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## Metamorphoses of 1968: Latin America and the Israel-Palestine Question in Tomás Abraham's *La dificultad* (2015)

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“Before Che Guevara, Argentines didn’t feel like they were Latin Americans. Now, however, they believe they are the only Latin Americans.”<sup>1</sup>

--Gabriel García Márquez, 1977

Metamorphoses of 1968: Latin America and the Israel-Palestine Question in Tomás Abraham’s *La dificultad* (2015).

For political actors around the world, May 1968 constituted a crucial moment in the consecration of political affinities and subjectivities. Argentine philosopher Tomás Abraham considers the role of May 1968 for his political and intellectual formation in his recent fiction debut *La dificultad* (2015). As Abraham’s largely autobiographical novel emphasizes, the experiences of May 1968 constituted a watershed moment for individuals—particularly youth—forced into a moment of reckoning with their global, national, and/or religious identifications within the broader context of shifting geopolitics that marked third-world liberation movements, particularly and especially in the case of Jews vis-à-vis third-world solidarity movements’ pro-Palestinian stance. In 1967, writing in the aftermath of the Six-Day War, fellow Jewish Argentine León Rozitchner anticipated some of the tensions that Abraham would experience in Paris and write about decades later.<sup>2</sup> Rozitchner affirmed: “our confronting the Israeli problem is simply a means of putting off our own confrontation with the national Argentine reality” (1967: 95). For his part, Abraham would posit in a 2007 essay that, for Argentine Jews such as himself, the problem is not the Israel question, but rather the Palestine question. Here Abraham adheres to a solidarity with Palestine that, as my reading of his novel will show, was instilled in him as a result of his experiences with the May 1968 protests. My analysis of Abraham’s *La dificultad* focuses on the novel’s treatment of these tensions between Argentine nationalism, global liberation movements, and the Israel-Palestine question that have continued to go unresolved now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Within the cultural imaginary surrounding 1968 in Latin America, points of overlap between identification with the global movements of 1968 and identification as Latin American are often shown to be in flux. Within this context, tensions are often maintained not only between being Argentine and being Jewish, but also between being Latin American and being Jewish. Specifically, tensions arise between, on the one hand, being Latin American and aligned with Latin American liberation movements—which, for their part, evinced solidarity with Palestinian causes—and, on the other, being Jewish in the wake of the Six-Day War and in the years leading up to the Yom Kippur War, moments which called for a reckoning with one's relation to Israel. In 1966, the Tricontinental Congress would take place and adopt a pro-Palestinian stance.<sup>3</sup> As I will emphasize in my analysis of *La dificultad*, the novel traces its narrator's processes of coming-of-age as a political subject and philosopher. This process culminates in an understanding of himself as Latin American that he reaches only after his experiences in Paris in 1968 and through solidarity with the student movements. This self-understanding will necessarily upset his family's Jewish and Zionist background, galvanizing him into a moment of reckoning in the wake of what he terms a "metamorphosis" produced by the zeitgeist of May 1968.

My analysis of Abraham's novel begins with a consideration of the emergence of Latin American solidarity movements vis-à-vis Jewish Latin America. From there I consider Abraham's notions in his 2007 book *Posjudaísmo* of the role of the Israel-Palestine conflict as a determining factor in both political affiliations and Jewish identities. I go on to focus on Abraham's novel for what it may offer for a critical reconsideration of the points of contact between Jewish cultural practices and revolutionary political affinities. Specifically, I focus on the novel's depiction of assimilation and hegemony in Argentina and political and philosophical

revolutions in Paris. Ultimately, I contend that Abraham's novel redefines what it means to be Latin American, Jewish, and revolutionary in the late 1960s. Much more than a nostalgic retrospective, *La dificultad* contributes to continuing conversations about political participation and religious identities in Latin America today. Abraham's focus on Paris 1968 can be seen as a return to ground zero for the formation of the New Left; in this way, he is rewriting the history of the Left over the past decades at the same time that he creates a justificatory narrative of his own intellectual and political positions.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as I will emphasize in my analysis of *La dificultad*, debates surrounding the Israel-Palestine conflict in the late 1960s remain relevant today as the conflict continues to be debated and contested in global politics.<sup>5</sup>

*La dificultad* forms part of a broader panorama of twenty-first century Argentine fiction that has sought to revisit the political and ideological tensions of revolutionary culture. Other such novels include but are not limited to Martín Kohan's *Museo de la revolución* (2006), Laura Alcoba's *La casa de los conejos* (2006), Carlos Gamerro's *Un yuppie en la columna de Che Guevara* (2011), and Patricio Pron's *El espíritu de mis padres sigue subiendo en la lluvia* (2011). This constellation of works has appeared and garnered a considerable amount of critical attention due in part to the so-called "memory boom" in recent Hispanic cultural production but also because this moment of revolutionary fervor has continued to serve as the origin story and ideological underpinning of leftist political thought and action over the past decades yet has largely gone unexamined due to the more obvious political and ethical crises posed by Argentina's military dictatorship (1976-1983).<sup>6</sup>

Within this recent contingent of authors dealing with revolutionary topics, several Jewish voices have emerged to explore the particular complexities of Jewish revolutionary experiences, including Marcelo Birmajer's *Tres mosqueteros* (2001), Andrés Neuman's *Una vez Argentina*

(2004), and Ricardo Feierstein's *Consortio utopía* (2007). Thus, Abraham contributes to a growing contingent of recent fiction that deals with these topics. What sets *La dificultad* apart from these other works is Abraham's sustained and overt engagement throughout the novel with the points of contact between the national project—a term which takes on different valences at distinct points of the novel—and global movements, of which the Israel-Palestine conflict is both the most important and the most fraught. As critics have shown, there remains a great deal of work to be done in the way of considering cultural production's engagement with Jewish political participation (Rein and Tal, 2014; Pridgeon 2017).

### **Latin America(n) as Category in 1968**

In considering the movements between national consciousness and global conflict, it is necessary to take into account the role of the Latin American region as a conceptual category. We can trace the emergence of “Latin America” as a political category to the success of the Cuban revolution in 1959.<sup>7</sup> As Diana Sorensen argues in *A Turbulent Decade Remembered: Scenes from the Latin American Sixties*, “only [in the 1960s] did a transnational cultural identity become rooted in the hemispheric imagination” (2007: 1). Indeed, over the course of the 1960s, “Latin America” came to crystallize as a political category that was fortified by the global editorial success of the Latin American boom as well as by increasing revolutionary fervor throughout the region that often transcended national boundaries in favor of a regional “Latin American” solidarity. Sorensen goes on to posit, apropos of the 1968 student movements:

Mythical visions of young rebels like James Dean, Marlon Brando, or Che Guevara could be made to incarnate romantic aspirations for Messianism that decried a world seen as dehumanized and that longed for the purifying force of revolution. And in the midst of such redemptive longings, a different sense of community to come was being imagined.

This mood was often expressed in sympathy and support for Algeria, Congo, Vietnam, and Palestine. (2007: 6-7)

Per Sorensen's estimation, sympathy and support for Palestine came to be understood as the manifestation of the spirit of Latin America's revolutionary groups. What is more, as Sorensen posits here, 1968 led to the emergence of "a different sense of community," akin to the "metamorphosis" that the narrator will undergo. These differences can be seen both in the tropes and mechanisms of communitarian practices and in the shifting alliances among individuals purportedly aligned with one group or another, but whose identifications are called into question as a result of the changes in global political communities resultant of the 1968 movements.

It is difficult to overstate the cultural weight of revolutionary fervor in the late 1960s in Latin America. As historian Jeffrey Gould notes, "Only the Wars of Independence and the strike wave of 1919 rival the dimensions and simultaneity of the 1968 protests" (2009: 348). While the timing of the Tlatelolco protests (in October 1968) might suggest that the events that took place in Paris in May served as the impetus for protests and social movements in other parts of the world, in fact, movements that had previously gained traction in Latin America served to inspire student protesters in May in Paris. Gould cites a student quoted by a journalist in June 1968 who asserted: "The French students were inspired by Che Guevara and I don't know if you are aware that Che was a Latin American" (2009: 352). The student's mention of Che Guevara's influence over the French students' movements emphasizes Latin American regional solidarity as an integral component of the Paris 1968 movements.

In addition to what was happening on a global or regional scale, local events in Argentina also shape Abraham's narrator's political worldview, even as he is thousands of miles away in Paris. The 1969 workers' protests in Córdoba, Argentina, which came to be termed the

“Cordobazo,” exhibited a similar amount of fervor and energy to the previous year’s Paris protests.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, from his exile in Madrid, Juan Perón would draw parallels between the 1969 Cordobazo and the student protests of Paris in 1968.<sup>9</sup> However, at the same time that the student movements of Paris in May 1968 shared ideological affinities with events in Argentina, many Argentines preferred to eschew the comparisons between their struggles and those of their European counterparts. Historian Valeria Manzano points out: “As protagonists of the interwoven popular revolts in Corrientes, Rosario, and Córdoba, many youths saw theirs as incomparable to the French events. In the Argentine May of 1969, young people tried to erase markers of youthfulness, chiefly their student condition, in order to merge with ‘the people’” (2014: 160). Differing sensibilities regarding the identification with popular classes as an act of solidarity thus constitute a point of divergence between the Paris student movements and Latin American liberation politics. In this vein, Paris 1968 served to make individuals such as Abraham and his narrator—Jews who grew up in Argentina and whose parents had been born in Eastern Europe—more acutely aware of their own identities as Latin American.

*La dificultad*’s narrator, Nicolás, experiences his Latin Americanness from Paris, recalling the insistence of the student cited above on the importance of Latin American political actors for the thoughts and movements that characterized this watershed moment of political participation in France. At the same time, however, we may also interpret this position as similar to Manzano’s point regarding the differences that Argentines perceived between the plight of the Paris students and their own social movements. For Argentines in Paris, the May student protests spark a solidarity with student groups there but also foster Argentine nationalism and solidarity along then third-world categories, partially in opposition to what was going on in Europe at the time. Thus, being in Europe immediately following the 1968 student movements serves to forge

an awareness of a Latin American identity by marking Nicolás as different from the non-Latin American members of his own family. For many, May 1968 was as a moment that indelibly marked individuals and interpellated them as new types of political subjects. Moreover, the events of May 1968 helped to consecrate the global New Left and brought into sharper relief some of the tensions and factions among global leftist groups.<sup>10</sup> To be sure, as Abraham suggests, one of the tensions brought into relief as part of the student movements was the Jewish Left's responsibilities and positionality regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which had already been a central factor in Jewish political discussions since the previous year's Six-Day war.

### **1968 and the Global Jewish Community**

For Jews, Latin America in the late 1960s was a particularly tumultuous time period. Jewish youth found themselves not only influenced by revolutionary fervor, but simultaneously in the midst of complicated challenges to their global community. Similar to Sorensen's aforementioned model of regional solidarity generated throughout Latin America in the sixties, historians Brodsky, Gurwitz and Kranson consider global networks of political affinity in the case of Jewish youth in their introduction to a dossier edition of *Journal of Jewish Identities* focused on Jewish youth in the global 1960s:

it has become clear that many young Jews of the period, whether they came of age in South America, North America, Israel, Western Europe, or Eastern Europe, found themselves influenced by common events and considerations. They grappled with particularly Jewish issues, such as the repercussions of the Holocaust, the status of Zionism among diasporic Jews, and the effects of the Six-Day War. At the same time, they also engaged in the cultural and political rebellions that animated so many others of

their age group, joining in struggles against racism, the Vietnam War, sexism and imperialism, and the flouting of accepted tastes and conventions of the older generation.

(2015: 1-2)

Jewish youth worldwide found themselves in a particular moment of reckoning due to these “particularly Jewish issues,” which, coupled with the spirit of youth activism worldwide, necessitated complex processes of discerning one’s primary ideological affiliations between national, regional, and global social movements vis-à-vis religious identification.

We thus see that the events of May 1968 had a particular effect on both global Jewish youth and Latin America’s youth. Hence, this was a doubly complex moment for Latin American Jewish youth. In the particular case of Latin American Jews in Paris in the wake of the 1968 movements, we may observe the particular manifestations of ideological affinities vis-à-vis the opposing forces between the perceived center and periphery. As I show, the experience of being Jewish Latin Americans in Europe serves to reinforce categories of solidarity with Latin America and global decolonization movements.

### **Abraham on “Post-Judaism,” Zionism, and Israel**

While *La dificultad* is his fiction debut, Tomás Abraham has long been known in Argentina as a philosopher and critic. He has written elsewhere about the complexities of Argentine-Jewish identities in 21<sup>st</sup>-century culture. In 2007, he participated in the publication of a two-volume project titled *Posjudaismo: Debates sobre lo judío en el siglo XXI*. Throughout these conversations, Abraham’s notions of what it means to be Jewish and/or to be Argentine are almost always articulated through their inverse. He remarks, for example: “I do not doubt that I am Jewish because I would be ashamed not to be” (2007: 47). In his first remarks in this intervention he affirms that he feels more Jewish than he does Argentine, for he became

naturalized as an Argentine; he proclaims that he is Jewish for historical reasons, while he is Argentine by adoption. He thus opens a provocative consideration of Jewish identities among Jewish Argentines who immigrated to the country, a significant contingent of the country's Jewish population. Moreover, he posits that, in addition to having Argentine nationality only by adoption, no Jew can ever fully belong only to the nationality of the country in which he was born. Abraham goes on to note that a great deal of Argentina's twentieth-century history was based on Catholic nationalism, further complicating his self-identification as Jewish and Argentine and again marking his processes of identification as negation more than affirmation.

As in *La dificultad*, in *Posjudaísmo* Abraham repeatedly seeks to complicate understandings of Argentine Jewish identities. He affirms: "The Jews I like are the dissident ones. I love that rebellious Judaism that does not have a place, the Judaism of the wandering Jew" (2015: 38). In a similar fashion, Abraham's novel depicts a wandering Jew who travels the globe—to Paris and later to Tokyo—and in the process grapples with his identity as Latin American, Argentine, Hungarian, and Jewish.<sup>11</sup> As Abraham posits here, Jews' wandering is associated with dissidence, a questioning of one's own loyalty to Judaism, which also figures prominently in his novel's protagonist. We may liken this notion of dissidence to questioning one's own beliefs and self-identification as Jewish.

Despite this avowed love of dissidence, however, Abraham does not ever cease to describe himself as Jewish. Moreover, he is able to articulate practical delineations between Zionism and supporting the state of Israel. Abraham states in *Posjudaísmo* that he appreciates the State of Israel because, without the existence of the State of Israel, there would be no mechanism in place to ensure that Jews around the world were not mistreated, an idea he attributes to Argentine musician and composer Daniel Barenboim, a citizen of both Israel and Palestine (in

addition to Spain and Argentina). He later states, however, that there is a difference between supporting the State of Israel and Zionism, which he describes as an ideology completely distinct from what it had been originally. One of his major contentions with Zionism is that, he maintains, Israel knows that Jews living outside of Israel are just as important for Israel as those who live within Israel. He goes on to affirm that the problem in contemporary Israel is no longer “the Jewish question,” but rather “the Palestinian question.”<sup>12</sup> These notions put forth in *Posjudaisimo* help to contextualize Nicolás’s solidarity with Palestine that, as far as the narrator informs the reader of *La dificultad*, never directly contravenes his self-identification with Judaism or with Jewish culture.

### ***La dificultad***

*La dificultad* narrates its protagonist’s journeys through Paris and later through Tokyo before moving back to Buenos Aires, where he had grown up as the child of Hungarian immigrants. As I will emphasize in my analysis, the narrator’s experiences in Paris are presented as the culmination of his journey of acquiring a political consciousness, a process of shifting ideological affinities that comes to upset a familial identification with Judaism and Zionism. Likely a result of the author’s vocation to philosophy, *La dificultad*, in addition to being a coming-of-age novel, also reads like a novel of ideas or philosophical novel, a subgenre of fiction that was critically acclaimed and enjoyed editorial popularity in France through the works of Abraham/Nicolás’s idol Sartre, as well as in Argentina through works such as Julio Cortázar’s *Rayuela* (also set in Paris) and Ernesto Sábato’s *El túnel*. The novel chronicles the processes through which Nicolás becomes interested in philosophy and overcomes his childhood stuttering at the same time that he learns to assimilate into Argentine society as the son of Hungarian immigrants, only later to relearn social codes as he finds himself in the midst of Paris’s 1968

student movements. Abraham's presentation of these processes emphasizes the influence of various philosophical movements throughout the world. In this sense, *La dificultad* recalls his earlier non-fiction book *Historia de una biblioteca: De Platón a Nietzsche* (2011), which Abraham begins with a reference to *Sophie's World* by asserting that this book explores Tomás's world, that is, the ideas that influenced his consciousness formation.

While Abraham's narrations of Nicolás's time in Paris are an autobiographical element reference to the author's involvement in the Paris 1968 student movements for which he is well known in Argentina, the novel's setting in Paris in the 1960s also recalls Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela*. Nicolás mentions coming across Cortázar in Paris and feeling the grandeur of the "silent giant" who had created Oliveira and la Maga, the protagonists of *Rayuela*. Sorensen clarifies that Cortázar's work "remains crucial for understanding the *promesse de bonheur* that art was bound up with in the sixties" (2007: 105). In this vein, we may take into account *La dificultad*'s connections to Cortázar's work in light of Abraham's consideration—from the vantage point of over fifty years past since the publication of Cortázar's novel and nearly fifty years since the events of May 1968—of Argentine literature and politics as seen from Paris in the 1960s. Critics of Latin American literature often debate to what extent Cortázar's "del lado de allá" (Paris) and "del lado de acá" (Buenos Aires) can be interpreted as deliberately writing for an Argentine audience (Buenos Aires being "here") and what such an interpretation might mean for the considering centers and margins in literary production. Similarly, Abraham's narrator will note: "One writes for oneself, but the direction is centrifugal, it doesn't go inward" (2015: 464). In this sense, the more metaphysical aspects of the novel must still be taken into account with respect to Abraham's articulation of Argentine nationalism and third-world liberation solidarity.

### Nicolás's "Metamorphosis"

Indeed, the narrator refers to himself as Argentine for the first time while in Paris. Describing his time spent in Paris, Nicolás proclaims: "I was Argentine despite not having the documents saying so because I was not naturalized" (2015: 169). Nicolás, who has focused on being Jewish and Hungarian during his childhood in Buenos Aires, describes himself for the first time as Argentine while in Paris; Europe thus serves as a relief of Argentina and Latin America, a space that allows him to identify wholly as Argentine despite, as he disclaims here, never having been naturalized as a citizen. The context of the Paris student movements allows for the narrator to proclaim himself Argentine.

Moreover, his solidarity with Latin America and with other third-world liberation movements causes a rift between him and his European family members with respect to Zionism versus sympathy with Palestinian liberation causes. Nicolás recalls thinking as he was about to leave Paris:

fortunately my cousins were good humored and agreed on the most important issues—being Jewish—before, as a cause of the metamorphoses produced by May 1968 they got mad at me because, in addition to writing checks I could not cash before leaving the City of Light for good [...] I gave into an event for the liberation of Palestine in solidarity with the *Cordobazo*. (2015: 211-212)

Nicolás comes to understand himself as different from his cousins who are not Latin American and are therefore unfazed by the events in Córdoba that lead to the narrator's solidarity with Palestine. Abraham thus presents a familial rift between the Latin American member of this family and his European relatives.

Nicolás's mention in the above-cited scene that his cousins were in agreement "en lo principal—ser judío" before the events of May 1968 evokes León Rozitchner's affirmation: "Yes, it's true: we must sacrifice our Jewish parts that are opposed to the revolution" (1967: 15). Taken with the rest of *Ser judío*, the assertion serves more to question whether or not one does need to sacrifice "lo judío" and what aspects therein would need to be sacrificed. Rozitchner goes on to ask: "What about me is Jewish in the face of the current Arab-Israeli conflict?" (1967: 15). Rozitchner thus posits the need to question what identifies a Jew as a Jew within the geopolitical matrix of the Israel-Palestine conflict of the late 1960s. This is particularly the case, as Rozitchner will go on to elaborate, for a progressive Jew who finds himself ideologically aligned with third-world liberation movements. Abraham's novel thus reintroduces the debate that Rozitchner addressed some fifty years ago. As Bruno Bosteels recently noted, Rozitchner's *Ser judío* is worth revisiting not only for what the work contributes to discussions of Jewish communities, but also for rethinking the what Bosteels terms the "the politico-theoretical archive and everything that might be contained therein in terms of relevant materials for rethinking the effective legacy of Marx and Marxism in Latin America" (2012: loc. 72-81). If Rozitchner directly considers the effects of the Six-Day War, Abraham takes into account the ripple effect—in this particular case Europe—of the Israel-Palestine conflict within his own extended family. Nicolás's having irked his cousins due to his attendance of a Palestinian liberation event in solidarity with the Cordobazo in Paris as a result of the "metamorphoses" produced in him by May 1968 condenses many of the main preoccupations of Jewish culture vis-à-vis Zionism and Palestine within 1960s revolutionary and liberatory practice.

Namely, we see a familial rift within a Jewish family over issues of Palestine/Zionism, an identification with Palestine along lines of solidarity with activism in Argentina, and the

radicalization that resulted from May 1968. Crucially, the cousins to whom the narrator is referring here grew up in France, whereas the narrator's immediate family immigrated to Argentina and he grew up there. Argentine Jews' experiences in Europe in the wake of May 1968 served to make more explicit the categories of third-world countries that were seeking to be liberated, forging an alliance of solidarity along lines of mutual identification between third-world countries. Thus, while Nicolás self-identifies as Jewish, he forges a solidarity with Palestine, whereas his cousins do not, we understand, because they are not from a formerly colonized country and, while they too experienced Paris in May 1968, their national identity is unchanged by an event such as the Cordobazo that allows them to identify more readily with the plight of Palestinians.

While Nicolás does not mention the Tricontinental Congress, his articulation of solidarity with Palestine and the schism that he suggests within his Jewish family recalls the challenge posed to Jewish revolutionaries by the Tricontinental's position. In the closing remarks to the Tricontinental Congress in 1966, Fidel Castro recapitulated: "The peoples and the liberation movements of Africa [...] received the warm support of the conference, as did the people of Yemen and the people of Palestine" (1966), such that support of Palestine was not only resolved, but came to constitute one of the defining aspects of the Tricontinental. While it has been noted that Argentina's delegation to the Tricontinental Conference did not ratify the resolution in support of Palestine and against Zionism (nor had Argentina's delegation to the UN ratified the creation of the state of Israel in 1948), this position had strong repercussions among Argentine Jews who supported third-world liberation causes. Historian Andrés Kilstein notes: "The declaration in Havana presented a great dilemma to progressive Jewish intellectuals, who were called to disparage their own condition to understand the historical reality as well as to let go of

any fraternal solidarity with Jews in the Middle East” (2011: 4). For his part, León Rozitchner would remark, “And so then the Israeli cannot be an Israeli revolutionary, for example, and for the mere fact of being it he remains excluded from the process, as the Tricontinental signalled” (1967: 21). Here, as elsewhere in his essay, Rozitchner questions the basic assumptions of Jewish geopolitics and political participation, and presents one of the most compelling fault-lines of Jewish political subjectivity: the notion that, in keeping with the Tricontinental’s resolution, an Israeli by definition could not be revolutionary. Of course, as Rozitchner shows, this notion is only partially true. Nonetheless, it signals the challenge presented to progressive Jews—and particularly Zionists—aligned with revolutionary causes.

We may understand Nicolás’s moment of reckoning with Jewish identification, Argentine national (revolutionary) politics, and Palestinian liberation as a climactic moment in his process of political and philosophical formation. Throughout the novel, Abraham explores what it means to be Jewish and to be a political subject. Despite his novel’s publication in 2015, the narrative elides over thirty years of Argentina’s history, suggesting that the salient moments for the narrator’s formation as a philosopher, an Argentine citizen, a Latin American, and a Jew were during the apex of tensions between Jewishness, Zionism. Abraham creates an exploration of political subjectivity and Jewish self-identification from the vantage point of the twentieth century that, as I will show, takes roots in the Peronist years of the Hungarian Jewish immigrant’s childhood in Buenos Aires.

### **Hegemony and Jewish Assimilation in Nicolás’s Childhood in Argentina**

As a way of broaching these subjects in a fictional key, Abraham’s novel chronicles its narrator’s childhood in Buenos Aires, a challenging time for a stuttering Jewish immigrant. As an adolescent in Buenos Aires, Nicolás comments: “Nobody talked of Perón. Politics did not

exist, only bull shit ideas” (2015: 131). Such a seemingly apolitical climate was, more accurately, the apparent lack of overt political consciousness produced by the almost over-determined presence of Peronist consciousness within the country, forces that would later take on a more explicitly political valence. Like many children growing up during Argentina’s Peronist years, however, the protagonist seems to be keenly aware of certain impulses to assimilate into what we may term Argentina’s cultural hegemony. Antonio Gramsci defines cultural hegemony as: “the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production” (1971: 12). Apropos of hegemony and Peronism in 1950s Argentina, Jon Beasley-Murray, quoting Ernesto Laclau, affirms in *Posthegemony: Political theory in Latin America*: “The working class becomes hegemonic by also being populist. Populism, precisely because it is hegemony itself, is no distraction or deviation from socialism. Far from it: ‘A ‘socialist populism’ is not the most backward form of working-class ideology but the most advanced—the moment when the working class has succeeded in condensing the ensemble of democratic ideology in a determinate social formation within its own ideology” (2010: 51). As Beasley-Murray and Laclau suggest, Peronist Argentina facilitated a socialist populist climate of sorts; this was the hegemony into which Nicolás would assimilate.

Despite the pervasiveness of Peronist hegemony, the narrator’s accounts of his childhood include mentions of differences between himself and others. As the narrator recounts of his childhood skip trips to Bariloche, which was notorious for welcoming Nazi war criminals: “Between Nazis and victims of World War II was the country of silence, amnesty land. Nothing

was known, everything was forgotten, and that was how people coexisted in the hospitable Argentina of those years” (2015: 57). The lack of upheaval in post-World War II Argentina is revealed to be a result of deliberate silences forged by both Nazis and Jewish immigrants. Nicolás’s coming-of-age process includes friendship and a romantic relationship with non-Jews, including his first kiss at the age of eleven with a gentile girl, whom he describes as finding attractive in part because she is not Jewish or Hungarian like his family. Nicolás describes: “Fortunately she was not the daughter of Hungarian Jews [...] Hungarian was the police language. Furthermore she was not Jewish. I knew Catholics like my neighbors in Flores, but I had never kissed a Catholic girl, actually I had not kissed any girl” (2017: 47). Tellingly, this courtship takes place while on vacation in the seaside town of Mar del Plata and, as the narrator describes, away from the confines and rigidity of social categories and norms (suggested most obviously through his mention of Hungarian as “the police language”). The narrator clarifies that his young love does not take place in a club or a camp—both of which are conventional, almost stereotypical, spaces for Argentina’s Jewish communities—but rather in nature and away from such conventions.

Abraham also depicts his high school years during and immediately after Perón’s presidency and the assimilation into a strong national project as gray and lacking in contrast. The novel follows a mainly chronological structure ending in the early 1980—some thirty years before it would be published—but at times shuttles between years in order to make a point about the historical *devenir* of social thought and of Argentina’s political situation. At one point, Nicolás contrasts the his gray high school years with later political time periods in color:

That’s why the march to Ezeiza to receive the General remains a vivid, multicolour memory and the death of Evita became materialized as an opaque gray day. High school

was gray. Not even white. Saturdays when I played ball shone a little more. High school teachers wore gray suits, sometimes striped, shoes with worn-out soles, briefcases with fake ironwork and faded leather, shirts with the seaming unstitched, anti-Peronist middle class with dandruff on their deflated shoulder pads. (2015: 93)

Abraham offers a depiction of middle class Buenos Aires in the 1950s as gray. The author uses grayscale here in such a way that to present a moment that served as a hegemonizing force throughout the country to interpellate Jewish immigrants as part of this national project. Moreover, the contrast that the novel presents between Evita's funeral, on the one hand, and the manifestations at Ezeiza presented in black and white and in color, respectively, serves to highlight the distinction between a moment that was presented or broadly perceived to be apolitical, Evita's funeral, and an event that was overtly political in nature, the gathering at Ezeiza to celebrate Perón's return.

Despite these mentions of "gray" hegemony and assimilation, however, Nicolás observes the wilful forgetting of personal and familial origins that were necessary in order to assimilate and live in a new land of opportunity: Argentina. During his childhood, Nicolás's father is in charge of sock factory in Buenos Aires; at one point in the novel, Abraham includes an ethnographic account of the people and work that make up the sock factory that, as he points out, may one day be his inheritance.<sup>13</sup> Nicolás reflects when visiting the sock factory: "Everyone tried to forget. Some because they had lost the war and wanted to erase the traces of their past actions and beliefs. Others, like the Jews, erased the traces of their pain or their humiliations because they found themselves in a new land with opportunities that they must not compromise with nostalgias" (2015: 396). Abraham thus suggests the sacrifices made by Jewish immigrants in order to assimilate into the hegemonic cultural practices that characterize this new land of

opportunity in which they found themselves, questioning the utopic thinking that often goes along with the so-called *mito de crisol*, or the myth of the melting pot often used to describe Peronist Argentina.

Elsewhere, Nicolás more overtly indemnifies the push towards assimilation for Eastern European Jews in Peronist Argentina: “Adapt? To the contrary, doing what one does not want to do is not adapting. Submission is not adaptation. The *marranos* who converted to Christianity and secretly prayed the Torah knew it. Never freer than during the Inquisition. Never freer than during the Occupation, Sartre might say” (2015: 403).<sup>14</sup> Nicolás’s comparison between adaptation and the Inquisition evinces the latent violence and threat of persecution that often underwrite assimilation and suggests a subtle resistance necessary in order to maintain the integrity of one’s personal heritage and cultural practices. Particularly, Jewish assimilation into Argentine hegemony during the country’s Peronist leadership was fraught, as processes of assimilation necessarily incorporated a certain degree of acceptance of anti-Semitism through the Peronist project’s openness towards Nazis.<sup>15</sup>

As a university student in Buenos Aires, Nicolás also comes into contact with the Abram León group. Nicolás recalls, from his days as a student: “Abraham Leon’s group’s leftist Zionism allowed me to learn a definition of Marxist history in which the oppressed Jewish people in the diaspora would only achieve their emancipation in Israel through a socialist revolution” (2015: 168). Indeed, Leon posits in *The Jewish Question* that Zionism is a function of capitalism and that the only way to resolve the Jewish question is through the destruction of capitalism. Zionist socialist groups were common throughout Argentina’s twentieth century, but came under growing scrutiny over the course of the 1960s as individuals such as Nicolás aligned themselves increasingly with Palestinian causes. His early contacts with politics, however, after a

seemingly apolitical childhood, do not present Nicolás with the types of crises of conscience or conflicting identifications that he will encounter in Paris.

### **Religion and Revolution in Paris**

Nicolás's time as a university student in Buenos Aires is, as he describes, very brief, for it is truncated by the Noche de los Bastones Largos, an infamous act of police brutality in 1966 at the Math and Science campus of the Universidad de Buenos Aires. Afterward he describes his decision to travel to France: "To stop wandering like a nationless militant that the new Argentine Revolution could exile because of residency laws...to be a worthy heir to [my father's] company, for all those reasons I was in conditions to travel and to search for a new place, the France I had dreamed of" (2015: 179). France offers a more amenable environment to an immigrant than Argentina during Onganía's government (an effect of the "Revolución Argentina" to which the narrator refers here). In contrast to, or perhaps as a continuation of, the earlier impulse to assimilate, Abraham suggests here the xenophobia and discriminatory immigration policies that characterized Argentina's authoritarian governments of the 1960s.

As part of his experiences in Paris, we see Nicolás become exposed to key figures of Argentina's revolutionary movements, part of the zeitgeist of both Paris 1968 and revolutionary culture in Argentina. These references to both popular culture and revolutionary icons remind us of the spirit of this moment that will produce in him what he terms a "metamorphosis." These moments are often narrated in an irreverent key. At one point, describing an acid trip with a friend, Nicolás recounts: "Then we went to pray with Padre Mugica in a private mass in Paris...and I was present in the sacrifice of the man crucified by his love for the poor" (2015: 289). His mention of the man sacrificed for his love for the poor evinces the identifications posited between Catholicism and preferential treatment of the poor that would characterize both

liberation theology as a movement and the legacy of Padre Mugica specifically. Here, in Paris, an Argentine Jew imagines attending a mass with a Catholic Argentine leader. Here, we see the complexities that are presented between the global and the local, Jewish and Catholic, within one's self-identification as Argentine, Jewish, and revolutionary. In an altered state, Nicolás visualizes the conflicting identities that he carries with him.

### **A Novel of Philosophical Formation**

As previously mentioned, *La dificultad* has many elements of the subgenre of the “novel of ideas,” to which Abraham's avowed idol Jean-Paul Sartre belongs. Within the tradition of Argentine literature, *La dificultad* recalls Ernesto Sabato's 1948 masterpiece, *El túnel*, whose protagonist's name, Juan Pablo, is understood to be a reference to Sartre. While he never mentions explicitly the connections between Sartre and Sabato, Nicolás references Sartre and shortly thereafter recalls hearing Sabato speak in Buenos Aires: “he seduced me with his voice, a manifestation of *porteña* professorial elegance presented in rustic, sober, impeccable, somewhat discolored way” (2015: 238). Sabato is presented as another influential figure, which we also see through *La dificultad*'s structure and content. Like *El túnel*, Abraham's novel consists primarily not of plot, but rather of the narrator's attempt to string together the pieces of his life in a way that make sense and explain his eventual outcome. In this sense, we observe an homage to the existentialist literature that influenced Abraham in his youth but which he would soon outgrow during his time in Paris.

However, existentialism is revealed to be anachronistic within the setting of Paris in the late 1960s, although it would perhaps have been more welcomed in Paris earlier in the decade. Diana Sorensen offers a similar interpretation of the protagonist of Cortázar's aforementioned *Rayuela*: “Horacio Oliveira, faults and all, is a model of humanity that was being worked out in

the wake of existentialism, of course. But perhaps we need more than Sartre to understand Oliveira's function in the boom's imaginary [...] Indeed, Oliveira is like a Che Guevara who cannot embrace action" (2007: 205). Thus, like Cortázar's earlier depiction of a "model of humanity" that requires some reckoning, Abraham's novel, too, reckons with an obsolete model of social thought—namely Sartre's existentialism—as Nicolás seeks to reconcile himself with an emerging world order and new directions in critical thought.

Abraham's consideration of philosophy also has compelling points of contact with questions of religion. Judaism is present more as an ethnic and/or cultural category than as a religious category or identification. Nicolás affirms, referring to Sartre: "The father of existentialism was an atheist, existentialism was a humanism, and religion was the opium of the masses" (2015: 168). We thus see that Nicolás's religious identifications are brought under scrutiny even before his broaches with revolutionary culture, such that the tension with Jewish and Zionist affinities presented by the Paris student movements add yet another layer to an already problematic paradigm of personal and ideological identity.

Abraham charts a shift from Sartre to Althusser among his intellectual circle in 1960s Paris. Nicolás is confused and surprised when he arrives in Paris to see that his peers seem to have forgotten Sartre: "But where was Sartre? Within a few weeks of arriving I knew that French philosophy had forgotten him" (2015: 237). Indeed, his fellow philosophy students are speaking not of Sartre but of Althusser, whose 1970 "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," according to philosopher Bernard Gendron: "provided what seemed to be the definitive Marxist response to the events of May-June 1968" (2013: 39). Thus, Althusser becomes the landmark figure for the philosophical and political discussions in which Nicolás participates in Paris, again underscoring his entrenchment in this watershed moment of political and social activism. Nicolás

is frustrated with these conversations, mentioning: “a work environment in keeping with the paradigm created by Crosby, Stills, Nash, Althusser, and Young was still a kind of silly project” (Abraham 2015: 412). This tongue-in-cheek reference is one of many mentions in the novel to popular culture references alongside theorists and philosophers as guideposts to the prevalent voices of revolutionary culture that formed the zeitgeist of 1968.

Back in Argentina in 1978, Nicolás is invited to give a lecture series on Foucault, a task which he accepts and presents to the reader as a moment that marks his overcoming his stuttering, “the difficulty” from which the novel’s title is taken.<sup>16</sup> That he should be asked to speak on Foucault once back in Argentina some ten years after the student movements of 1968 evince yet again the importance of this moment, given the importance of the events of 1968 for Foucault’s emergence as an important voice in critical thought. At the same time that Nicolás emerged from the “metamorphosis” produced in him by having experienced Paris in May 1968, Foucault was also undergoing a pivotal moment in the trajectory of both his thought and political action.

While not the case for all students involved in the 1968 movements or all revolutionaries in Latin America, for Abraham and for his alter-ego Nicolás, Foucault was inexorably linked to Paris 1968. As Gendron notes, “Foucault was giving May 1968 credit for creating the conditions for the flowering of Foucauldian studies of power” (2013: 37). Abraham’s trajectory in a sense mirrors that of Foucault, as the two shift to a framework of disciplinarity over the course of the early 1970s.<sup>17</sup> While Nicolás briefly mentions later moments of the dictatorship and the novel resists a straightforward chronological order, this moment in 1978, which occurs toward the novel’s end, is presented as the culmination of Nicolás’s process of overcoming his difficulty in speaking as well as of his process of formation as a philosopher and political subject.

## Conclusions

Throughout Abraham's "novel of ideas," the place of Judaism is revealed time and again to be central to Nicolás's understandings of revolutionary politics, philosophy, and his own identity. Moreover, life experiences and politics are inexorable from each other, as we observe through Nicolás's affinity with Palestinian causes as a form of third-world solidarity and as opposed to his European cousins' rejection of the cause and loyalty to Zionism. The novel's many references to the cultural zeitgeist of revolutionary culture remind us of the pervasiveness of the utopic thinking that pervaded in the 1960s and that, as Abraham's novel elucidates, continues to confound the present-day legacy of revolutionary culture vis-à-vis politics and Jewish culture in Argentina. While published over thirty years after the novel ends (in the early 1980s), Abraham gives little indication as to how these issues have continued to develop and come into conflict with each other over the intervening years. However, that Abraham should choose to focus this autobiographical novel on the years marked by revolutionary movements and challenges to the global Jewish community suggests that these issues continue to affect his identity as a Jew, as an Argentine, and as a philosopher. In this sense, we may return to León Rozitchner's assertion that Argentine nationalism and a preoccupation with events in Israel are inexorably linked. Moreover, as we see through Abraham's novel, the Israel-Palestine conflict continues to inform political and intellectual subjectivities of Argentine Jews.

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<sup>1</sup> This and all subsequent translations are mine.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that Rozitchner and Abraham evince quite differing political views.

While Rozitchner was always an avowed leftist, Abraham was not considered to be progressive in the 1960s and 1970s, although he was in the 1980s. In more recent years, Abraham was critical of Kirchnerism and now supports Macri's government. In this regard, Abraham's politics

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are perhaps closer in line with Rozitchner's son, Alejandro, a fervent support of Macri who has been nicknamed "el filósofo del macrismo". Nonetheless, as is my focus throughout this intervention, León Rozitchner and Abraham are contributing to the same cultural and political debates regarding the points of contact between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and social movements in Argentina, albeit from differing standpoints.

<sup>3</sup> The Tricontinental Congress was comprised of delegations from Africa, Asia, and Latin America (hence the "Tricontinental" of the name) as a means of articulating solidarity among "the exploited people of the world." It is important to note here that Argentina's delegation did not ratify the Tricontinental's position against Israel and in support of Palestine. Nonetheless, as I will show in my discussion of León Rozitchner's *Ser judío*, the congress's position had a lasting impact on Jews involved in Argentina's revolutionary movements.

<sup>4</sup> However, here we should take into account that Abraham's politics have not always been in keeping with the New Left. In this sense, his fictional retrospective of his intellectual and political formation is somewhat *sui generis*.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Emmanuel Kahan's recent study *Israel-Palestina: Una pasión argentina* (Prometeo, 2016). Kahan's analysis compiles several studies focused from the early twentieth century through Argentina's Kirchnerist period (2003-2015). As the title suggests, Kahan and his collaborators show that the Israel-Palestine conflict is a particularly complicated issue in Argentina.

<sup>6</sup> Undoubtedly, a further catalyst in this cultural phenomenon was Argentina's Kirchnerist leadership (2003-2015) and the broader so-called "return of the Left" that characterized politics throughout Latin America in the first decade and a half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and has now largely

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come to an end with the defeat of the Kirchners in Argentina, Chavismo in Venezuela, and Dilma Rousseff in Brazil.

<sup>7</sup> This Pan-Latin American solidarity resultant of the Cuban revolution's success recalls the regional unity for which Simón Bolívar called in the early nineteenth century but which was complicated by the particular politics and struggles of individual countries throughout Latin America.

<sup>8</sup> The Cordobazo was a turning point for the mobilization of revolutionary groups in Argentina during the oppressive authoritarian regime of Juan Carlos Onganía, who ruled from 1966 until 1970.

<sup>9</sup> Perón had been ousted by a military coup in 1955 and, from his exile in Madrid, served as a figurehead for many of the revolutionary student groups that appeared throughout the 1960s and called for his return to serve as leader. He did return to the presidency in 1973 but died in office the following year. With respect to Jewish revolutionaries, Raanan Rein has studied Jews' relation to Perón and Peronism extensively, most recently in *Los muchachos peronistas judíos* (2015), in which he affirms: "Perón fue el primer mandatario argentino que legitimó el mosaico de identidades de distintos grupos étnicos de su país. El no vio ninguna incompatibilidad entre ser un buen argentino, ser un buen judío, y dar apoyo al sionismo o al Estado de Israel" (13). While Rein is referring here to the time period of Perón's 1947-1955 rule rather than to the Peronist revolutionary movements of later decades, he offers this assertion in response to an anecdote from a Jewish Kirchnerist legislator who commented that many people still found surprising in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that a Jew would identify as Peronist. Thus, the anecdote is relevant for considering the present-day legacy of Jewish involvement in Peronist and revolutionary

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movements. Perón had a widely documented, ambivalent stance regarding the Jews (Senkman 1989; Newton 1992; Goñi 2002; Lvovich 2003)

<sup>10</sup> Within Latin America, the student movements in Paris were less important to galvanizing revolutionary action than other global political events such as the Vietnam War, the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre in Mexico, and the assassination of Camilo Torres. Nonetheless, for Abraham—alongside other intellectuals who happened to be in Paris at the time—May 1968 was important in informing their political subjectivities and their understanding of the New Left.

<sup>11</sup> Apropos of the “judío errante,” it is worth noting here that Erin Graff Zivin’s study *The Wandering Signifier: Rhetoric of Jewishness in the Latin American Imaginary* focuses on the Jew as a “wandering signifier” vested with different meanings at different points and in different contexts throughout Latin America’s history. Zivin’s focus is on the “rhetoric” of Jewishness and the representation of Jews, in contrast to Abraham’s novel’s exploration of Jewish subjectivity and identity formation.

<sup>12</sup> In a sense, Abraham’s focus on the “Palestinian question” and “Post-Judaism” anticipates Amalia Ran’s analysis of a younger generation (younger than Abraham) of Jewish Argentine authors for whom “Zionism, Israel, Hebrew, or Yiddish, along with the memories of the past, are connected to a new type of sensibility: they form an integral part of the Jewish identity of the younger generation without ever provoking a crisis. This new tendency generates a type of *cool* Judaism, secular and amusing, free from the weight of history and the responsibility of collective memory” (35).

<sup>13</sup> As a point of comparison, the critically-acclaimed Uruguayan film *Whisky* (2004) focuses on a Uruguayan Jewish family in which the sock industry is the family business.

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<sup>14</sup> “Marrano” is used to refer to Jews who converted to Christianity while covertly still practicing Judaism.

<sup>15</sup> For more on this, see Goñi.

<sup>16</sup> Abraham was allowed back into the country during the dictatorship in no small part because his politics were less staunchly leftist than many of his contemporaries.

<sup>17</sup> Similarly, in a recent panel discussion at Columbia University on Foucault May 1968, Jesús Velasco mentions correspondence from Etienne Balibar to Bernard Harcourt: “Balibar puts us on a different, extremely complex track—that of the intellectual history of the late sixties and the early seventies in the context of the revolts in Paris, the École Normale Supérieure, the founding of Vincennes, and, of course, the debates among Maoists, Leninists, and Marxists, with the two towering figures of Althusser and Foucault in the foreground” (LAIC 2015).

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