed oral testimony into a non-victim's writing that recalls Castellanos Moya's narrator. As Blejmar, autofiction "can access the point of view of the other (the perpetrator) in ways that previous, testimony-based accounts could not" (6). The novel's distinctions between "the person who informs," "the person who discovers" and "the person who testifies" have crucial implications as far as different roles in present-day society—namely victims, witnesses, and accomplices—as I explore presently. Specifically, principles of inclusion and exclusion among these various roles in society explain precisely why memorial culture is so

vexed with contestation and rival interpretations of the past, as Leonardo also shows in his consideration of ESMA.

“El pibe de un ex-suboficial”

Indeed, when speaking of the ESMA, both past and present, Leonardo begins to use terms of “us” and “them.” He couches his father as “one of them” when his father is operating under the command of an officer. Similarly, he will proudly position himself as “among them, me” when he accompanies his friend Miki and his mother to the ESMA: “I think of Hebe, the *abuelas* I have seen...Something new beyond pain, or maybe beyond just pain, is driving them. Something that excludes me. But I am so proud to be, for the first time, among them, myself” (216). His mention here of “something that excludes me” recalls Huyssen’s enjoinder to move beyond loss. We may also think here of Jelin: “There are also those who did not have the ‘past experience’ themselves. This lack of experience puts them in another category: they are ‘others.’ For this group, memory is a *representation of the past constructed by a cultural knowledge shared by successive generations and by different ‘others’*” (21, emphasis original). Questions of inclusion within this panorama of political and personal groups pervade *Una misma noche*, leading us to understand that Leonardo is seeking a space and in which to reconcile the truths of the past few decades from outside a framework of ideological or political affiliation.

Leonardo’s father’s ties to the Navy undergird his feelings of being an outsider to the “ellos” mentioned above. As the novel progresses, the narrator somewhat reluctantly divulges his father’s background in the Navy and speculates as to why the *grupo de tareas* would have entered into his family’s house first, concluding that they were, in fact, seeking out his father as an accomplice to their breaking into the Kupermans’ and taking them prisoner. Most likely out of fear, the young Leonardo’s reaction to the *grupo de tarea*’s occupying his home was to sit at the

piano and ignore their presence, just as he would go on to repress his entire memory of the event.¹⁸ His father's Navy connections helped him and his family to escape further interrogation or repression. Yet Leonardo cannot but wonder whether his father was accomplice to the neighbors' disappearance; we learn that his father was the one who kicked in the door of the Kupermans' home, facilitating Diana's disappearance. In 2010, his father has passed away and his mother is either too senile or too stubborn to discuss that evening.¹⁹ Leonardo, then, is now the only carrier of this memory, which we understand has become inextricable from his identification with victims of dictatorial repression despite not being a direct victim himself. He knows that his father was a student at the ESMA and searches for information about the ESMA when it was a school; he finds only one book. This dearth of information impedes Leonardo's attempts to understand his father's motives and the role that his family played in the dictatorship's brutality.

In this vein, Leonardo notes that, from his perspective as a child, his father was a different person when operating under the orders of a superior commander. He notes: "As soon as the chief tells my father something I don't hear...he is no longer my father. He becomes one of them" (105). He then wonders to himself, as his father guides the men to the back of the house, "¿And what should the 'kid' of an ex Navy man do?" (107). His wondering what he should do as the child of a former non-commissioned officer evokes ethical questions of how certain social positions make certain behaviors appropriate or expected. Within the specific context of post-dictatorship Argentina, the question also recalls the *ley de obediencia debida*, passed in 1987 to grant amnesty to lower-ranking enlisted men who committed or facilitated acts of state terror on the basis that they were following orders from officers who outranked them. While most of these cases were later revisited and many perpetrators were prosecuted, such

questions of complicity—particularly in the case of a child, such as our narrator—continue to pervade cultural understandings of the dictatorial period. Leonardo positions himself as accomplice as well as witness to the kidnapping that would take place next door, shifting constantly between a genuine desire to understand better his father and a feeling of guilt for what he did not impede his father or the military men from doing.

We see that Leonardo's conflicting feelings over his complicity continue to inform his actions. In 2010, the narrator informs us that he has told his neighbor of the similar break-in that took place a few decades earlier, but cannot bring himself to disclose his own possible complicity. He states, "but I don't tell them that they came through my house first. Nor do I tell him what happened during those ten minutes that they stayed there with us and that I haven't dared to tell anyone ever and that now makes me tremble like a fever" (24). Leonardo thus divulges his unresolved feelings of culpability and fear stemming from this childhood memory and from his passive action of playing the piano rather than intervene in the soldiers' kidnapping of his neighbors. Through his mention that this secret makes him tremble "like a fever," we see that the narrator's feelings of culpability—which I would liken to Brizuela's previously mentioned frustration with himself for forming to a generation without a consciousness—borders on pathological, generating physical illness.

ESMA After Dictatorship

Likely due to these feelings of culpability, Leonardo also fails to identify fully with the victims of state repression as represented by the Kirchnerist memory space. Akin to the existing novels, histories, and memoirs that have been written about the 1970s, this space is yet another medium that does not provide Leonardo with the resolution that he seeks, but rather the existing ideological polarization that pervades the current Argentine political landscape. This visit to

ESMA is the culmination of Leonardo's search into his past after the 2010 break-in and the return of his repressed memory of Diana Kuperman, which have inspired him to find out more about Miki's identification with other victims of dictatorial repression. Leonardo hopes that visiting this site with Miki will allow him to reconcile some of the memories of the moment in 1976 when the soldiers entered his own house and to be able to finish his novel about that night. However, this attempt at an affective identification with the victims of state repression represented in the ESMA is foiled by the particular representation of history with which this memorial space presents visitors.

At one moment of the ESMA tour, the tour guide asks why the visitors think that the guards at ESMA may have followed a particular practice with the individuals detained there. As the other visitors venture guesses, our narrator thinks to himself: "Because they believed that it was okay" (237). He adds, "they believed that what they were doing was okay. And that is the worst part" (237). Despite making a value judgment that the military's thought process was wrong ("and that was the worst part"), he believes that many aggressors believed that what they were doing was right. Leonardo's identification with his father and with the soldiers with whom his father was affiliated allows him to understand their rationale for what they did despite the atrocity of these actions. As Leonardo learns in the course of his visit, however, this identification with the military's rationale for their actions is not an experience that other visitors to the ESMA share with Leonardo, or at least not one that they articulate. As such, ESMA is depicted as a space in which certain histories—such as those of the narrator—are silenced.

The timing of the narrator's trip to the ESMA is fundamental to the novel's consideration of the relationship between the Kirchners and memorial culture: he visits the space the day after Néstor Kirchner's sudden death in 2010.²⁰ Immediately after arriving at the ESMA, Miki's

mother, Susana, makes an explicit connection between the loss of peers in the armed struggle and Cristina Fernández's loss of her husband: "those of us who have lost peers in the struggle...know what the president is going through right now" (216). Brizuela's situating his narrative in 2010 allows him to reflect upon the way in which Néstor Kirchner's death was taken up by Kirchnerists. This identification works both ways: just as Cristina Fernández describes herself as "militante," Miki's mother couches Fernández within her own group of people who have lost loved ones in the cause. Moreover, the locus of enunciation—the ESMA itself—highlights the use of this space as a means of interpersonal identification due to everyone's having lost a loved one. This identification is highly inflected with political affiliation, such that the ESMA is figured here as a space in which life, love, and loss are on display within the broader context of a political narrative. As my reading of this scene of the novel shows, this political narrative begins with Montoneros in the early 1970s and continues through 2010. The discourse that Leonardo encounters at the ESMA reflects upon the present as well as the recent past.

In his visit to the ESMA, we see how postmemory interacts with politics. Upon his arrival, Leonardo identifies two individuals at ESMA: Miki's mother, Susana, and Clara, the young tour guide. Leonardo observes about Clara: "since she is so much younger than I am, about twenty-eight, I understand that she is also younger than anything that could be told about this place; and, therefore, her relationship to the history of ESMA is the product of feeling, not experience" (218). Despite her age, as Leonardo observes, this young woman appropriates the persona and the ideological affinities of the 1970s revolutionaries whose lives and deaths are now on display within ESMA's walls. He informs us that this tour guide, "takes up Susana's discourse, almost as if she were imitating her or wanted to succeed her, I cannot help comparing

the two: she has her same spirit, maybe. But not her appearance, as if she wanted to imitate the person Susana used to be” (217). Clara constitutes another element of the novel that strongly evinces a mutual imbrication between past and present; here again, Hirsch’s notions of postmemory are relevant insofar as Clara espouses a memory of a past that she is too young to have lived.²¹

ESMA and the Legacy of Armed Violence

Leonardo’s visit to ESMA becomes particularly challenging for him when the topic turns to armed struggle. We see again Clara’s affinity for 1970s militancy in her mention of “la Gaby,” the nickname of Norma Arrostito, a well-known member of Montoneros who was responsible for the death of the former Argentine de facto president Pedro Eugenio Aramburu in 1970. Leonardo observes that Clara points out a specific detention cell and says, “There, for a year la Gaby was held prisoner,” as if all of the visitors would know exactly to whom she was referring just by saying “Gaby.” This reference to “la Gaby” evinces the notion that all visitors to ESMA—if not all Argentines—would be expected to know who “la Gaby” is, positing a shared sensibility among ESMA’s visitors. Leonardo then explains that the tour guide, “she corrects herself ostentatiously, as if she had forgotten for a second that we are not militants, like her” (238). His mention “like her” ironically highlights the anachronism of this character’s self-identification as militant. Once she realizes that she must explain to whom she is referring by saying “Gaby,” she chooses the word *ajusticiamiento* rather than *asesinato*: “she was part of the kidnapping and *ajusticiamiento* of General Aramburu...and note that I said *ajusticiamiento*” (238). Montoneros’ assassination of Aramburu would form the origin story for their group’s militant action throughout the 1970s. With her implicit vindication of this action through the terminology *ajusticiamiento*, Clara creates a strong identification with this militant group.

The use of the term *ajusticiamiento* provides a powerful connective thread between past and present in the novel. Clara's use of the term evinces solidarity with Montoneros' cause because it is the word that Montoneros chose in their missive describing Aramburu's death, "Cómo murió Aramburu." The piece, originally published in 1974, affirms: "for everything that we strive for everyday, for the growing popular support, the fruits of this historic *ajusticiamiento*" (my emphasis). The unsigned column is attributed to Rodolfo Galimberti, who was in charge of Montoneros' communications at that point. Mario Firmenich, Montoneros' leader and Arrostito's accomplice in the kidnapping and assassination of Aramburu, chose the same word in his description of the event, quoted in "Cómo murió Aramburu:" "Aramburu's *ajusticiamiento* was an old dream of ours" (my emphasis).²² Given the importance of Aramburu's death as the origin story of Montoneros, the tour guide's use of the signifier *ajusticiamiento* positions her in line with Montoneros. Brizuela's depiction of the ESMA thus strongly suggests an ethos that reclaims the cause and the tactics of insurgent revolutionary action.²³ Cecilia Sánchez Idiart interprets this scene: "Bazán's visit to the ESMA and his alarm at the guide's "ajusticiamiento" evinces the necessity to take a step back from the logic of armed militancy to make way for a debate regarding the possibilities to proceed and the legitimacy of revolutionary violence" (491).

Our narrator grows increasingly agitated with the tour guide's discourse, silently wondering to himself, "Why does she disregard the fact that each of us has prior experience with that time period, and an idea about that experience?" (233). He then rushes out of the building and vomits, an abject corporal reaction to the convergence of incongruous experiences about the recent past. The narrator is made ill, I submit, by the erasure of stories like his from the representation of the 1970s that the ESMA's discourse has consecrated.²⁴ We understand that the

experience and ideas that Leonardo has about the 1970s are not represented in this space.

Leonardo's visceral act of rejecting the discourse of the tour guide is spawned by his intolerance of this space and the version of history that it presents. At the same time, we are reminded of Brizuela's assertion that he forms part of a generation without conscience; we may venture that an inkling of culpability may also be the root of Leonardo's unease.

The conflicted narratives about the past impede mutual understanding between Leonardo and Miki. After rushing out of the building and vomiting, Leonardo is reunited with Miki and drives with him back from ESMA. They sit in silence during the car ride, until Leonardo finally says to Miki: "The truth is I cannot understand armed struggle, Miki...I mean, I can understand it in theory. All those theories about the violence by those in power that generates violence below. And the need to 'take charge of history'...But I can't put myself in their shoes, you know?" (246). This utterance is met with Miki's silence and a half-hearted nod, which leads Leonardo to think that Miki is still thinking of his own father, as he observes a soft smile on Miki's face after having visited ESMA. Leonardo's speculation links the politicized versions of 1970s armed struggle presented in a space such as ESMA and the personal memory of a father Miki never knew. Rather than create the point of identification that our narrator was hoping to find with his friend, their visit to ESMA has proven to create an indelible division between the two. Leonardo—who, in his own words, simply cannot understand the armed struggle—feels he will always be on the outside. The novel thus suggests that for a citizen such as our narrator, visits to the ESMA and attempts at fostering friendship with children of victims do not resolve contested versions of the past or present. The only way that he may see his own history represented is through his writing of this novel, which may constitute a move towards overcoming the ideological chasms within cultural memory.

Conclusions: The Novel's Irresolution

Our narrator's visit to ESMA—like his consultation of other writers, history books, and neighbor's testimony—proves not to provide the resolution between warring political factions that he had hoped. Rather, this visit has served only to reify the divisions that continue to exist within Argentine society. In this sense, his act of fleeing the building and vomiting is analogous to his novel's ending: a chapter titled "Z" that has simply a black square drawn across the whole page, suggesting that language has not sufficed in providing him with a resolution of this moment of his country's and his own recent pasts. Here, we may return to the novel's reference to Cortázar's "Casa tomada." Brizuela's narrator has a similar function to Cortázar's: to explore the mindset that underlies resistance to an emerging social and political movement. Just as, for many readers, Cortázar's narrator constitutes an analog for the 1950s bourgeoisie who feel their "home" is being overtaken by the *aluvión zoológico*—the influx of working-class populations from the interior of the country into Buenos Aires during Perón's first presidency—Brizuela's narrator fears that his experience is written out of national history. I would venture a comparison between, on the one hand, Cortázar's narrator slamming the door to the home and throwing the key into the sewer and on the other, Leonardo's rushing out of the ESMA to vomit. As Brett Levinson posits in his reading of "Casa tomada" occasioned by the story's fiftieth anniversary, the narrator "forfeits control, and 'is silenced' the instant the saga, the house, shuts down" (104), not unlike Brizuela's final chapter "Z" consisting of a black rectangle that fills the page. While Brizuela's narrator is not presented in the same key of frivolity and mockery as Cortázar's narrator, he too embodies a political stance shared by a contingent of society that—justifiably or not—finds itself marginalized to a popular political discourse. *Una misma noche* highlights the

ongoing struggle to be represented as a citizen and as a subject within memory sites such as the former ESMA as well as within political discourse writ large.

With the Kirchners no longer in power, it remains to be seen how Brizuela's novel relates to present-day memorial culture. Levinson's reading of "Casa tomada" suggests: "perhaps we should not discuss 'Casa tomada' as an allegory of Peronism but posit Peronism as the literary performance of the political" (107). Likewise, Kirchnerism may be understood as both context and intertext in *Una misma noche* insofar as Kirchnerism is a mode of storytelling with which the narrator grapples as he attempts to remember and recount his own past.²⁵ The ESMA, as a *lieu de mémoire*, is the site of a multilayered history that may reveal as much about the past as it does about the conflicting interpretations and appropriations of the past within the present. While these conflicting positions are never resolved, the writing process disarticulates the ways in which the 1970s have been used to inform and undergird contemporary politics. It is through writing that the narrator is able to contest understandings of his nation's past as they are brought to bear on the present. His repeated emphasis on how Kirchnerism informs understandings about 1970s politics and vice-versa affirms the controversial and contradictory points of contact between politics and memorial culture. Memory is used to question the ways in which society uses group divisions rooted in past moments of history as the basis for present-day points of political solidarity and enmity. In this sense, *Una misma noche* is a timely contribution to our critical understandings of how identities and categories of social belonging inform—and impede—political and ethical identifications. Brizuela reminds us of the capacity for evil in all of us, which is nothing new. What is innovative, however, is that his exploration of the human capacity for evil—through the entirely plausible complicity of his narrator—destabilizes categories of good and evil through a contestation of cultures of memory.

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¹ Néstor Kirchner was president from 2003-2007 and Cristina Fernández was president from 2007-2015, when the Kirchnerist party lost the presidential elections to Mauricio Macri.

² In the first President Kirchner's inaugural address, he proclaimed that he formed part of a "decimated generation" marked by painful absences, referring to his militant peers' disappearance. This proclamation took many Argentines by surprise since the question of militancy had been largely absent from his campaign. Many detractors of Kirchnerism interpreted his proclamation as part of this "decimated generation" and subsequent championing of human rights discourse as opportunistic.

³ Deffis does mention Leonardo's trip to the ESMA and mentions that it takes place during the Kirchnerist years but does not discuss Brizuela's depiction of this space or of the memory politics with which it explicitly engages.

⁴ "Grupo de tareas" was a term used during the dictatorship to refer to small groups of paramilitary forces that would enter into people's homes, ransack their belongings, and kidnap them.

⁵ Ramos glosses the novel as "la crónica de un instante que se ensancha y se abre como un cráter en la mente del protagonista para dejarle entrever el significado de toda su vida" (189).

⁶ *Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio* (H.I.J.O.S.), formed in 1995, consists of children of disappeared political prisoners who have come together over the past two decades to demand justice and information about their identities.

⁷ Leonardo's interest in Diana Kuperman conjures identification with one of the most persecuted sectors of Argentina during the military dictatorship: the country's Jewish community. An estimated seventeen percent of the *desaparecidos* during the dictatorship were Jewish, a number that is disproportionate to the one to two percent of Argentina's population comprised by Jews. See Emmanuel Kahan, *Recuerdos que mienten un poco: Vida y memoria de la experiencia judía en la última dictadura militar* (Prometeo, 2014); Leonardo Senkman, *Antisemitismo en la Argentina* (Centro Editor de América Latina, 1989); Senkman et. al., *El legado del autoritarismo: derechos humanos y antisemitismo en la Argentina contemporánea* (Instituto Harry S. Truman, 1995), Federico Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War: Fascism, Populism, and Dictatorship in Twentieth Century Argentina* (Oxford, 2014).

⁸ Regarding Argentina in particular, Huyssen posits: “all such struggles about how to remember a traumatic past of genocide, racial oppression, and dictatorship play themselves out in the much larger and more encompassing memory culture of this turn of the century in which national patrimony and heritage industries thrive, nostalgias of all kinds abound, and mythic pasts are being resurrected or created” (95).

⁹ Critical interventions regarding both fictional and real-life cases of complicity are to be found in Olga Wornat and Miriam Lewin’s *Putas y guerrilleras* (2014) and Ana Longoni’s *Traiciones: La figura del traidor en los relatos acerca de los sobrevivientes de la represión* (2007).

¹⁰ Heker’s novel has been shown to anticipate many of the debates surrounding memory and militancy that arose during the Kirchnerist era (Pridgeon 2016).

¹¹ Berlanga notes in his column: “Habrá que decir ya mismo, para acomodar el tono que trae esto, que *Una misma noche* es una novela muy incómoda (“La noche de las confesiones”).

¹² The exception in Blejmar’s book is her inclusion of playwright Lola Arias’ *Mi vida después* in which she includes the monologue-testimony of Vanina Falco, the daughter of a perpetrator of state violence.

¹³ “La teoría de los dos demonios” refers to the idea that the violence committed by the left in the years leading up to the dictatorship was just as bad as the violence committed by the military dictatorship and that leftist insurgency provoked the violence committed by the military government. See Franco.

¹⁴ Ricardo Gutiérrez Mouat’s “El lenguaje de los derechos humanos: *La muerte y la doncella*, *Insensatez* y *El material humano*” addresses texts that, like Brizuela’s mention of the CONADEP, “quote” truth and reconciliation commissions’ reports.

¹⁵ Reati states: “la presencia de un Falcon con civiles armados en su interior llegó a ser sinónimo del terror en medio de una ciudadanía atemorizada que aprendió a mirar prudentemente hacia el otro lado cuando uno de esos temibles vehículos hacía su aparición” (2010, 386). As Reati goes on to explain, many authors include the Ford Falcon in their novels set in the 1970s—Miguel Bonasso, Mempo Giardinelli, Osvaldo Soriano, José Pablo Feinmann and Martín Kohan—in addition to its presence in such iconic films about state repression as *La historia oficial* and *Garage Olimpo*.

¹⁶ Despite Ignacio Sánchez Prado’s claim in his analysis of *Insensatez* as a “meta-testimonio” that in the case of the Southern Cone, unlike in Central America, literature has treated the violence and mourning characteristic of dictatorship in a variety of modalities and genres, Brizuela’s explicit treatment of testimonio-type narratives is similar to Castellanos Moya’s cynicism towards testimonio and the novel also intercalates traditional testimonial narratives.

¹⁷ While Brizuela does not seem to be critiquing testimonio as such, in his implicit engagement with the genre as part of his consideration of modes of narrating the past, the novel recalls Beatriz Sarlo’s critiques of testimonio in *Tiempo pasado*.

¹⁸ His sitting at the piano, as he has affirmed in an interview, is an intertextual reference to Marcela Solá’s *El silencio de Kind*.

¹⁹ While not the focus of my analysis here, Leonardo’s mother’s senile condition dovetails with conversations on cultural amnesia in post-dictatorship Argentina.

²⁰ Cecilia Sosa posited, regarding a 2012 barbecue held at the ex-ESMA: “For many, the celebration emerged as an arrogant and over-confident gesture led by Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s administration, which had managed to transform the demands of a network of victims

based on kinship ties into its own official narrative” (124). Sosa concludes that such events that characterized the Kirchnerist period offer a possibility for conviviality in the country.

²¹ Hirsch describes postmemory essentially as: “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before” (2008; 106)

²² The assassination of Aramburu became so pervasive among militant circles that, as Beatriz Sarlo explored in *La pasión y la excepción*, the chant “duro, duro, duro, estos son los Montoneros que mataron a Aramburu” would become the battle cry and the origin story of the Montoneros’ political activity throughout the 1970s. Another common Montonero chant was: “con los huesos de Aramburu vamos a hacer una escalera para que baje del cielo nuestra Evita Montonera.”

²³ In her analysis of the debate surrounding the creation of a memorial space at ESMA, Claudia Feld includes these 1970s insurgency as part of a series of contested points: “es interesante constatar la cantidad de demandas que se le hacían al espacio...explicitar y continuar las luchas políticas del pasado —incluidas las luchas insurgentes de la década de 1970” (119).

²⁴ It must be noted that in the years since the novel’s publication, ESMA has been reconfigured so that it now includes more museum-type photos and exhibits that explain the history of the space, beginning with a comprehensive description of the building’s use as a naval school. At the time of the novel’s publication, however, the information offered to visitors did depend almost entirely on one tour guide. In my 2013 interview of Eduardo Jozami, then-director of the Espacio Haroldo Conti at the former ESMA, he stated that he had never heard a tour guide use the term “ajusticiamiento.” Brizuela’s inclusion of this term seems to be a use of poetic license.

²⁵ Many people speak of the so-called “relato” or “storyline” of the recent past that Kirchnerism propagates. Javier Trímboli approaches this question of “el relato” in his recent intervention, *Sublunar: Entre el kirchnerismo y la revolución*.