

The Copyright Generation: Historical Memory and the Children of the Disappeared

In *Formas de volver a casa*, a novel by the Chilean author Alejandro Zambra, the narrator speaks on behalf of a generation who were learning to ‘hablar, caminar, a doblar las servilletas en forma de barcos, de aviones’ (talk, walk, fold napkins in the shape of boats and planes) at a time when their parents were becoming increasingly involved in left-wing militant activity (2011: 55–56). Moving between present-day Chile and memories of his childhood under the Pinochet dictatorship (1973–1990), Zambra gestures towards the impact that the political choices of the previous generation have had on any contemporary sense of collective cultural identity. In one episode of the novel, the author focuses on the unresolved remnants of this problematic parent-child relationship, drawing attention at once to the influential nature of the previous generation’s political and cultural legacies, and to the bearing that such an imposing heritage exerts on both his own life and the lives of his contemporaries. He writes:

Hoy inventé este chiste:

Cuando grande voy a ser un personaje secundario, le dice un niño a su padre.

Por qué.

Por qué qué.

Por qué quieres ser un personaje secundario.

Porque la novela es tuya. (2011: 74)

[Today I made up this joke:

‘When I grow up, I’m going to be a secondary character’, a boy says to his father.

‘Why?’

‘Why what?’

‘Why do you want to be a secondary character?’

‘Because the novel is yours’]

The mix of humour, irony and childhood references with which Zambra, and indeed many of his Argentine counterparts, negotiate this difficult relationship points to a broader, more foundational issue for this generation as a whole—namely, that of acknowledging the authority of their parents’ political impetus in the present without being permanently relegated to the dependent, secondary position as a child of the disappeared.

As these writers struggle with memories that precede their births or with episodes from their childhood which they were too young to remember, their textual attempts at exploring and understanding these pasts are, therefore, marked indelibly not only by the political choices of the previous generation but also, as Ana Amado contests, by ‘the faltering and convoluted nature of the act of remembering’ (2009: 201). While the gaps and fissures in the testimonial self are themselves testament to the obscure and often unfamiliar period of childhood that is being represented, the persistent focus on contemporary political and social issues that guides the re-elaboration of these memories further serves to underscore the importance of the *present* in any process of memorial transmission. Though Paul Ricœur has written in *Memory, History, Forgetting* that ‘[m]emory appears to be caught from the outset in the nets of a transcendent authority, where the problems of credibility are held to be already resolved’, this generation of authors, directors and artists instead foreground the very instability of memory as a constituent element of their ongoing concerns with both personal and collective identity (2004: 96). Far from imbuing the present with a sense of security—Ricœur’s ‘transcendent authority’—these works explicitly and actively situate their narrative origins within the very fractures of memory. In doing so, they emphasise the breakdown of familial narratives and, contrary to the work

of a previous generation of Argentine authors and directors, explicitly problematise the ‘already resolved’ issues of testimonial coherence.

Ernesto Semán’s *Soy un bravo piloto de la nueva China* (2011) and Patricio Pron’s *El espíritu de mis padres sigue subiendo en la lluvia* (2011) both exhibit such a foregrounding of the subjective pitfalls and processes of memory, doing so through the elaboration of personal and collective recollections surrounding their parents’ militancy and eventual deaths. Echoing Marianne Hirsch’s thoughts in *The Generation of Postmemory*, these postmemorial narratives are indeed progressively ‘shaped more and more by affect, need, and desire as time and distance attenuate the links to authenticity and “truth”’ (2012: 48). Correspondingly, these two semi-autobiographical novels point to memory not as a source of any objective or official history, but to its inherent quality as a subjective, postponed and mediated construct. However, rather than simply exposing its constructed nature through the postmemorial appropriation of memory *through* fiction, these texts are also able to imbue their narratives with a conflictive sense of present politics; a politics not only of memory, but of generational identity, social inclusion and historical representation. Indeed, as these two authors negotiate personal and appropriated memories from the position of the present, they exhibit to varying degrees the dual aim of destabilising the dominant societal narratives of this turbulent period *and* of complicating the pervasive public images of their parents that circulate in twenty-first-century Argentina. As such, their narratives enter into a personal exploration of this shared past, which highlights and responds to the affective gaps that are to be found between the lines of textbook history.

The subjective ‘truths’ that are therefore constructed through the creative exploration of the past, though incongruous with ideals of objective historical fact, become important indicators of the continued political effects of the country’s past in the *present* lives of these sons and daughters. Rather than dwelling on the narration of trauma or on the assertion of a collective sense of inherited victimhood, however, these texts avoid a universalising interpretation of this past and instead reinscribe such experience actively and firmly within the political context of contemporary Argentina. By extracting a sense of personal significance from this collective experience, then, the postmemorial process reappropriates political agency and generates an identity position in the present through the active exploration, and resolution, of events in the past. ‘El pasado nunca deja de doler’, writes Zambra in *Formas de volver*, ‘pero podemos

ayudarlo a encontrar un lugar distinto' (The past never stops hurting, but we can help it by finding it a different place) (2011: 113).

2.1 PART ONE: *SOY UN BRAVO PILOTO* AND THE LIMITS OF AUTOFICTION

Published in 2011, Ernesto Semán's novel *Soy un bravo piloto de la nueva China* provides an explicitly fictionalised exploration of his childhood memories and is divided into three discrete narrative strands, all of which infringe and impose upon one another in a reflection of the sporadic and unpredictable nature of the process of remembering itself. First, in the chapters entitled 'La Ciudad', we are presented with the main protagonist, Rubén Abdela, an Argentine-born geologist who now lives and works in the US. Written in a more realist style than the other parallel accounts, the majority of these chapters take place in his terminally ill mother's apartment and see the characters exchange, dispute and corroborate their individual stories of the family's past during the last few weeks of her life. In the second, entirely fictional narrative thread, 'El Campo', the reader becomes a witness to the torture and eventual murder of Rubén's father, Luis Abdela, a left-wing militant who was disappeared towards the end of the military dictatorship. As conversations are imaginatively narrated between captive and capturer—the difficult character of El Capitán who, we are told, 'no era de pensar sobre sus actos pasados, ni de dramatizar, ni de celebrar' (wasn't used to reflecting on past deeds, neither dramatising nor celebrating them) (2011: 43)—these scenes allow the main protagonist to grasp a better understanding of the political motivations and actions of his father, intimating the possibility of an eventual literary catharsis. The third and final collection of chapters, assembled under the heading of 'La Isla', form the more allegorical aspects of the novel, and take place on an unnamed and timeless illusory island where Rubén is able to view both his own childhood memories and the recollections of others projected via a USB drive. These three narrative strands coalesce and gesture not only towards the inherent problems in the intergenerational transmission of memory, but also towards the inconsistencies and tensions that arise when these recollections are used within a generation to assert a collective sense of social and political agency. By examining the latent political and generational tensions in the novel, this chapter will highlight how the subjective

modifications of what is being remembered allows Semán to move beyond an objectively unknowable past and look towards a future that is both open to, and shaped by, his contemporaries.

‘Ruby, esto que estás viendo acá es tu pasado, pero no tu historia. En el pasado no hay lugar para tu historia’, explains Rubén’s love interest at the end of *Soy un bravo piloto*, as his time on the imaginary island draws to a close: ‘Tu historia es lo que hagas con eso, *es tu presente*’ (Ruby, what you’re seeing here is your past, but it’s not your history. There isn’t room for your history in the past. Your history is whatever you do with it, *it’s your present*) (2011: 274, my emphasis). Coming to terms with the deeply personal and often highly distressing memories he witnesses in the chapters entitled ‘La Isla’, Semán’s central protagonist addresses many of the issues concerning memory and history discussed in the Introduction to this book, both problematising the act of memory transfer itself and drawing particular attention to the societal position of the children of the disappeared: a generation, as the novel ultimately contends, tasked with negotiating a history that is at once unfamiliar, yet continues to deeply and irreversibly affect their own lives in the present. The oneiric projections of his father’s death and the preceding fictitious conversations between victim and torturer in the parallel narrative strand, ‘El Campo’, reveal the troubling and enduring consequences of this past on any present sense of identity and, at the same time, expose the difficulty the protagonist experiences when caught between official versions of Argentina’s past and his own desire to address the gaps in this history that have been left resoundingly unaccounted for. As the historian Keith Jenkins asserts in *Rethinking History*, while the past is irrecoverable, it is history that is reformulated within the ideological and discursive frameworks of the present, and which thus maintains the ability to recalibrate identity. ‘[T]he past and history are not stitched into each other such that only one historical reading of the past is absolutely necessary’, he writes: ‘they are ages and miles apart’ (2003: 7).

While Rubén quite literally jogs through the past in *Soy un bravo piloto*,¹ running through dream-like projections of his father’s torture interlaced with images from his own childhood, Semán uses the Island not only to examine the act of remembering itself, but also to draw significant attention to the broader inter- and intra-generational transmission of memory, weaving the protagonist’s personal recollections—both genuine and invented—within his wider community. The surreal and constantly shrinking Island which provides the imaginative setting for the third narrative strand of the text has, by the end of the

novel, ‘desaparecido casi por completo’ (almost completely disappeared) (2011: 275), hinting at the possible resolution that may be achieved through this creative act of postmemorial exploration. However, while this may be superficially understood as an exhibition of closure, a successful process of ‘working through’ in the LaCaprian sense of the term, this chapter instead contends that such a facile interpretation obscures the greater political tensions inherent in present issues over identity and memory.² Following Ana Elena Puga’s assertion in her study of memory and allegory in post-dictatorship Argentina that, within such allegorical constructions, ‘[C]haracters, objects, and situations refuse to be pinned down to a single significance and resist easy comprehension’ (2008: 146), the Island will therefore be understood to function in part as an abstract representation of the protagonist’s own encounter with his labyrinthine and constantly mutating personal history. The very difficulty the protagonist encounters in comprehending its totality is, furthermore, reflected in the memories he experiences themselves. By approaching the use of fiction in this way, as both a space for coming to understand the past and as an expression of collective agency in the present, Semán’s narrative highlights how the subjective modifications of what is being recalled allow him to assimilate an objectively unknowable past and look towards a future that is accessible to his contemporaries and, crucially, defined by their dialogic participation.

2.1.1 *Projecting Memories*

‘Pero el centro de la fantasía era una última y larga conversación entre [yo y mi padre]’, writes Semán in the first few pages of the novel: ‘De tanto haberlo imaginado, todo parecía un poco más normal, a su modo. Salvo por el hecho de que el hombre colgado en el living de mi departamento, mi padre, el Camarada Luis Abdela, había muerto treinta años atrás’ (But the core of the fantasy was a final, extended conversation between me and my father. Having imagined it so many times, everything seemed quite normal, just as it should be; except for the fact that the man hung on the wall of my living room, my father, Comrade Luis Abdela, had died thirty years before) (2011: 15). While the protagonist here at once constructs an interlocutor and points to the sheer impossibility of any such interaction, this imagined conversation between father and son is indeed progressively realised in the pages of the novel. Balanced between the three narrative strands, Rubén succeeds

in examining both his own memories and those of his remaining family members', rewriting his family's history through the power of fiction and endowing the memories he negotiates with an imaginative agency that finally allows him to come to terms with the effects that his father's political legacy exerts on his present. The deliberate blurring of the boundaries of fact and fiction, an intrinsic quality of the works of this generation as a whole, is, therefore, not to be read as a deceitful strategy within the realm of autobiography proper, but as 'autofiction'; a literary genre first identified in 1977 by the French author Serge Doubrovsky. In his novel, *Fils*, Doubrovsky argues that autofiction's capacity to undermine the autobiographical pact between writer and reader, with its explicit rather than subconscious fictionalisation, prevents the genre from fitting neatly into the domain of autobiography. While autobiography proposes a nominal pact between author, protagonist and narrator, narratives of autofiction are engendered through the very collapse of this agreement. 'As opposed to autobiography, which is explanatory and unifying, and which wants to grasp and unravel the threads of destiny', wrote Doubrovsky, 'autofiction does not imagine life as a complete whole' (cit. Jones 2007: 260). This subsequent narrative gap between the author and his or her textual self implies, therefore, as Elizabeth Houston Jones affirms, that no straightforward correlation can be drawn between the main character and the author in autofiction: 'Rather than professing to tell the truth as sincerely as possible, autofiction acknowledges the fallibility of memory and the impossibility of truthfully recounting a life story' (2007: 98).

In this sense, Semán's novel exhibits a similar tendency towards the manipulation of history and memory as other comparable post-Holocaust texts, such as W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001) and Eva Hoffman's *After Such Knowledge* (2004).³ Furthermore, as a second-generation work of autofiction produced by the child of Shoah victims, Art Spiegelman's well-known graphic novel *Maus I* (1991) also exhibits similar strategies of childhood reference and generic as the artistic output of Semán's generation, employing self-reflexive narrative tactics that openly expose the fallible and often fictitious character of memory itself. Despite the differences that are to be noted when the political nature of Argentine postmemory is taken into consideration (discussed at length in the second part of this chapter), here both the generic ambiguity and ostensible playfulness with historical subjectivity are common literary devices in both contexts. Nevertheless, while the differing levels of

fictionalisation are, of course, instantly apparent, there is a similar focus that guides the re-elaboration of these narratives—namely, that of the family and the ongoing emphasis of contemporary repercussions of the parents' past decisions on the child. As Elisabeth El Refaie remarks in reference to *Maus*, '[H]is biographical material is always presented through the prism of Spiegelman's fraught relationship with his father, and there is a clear focus on how his parents' suffering has impacted upon the author himself' (2012: 41). In *Family Frames*, Hirsch presents *Maus* as a foundational example of the postmemorial text, a story 'dominated by memories that are not his own' in which 'the story of the father's testimony and the son's attempt to transmit that testimony' (1997: 26) allow for an exploration of the very mechanisms of memory transmission itself.

In *Soy un bravo piloto*, however, this autobiographical pact is complicated further by the inclusion of three separate narrative voices: the first, in 'La Ciudad', is the most realist and is supposedly elaborated directly from the author's point of view, surrounded by his remaining family members in his terminally ill mother's apartment; the second, in 'El Campo', belongs to an omniscient narrator who creatively recounts the interaction between the torturer, El Capitán, and his victim, Semán's father; and finally, the voice of Rubén emerges once more, but in the deeply fictionalised setting of 'La Isla'. These three narrative strands develop independently—though with the figure of the father functioning as their common denominator—and gesture, to varying degrees, towards the text's ostensible position as autobiography *and* towards the creative indicators that conversely assert its status as fiction. Indeed, while Gérard Genette has branded such autofiction as nothing more than 'shameful autobiography' (1993: 87), criticising its blatant disrespect of any truth value and irreverent dissemination of falsehoods, critics such as Claire Boyle see this fictional playfulness precisely as the genre's defining strength. '[T]he innovation of *autofiction* is that it involves not just an awareness, but a *celebration* of the fictionalisation of the self in writing', writes Boyle: 'For Doubrovsky, the epistemological limits on self-knowledge call for a form of self-writing that acknowledges these limits, delivering a manifestly incomplete account, a cluster of truth-nuggets that require assembling by the other who reads them' (2007: 18).

In *Soy un bravo piloto*, as with many post-Holocaust texts from the second generation, the additional obstacle of navigating the

intergenerational transmission of memory complicates the motivations for such recourse to autofiction. When Rubén stumbles upon a photo among his mother's personal belongings, 'la única imagen existente de nuestra familia en pleno' (the only remaining image of our family all together), we read: 'La foto que había sobrevivido a todo, incluidos nosotros mismos. En el reverso, escrito en letra cursiva y firme y apurada, con una lapicera negra, podía leerse: "Elías Semán, Susana Bodner, y sus hijos Pablo y Ernesto. Villa General San Martín, Rosario, octubre de 1969"' (The photo had survived everything, including us. On the back, written with a black pen in firm, rushed italics, you could read: "Elías Semán, Susana Bodner, and their children Pablo and Ernesto. Villa General San Martín, Rosario, October 1969") (2011: 185). This is the only episode in the entire novel in which we are provided with the real names of the whole family, including that of the author. In this case, the photograph does not, as one might infer from Genette's criticism, act as an attempt to imbue a deceptive façade of narrative or testimonial authenticity into the fictive accounts contained in the rest of the book; conversely, it allows Semán to 'generar el efecto contrario: esa parte real hacía mucho más fuerte la ficcionalización de todo el resto' (generate the opposite effect: this authentic detail made the fictionalisation in the rest of the novel much stronger) (cit. Frieria 2011). In a similar fashion to Spiegelman's *Maus*, where the inclusion of a fraudulent photograph of the author's father seeks not to conceal the text's reliance on fiction but rather to emphasise it, Semán also uses a purportedly 'objective' document to undermine any testimonial coherence that one may attribute to his narrative. 'By deliberately presenting cartooning and photography as equally unreliable forms of mediation', writes El Refaie of *Maus*, 'Spiegelman thus exposes the potentially fallacious nature of all accounts of human history' (2012: 172). Here, Semán both draws attention to the levels of mediation and manipulation contained within all ostensibly objective discourses of the past and, in turn, discloses the impossibility of constructing a story solely from these restrictive sources. In this sense, argues Semán, for both himself and his generation, there is no choice *but* to resort to the realm of fiction. While this postmemorial creativity allows the author to fill the gaps between such surviving documentary sources and enable a potential sense of catharsis, it is also precisely what 'relegates' the narrative to the domain of autofiction: a domain, as Doubrovsky explains, reserved for 'the overlooked and the disregarded, who have no right to history' (cit. Boyle 2007: 18).

Interestingly, whilst on the Island, Rubén has access to a USB drive that contains his childhood memories, which he can view at will by projecting them onto screens. The inclusion of this metaphor highlights precisely what Semán, and indeed most of his generation, lack: any material evidence of their childhood or affective reminders of their former parental relationships. While most children of the disappeared possess only a few photos or newspaper cuttings as documentary evidence of their parents' lives, this USB drive allows the protagonist a much more accessible and constructive relationship with his past, at times even allowing him to play an active part in their (re-)projection. In a particularly significant episode, Rubén recalls a seemingly trivial memory in which he is playing in a park with a friend, while his father looks on from a bench nearby. When his playmate steals a toy, his father refuses to make him return it, explaining: 'No, vení acá, Rubencito. Escuchame bien: los juguetes no son tuyos. Los juguetes *son*' (No, come here, Rubencito. Listen to me: the toys aren't yours. The toys *are*) (2011: 74, emphasis in original). While this memory alone may not provide any striking inference into why it has left such a lasting impression on the protagonist, a connected memory provides the key to understanding its place in the novel. As Rubén himself begins to grasp the connection, we read: 'Leyendo el guión, repasando los diálogos con la distancia de las décadas, todo es tan obvio y no por eso más banal: la relación entre Luis Abdela, su hijo Rubén y los juguetes está levemente desplazada, [...] lo que Rubén reclama no es la posesión de Los Juguetes sino su propia pertenencia a Luis' (Reading the script, going through the conversations with decades of hindsight, everything becomes obvious, though not any more banal for that reason: the relationship between Luis Abdela, his son Rubén and the toys is lightly displaced, [...] what Rubén is complaining about is not possession of The Toys but his own sense of belonging to Luis) (2011: 74). As the relationship between the childhood episode and its affective significance is explicitly disclosed, it becomes clear that the incident with the toy not only uncovers the protagonist's lack of parental attachment, but also metaphorically parallels the nature of the memories he is witnessing. Just like the toy, the memories of Rubén's father that are being displayed from the USB drive are not the private property of any one individual: they simply *are*.

In the previously mentioned interview with *Página/12*, shortly following the publication of *Soy un bravo piloto*, Semán comments on this idea of ownership and contends that the novel's purpose is precisely

not to provide a factually definitive version of his past, validated by *his* position as the child of Luis Abdela, but to offer a possible alternative to dominant historical narratives and to create ‘un collage de distintos recuerdos y distintas memorias’ (a collage of different recollections and memories) (cit. Frieria 2011). He expands:

A diferencia de otros textos con los que trabajo vinculados más a la historia, la ficción me permitía poner los recuerdos y las memorias en conexión con otras memorias y experiencias distintas –en algunos casos opuestas–, para reconstruir un pasado un poco más completo. Me da la impresión de que hay una forma de pensar el pasado y la memoria como ‘la’ memoria con mayúsculas, la memoria como la historia total; pero el esfuerzo del personaje de la novela es tratar de entender que su historia y la que vivió el país es la suma de todas las memorias, la suya y la de otros: las memorias que le gustan y que no le gustan. (cit. Frieria 2011)

[In contrast to other texts I work with that are linked more to history, fiction allows me to connect recollections and memories with other memories and distinct experiences—which may sometimes conflict—in order to piece together the past in a more complete way. I get the impression that there is a way of thinking about the past and about memory as *the* memory, with a capital ‘M’, about memory as a complete story; but what the character in the novel is trying to do is understand that his history and the history of the country is the sum of all these memories, his and all the others’: memories he likes and memories he dislikes.]

Criticising official discourses of memory that aim to control one’s view of the past or impose regulations on certain generic boundaries, here Semán argues against the alleged objectivity of history and in favour of both the socialisation of memories and the entitlement to vocalise his own subjective, imagined past. Indeed, as the protagonist objects to Rudolf’s intentions towards the end of the novel to turn the Island into a tourist attraction, perversely sponsored by Ford, his reasoning reflects this refusal to let the cultural memory of the past be dominated or ‘owned’ by a sole entity.⁴ ‘Cada uno cuenta su historia, cuenta lo que pasó’, he affirms, reasserting what he considers to be his right to engage creatively and personally with these memories: ‘La verdad ya la conozco. Es mi vida, lo que hice yo’ (Everyone tells their own story, they explain what happened [...]. I know the truth. The truth is my life, everything I’ve done) (2011: 265, 268).

2.1.2 *The Copyright Generation*

In *At Memory's Edge*, James E. Young discusses the artistic production of second-generation Holocaust survivors, pointing to an area of contention surrounding the perceived irreverence and lack of authenticity in their works. 'No doubt', he writes, 'some will see such work as supremely evasive, even self-indulgent art by a generation more absorbed in its own vicarious experience of memory than by the survivor's experiences of real events' (2000: 3). Anticipating criticism on both ethical and historical levels, Young claims, following Hirsch, that the 'hypermediated experience of memory' which originates from a 'vicarious past' is, nevertheless, a valid, experiential testament of the ongoing consequences of the Holocaust: unavoidable aspects of a generational memory which is intrinsically an 'unfinished, ephemeral process' (2000: 2). 'Theirs', he maintains, 'is an unabashed terrain of memory, not of history, but no less worthy of exploration' (2000: 3). This intragenerational tension is made manifestly clear between characters in *Soy un bravo piloto* during a noteworthy exchange in which Rubén's mother lies on her deathbed and shares some of her own recollections about her late husband's involvement with 1970s militancy. During this symbolic, final 'bequeathing' of memories, the protagonist's mother discusses an episode in which Rubén, as a baby, had fallen ill, and reveals how the father's political ideologies took precedence over the well-being of his own family. 'Que mi hijo se cure como un hijo de la villa' (Let my child be treated like a child from the shantytowns) (2011: 107), asserts the father, before the newly-born Rubén responds:

'Pero los hijos de la villa no se curan, pelotudo. Se mueren, la reputísima madre que te parió.' [...] La revolución se come a sus hijos, pero no así, carajo. No a mí, que a mi humilde modo había sido un buen revolucionario en las dieciséis semanas que llevaba en esta tierra. No a mí que soy tu hijo, Luis [...], eternamente huérfano e indeseado. (2011: 106–107)

['But children from the shantytowns don't get treated, you idiot. They die, you son of a bitch.' [...] The revolution eats its own children, but not this time, damn it. Not me, who in my own modest way have been a good revolutionary for the seventeen weeks that I have spent on this earth. Not me; I'm your son, Luis [...] your eternally orphaned and unwanted son.]

Through a postmemorial shift of possession, we see the mother's memories, of which Rubén was indeed a part but much too young to

remember, appropriated by the protagonist as an adult and endowed with a revealingly creative injection of significance. The surreal notion of a speaking infant, though interestingly appearing in the least fictive narrative strand of the novel, is neither acknowledged in the text nor questioned by the other characters. Crucially, it is the father's parental carelessness towards his son's health that takes priority and, importantly, which is blamed for rendering such speech impossible, rather than the irrationality of a fully conversant newborn: '¿O fue Rosa quien lo dijo? O nadie. Lo habría dicho yo, si lo que me quedaba de no infectado me hubiera alcanzado para ponerme en su camino' (Or was it Rosa who said it? Or nobody. I would have said it, if what was left of my infected self could have managed to block his way) (2011: 107). Discussed at greater length in Chap. 4 of this book, here Rubén's forceful criticism of paternal neglect by a parent who dedicated himself to militancy *despite* the dangers and implications for his family points to his current feelings towards his own position in this history: once again it is the present, and not the past, which fuels these processes of postmemorial resignification.

In *Tiempo pasado*, Beatriz Sarlo discusses the nature of testimony and postmemory in post-dictatorship Argentina, drawing attention to the undisputed confidence she accuses society of having placed in individual narratives of trauma. Highlighting the 'subjective turn' in recent theoretical and cultural debates, responsible in her opinion for granting an almost unquestioned legitimacy to first-person testimony, Sarlo borrows the words of Susan Sontag to argue that post-dictatorship society has come to assign 'too much value to memory, not enough to thinking' (2003: 115). Criticising Hirsch's terminology for its theoretical validation of this disrespect among the second generation, Sarlo seeks to unmask postmemory as nothing more than an indulgent literary façade that conceals an unwillingness to understand the cultural and political specificities of the previous generation. Likewise, Vezzetti condemns contemporary uses of memory and testimony in his critical work on left-wing militancy, *Sobre la violencia revolucionaria*. Considering official documented evidence of traumatic experiences to be more reliable than the individual memories of such events, and placing further limitations on the benefits that artistic production may yield in attempts at understanding the past, he writes, '[H]ay que desconfiar de la memoria y remitirse a las fuentes. No hay duda, la memoria testimonial, aún con sus límites y sus amnesias parciales, es una gran herramienta de conocimiento y comprensión, pero si se la controla mejor' (We must be wary of

memory, and go back to the sources. There is no doubt that testimonial memory, even with its limitations and partial amnesia, is a useful tool of knowledge and understanding, *but only if it is better controlled* (2009: 83, my emphasis). In approaching these texts with such a restrictive view towards their objectives, these critics fail in large part to comprehend the evident shift in historical representation from one generation to the next. For Semán, the recourse to fiction is not a frivolous display of the lack of intent to understand his parents' generation, but is, conversely, an attempt to reveal both the subjective mechanisms of testimony itself and, importantly, the layers of mediation that characterise official discourses surrounding the era of 1970s militancy. In highlighting their position as a generation which, through no fault of their own, have access to only fragmentary and often contradictory information about their past, their engagements with fiction are presented as a necessary means to reach a fuller understanding of the impact their respective familial histories exert on any sense of present identity.

In an ironic acknowledgement of such critical disapproval, the character of Rudolf, the malevolent guardian of the novel's imaginary Island, urges Rubén and his contemporaries—euphemistically labelled as 'los que tienen pasado' (those who have a past)—to be 'esclavos del placer de mirar hacia adelante' (slaves to the pleasure of looking forward) (2011: 76); that is, to make a conscious and sustained effort to leave the past as the past, and to focus on a future which refrains from critically assessing the vestiges of their parents' militancy. Unimpressed with Rubén's attempts to creatively interact and play a formative role in the memories he observes on the Island, Rudolf condemns his endeavours to rewrite history, confiscating the USB drive where his childhood memories are stored and shouting, 'Dame el USB. Dámelo, dámelo, dámelo, dámelo. [...] La escena me la quedo yo. Del pasado, los trajes y las tragedias' (Give me the USB. Give it to me, give it to me, give it to me, give it to me. [...] I'm keeping the scene for myself; the past, the outfits and the tragedies) (2011: 75–76). When Rubén refuses to be relegated to a passive spectator of his own past and attempts to retrieve the USB drive, the Island's caretaker angrily continues:

Y perdoname si me pongo a filosofar un poco, pero con ustedes el problema es que han perfeccionado al extremo el arte de hacer de la memoria un instrumento de disciplinamiento social, haciendo manipulaciones caprichosas de mi memoria, de lo que yo recuerdo, de lo que cada uno

recuerda, para aplanar el ahora y creerse que saben quién está o no a la altura de las circunstancias, de las verdaderas necesidades, de las Demandas Históricas.

[...]

¿Vos sabés que existe un *copyright* de lo que uno recuerda? Pero no de los contenidos, sino de su sentido, del mundo entero que incluye ese recuerdo. ¿O lo puede usar cualquiera? (2011: 76)

[I'm sorry if I go off philosophising a bit, but the problem with you lot is that you've absolutely perfected the art of making memory an instrument of social discipline, with your whimsical manipulations of my memory, of what *I* remember, of what everyone remembers, just so you can level out the present and think you're in a position to judge who was or wasn't up to the task of negotiating the circumstances, the necessities, the Demands of History.

[...]

Didn't you know there's a *copyright* on what you remember? Not of *what's* remembered, but of what it means, of the whole world that each memory involves. Or can anyone just use it?]

While the very use of the word *copyright* intimates the legal attempts to control memory in Argentina's post-dictatorship period, as outlined in the Introduction to this book, Semán's critique here unravels on a much wider scale. Addressing what seems to be the entire second generation by the use of *ustedes*, it is the apparent postmemorial irreverence towards the past, criticised by both Sarlo and Vezzetti, with which Rudolf takes issue in his heated critique. The rhetorical nature of the final question—'Or can anyone just use it?'—again raises the question of ownership and suggests he believes that memory, like private property, should be possessed and controlled by a single individual. Placing the discussion firmly within the domain of intergenerational transfer by directing the speech to Rubén and his contemporaries, Rudolf contrasts *los contenidos* of memory, or rather the objective narratives of the past that remain unchanged and unchangeable, with *su sentido*, which he claims the protagonist has appropriated for his own selfish and impudent aims. Rubén is guilty, as Rudolf sees it, not only of unfairly judging his father's political choices, but also of doing so through the incompatible and discriminatory lens of contemporary ethical and social standards. When Rubén

takes issue with his father's exclusionary dedication to militancy and resultant neglect towards his ill child, Rudolf continues his chastisement:

Discutir con los muertos siempre es reconfortante, no sólo porque no responden, sino porque es un camino ya conocido. [...] Pero discutir con los desaparecidos es mejor aún [...] porque los pobres tipos terminan por ser una elite sodomizada por sus propios vasallos, que se apropian de la memoria como arma de vejación. ¿Quién va a tener la estatura moral para decir que no eran héroes, y víctimas? ¿Eh? ¿Quién? (2011: 76–77)

[Arguing with the dead is always comforting, not just because they can't respond, but because it's a well-worn path. [...] But arguing with the *disappeared* is even better [...] because those poor guys end up being an elite that's sodomised by their own vassals, who seize their memory as a weapon of harassment. Who's going to have the moral stature to say they weren't heroes, or weren't victims? Huh? Who?]

Nevertheless, while the Island's guardian specifically pinpoints the dynamic interplay of present perspectives with the recalled past as the origin of Rubén's unjust criticism and arrogance, it is, conversely, precisely this double temporality which allows the protagonist to make sense of the history in the course of the novel, facilitating a narrative which fills the subjective gaps of his own past and produces an account that is, at once, deeply personal yet also reflects the experiences of an entire generation. As Pilar Calveiro asserts in *Política y/o violencia*, this process of appropriation is one which is necessary for the past to remain active and influential in the present: '[L]a memoria es un acto de recreación del pasado desde la realidad del presente y el proyecto de futuro. Es desde las urgencias actuales que se interroga el pasado, rememorándolo. [...] Se trata, en consecuencia, de un doble movimiento: recuperar la historicidad de lo que se recuerda [...] a la vez que revisitar el pasado como algo cargado de sentido para el presente' (Memory is an act of recreating the past from the reality of the present and the prospects of the future. It is from the urgencies of the present that the past is viewed, remembered. [...] As a consequence, this entails a double movement: recuperating the historicity of what is being remembered [...] at the same time as revisiting the past as charged with meaning for the present) (2005: 1). While this double movement between understanding the past and maintaining its relevance for the present may, at times, appear superficially to tend towards irreverence, *Soy un bravo piloto* instead argues for

its capacity as a generational mode of revitalising memories, interrogating the mechanisms of memory transfer, and, ultimately, reasserting their significance from the position as children of the disappeared. As Gabriel Gatti remarks in *El detenido-desaparecido*, speaking from his own experience as a child of disappeared parents: '[The children of the disappeared] show a willingness to objectify their own identity, to mark it with the signs of *the special*, to construct an account, a very generationally biased account, bordering on the irreverent, sometimes verging on the parodic, not toward the generation before them but toward themselves, toward their own history, and, above all, toward the mechanisms that make them and us' (2014: 140).

2.1.3 *An Identity Position*

'The past appears no longer to be written in granite but rather in water,' stresses Aleida Assmann: '[N]ew constructions of it are periodically arising and changing the course of politics and history. It is not safely locked up in history books and stowed away in libraries, but continually reclaimed as an important resource for power and identity politics' (2008: 57). Crucially, the postmemorial exploration of the protagonist's past in *Soy un bravo piloto* not only enables the novel to reach a coherent resolution in its final pages, but also, and perhaps more importantly, allows the protagonist to entwine himself within a web of recollections that firmly places him as an active interlocutor in his own familial history and as a constituent part of a much wider generation. Echoing Pron's assertions in *El espíritu de mis padres*, as we will see, it is only by explicitly embracing the temporal and ideological disconnection that lies between his own present and the era of his father's militancy that the creative process of postmemory may take place. As Rubén assimilates distinct memories and processes his father's political legacy, a process allegorically illustrated by the ever-shrinking Island, it is precisely through this imaginative investment that he is ultimately able to understand his father's intentions and forgive him, realising in the last few pages of the novel that 'hasta ahora no había pensado en el dolor de [su] padre, así de simple' (he hadn't contemplated the pain his father must have felt until now, it's as simple as that) (2011: 272). He continues: 'En lo terrible que tiene que haber sido para él. Siempre lo supe, siempre estuvo ahí, claro, pero para darme cuenta de cómo la pasé yo, del padre que yo no pude tener. Nunca paré un segundo para ponerme en su lugar, para sentir el

dolor desgarrador que tiene que haber sido su partido' (How terrible it must have been for him. I always knew it, it was always there, of course, but only from *my* perspective, about the father *I* was never able to have. I never stopped for a second to put myself in his shoes, to feel the heart-breaking pain that he must have felt) (2011: 272). Mirroring his father's actions earlier in the same chapter of the novel, when he forgives his torturer, we see the possibility of this act of pardon finally allowing Rubén to accept his father's actions and the imposing cultural legacy he must navigate as a child of the disappeared. 'Mi perdón', as Abdela declares shortly before his (imagined) death, 'es el futuro' (My forgiveness is the future) (2011: 269).

In *The Generation of Postmemory*, Hirsch highlights the distinction between familial modes of transfer and this broader affiliative structure of transmission, noting 'the difference between an intergenerational vertical identification of child and parent occurring within the family, and the intra-generational horizontal identification that makes that child's position more broadly available to other contemporaries' (2012: 36). Evident in the various narrative strands of *Soy un bravo piloto*, and particularly through the characters of Raquel and Rubén's brother, while the protagonist may appropriate the memories of his mother through a familial act of transfer, it is principally through the intragenerational sharing of stories and *affiliative* negotiation of meaning that leads him towards any sort of literary catharsis. 'It is only when [memories] are redeployed, in new texts and contexts, that they regain a capacity to enable a postmemorial working through', writes Hirsch: 'The aesthetic strategies of postmemory are specifically about such an attempted, and yet an always postponed, repositioning and reintegration' (2012: 122). Rebutting criticism from those who call for a greater objectivity when approaching historical memory, Assmann, in her article on the dynamic interaction between memory and history, draws attention to the capacity of these postmemories to create such a wider interrelated community and to the subsequent possibility they possess of collectively coming to terms with a shared past. She writes:

Autobiographical memories cannot be *embodied* by another person, but they can be *shared* with others. Once they are verbalized in the form of a narrative or represented by a visual image, the individual's memories become part of an intersubjective symbolic system and are, strictly speaking, no longer a purely exclusive and unalienable property. By encoding

them in the common medium of language, they can be exchanged, shared, corroborated, confirmed, corrected, disputed, and even appropriated. (2008: 56)

However, in a similar fashion to Patricio Pron's *El espíritu de mis padres*, the political agency that must be considered when contemplating specifically Argentine notions of postmemory here entails a modification of any horizontal identification among Semán and his contemporaries. While the novel does indeed provide the author with a space to negotiate this generational act of memory transfer, ostensibly pointing to the possibility of an ideological resolution through the disappearance of the Island in the text's final few pages, there is nevertheless a sense of tension that runs through its narrative. Characteristic of many of this second generation, such an engagement with the past does not equate to an understanding, assimilation and subsequent closure of the past, as may be intimated by the metaphor of the vanishing Island; it is, rather, a realisation of the need to explore the past which is proposed by *Soy un bravo piloto* before dissipating. As a result, Semán's past is not definitively sealed within the pages of the novel, 'worked through' and conclusively understood, but remains continually and actively important for any contemporary sense of personal and collective identity. While Hirsch asserts that '[P]ostmemory is *not* an *identity* position but a *generational* structure of transmission' (2012: 35), her theory must here again be recast in light of the political nature of these distinctly Argentine expressions of postmemory. As discussed in the Introduction, this is a generation whose attitudes towards their disappeared parents have become part of a wider political arena as a direct result of the ongoing work of human rights organisations and governmental manoeuvres towards 'Memoria, Verdad y Justicia'. As such, their decidedly politicised nature in contemporary post-dictatorship Argentina points to an understanding of the past which is quite different to the contexts in which Hirsch and her contemporaries have written. As this book will continue to argue, at the same time as the emphasis is shifted from largely traumatic elements of postmemorial transfer, present in much Holocaust writing for example, to a political critique of the previous generation, we do indeed witness the forging of an identity position against the cultural backdrop of post-dictatorship Argentina.

In *Soy un bravo piloto*, the toy airplane that the protagonist's father brings back from a military training trip to China comes to symbolise not only two of the text's main themes, those of the author's childhood and

his parents' militancy, but also becomes in the course of the novel 'una especie de talismán que va recorriendo generaciones' (a type of talisman traversing generations) (cit. Frieria 2011). Though the toy is quite literally inherited by the sons along with a few letters and a photograph, thus representing a link between generations, a later episode on the Island appropriates the symbol of the plane to refer to this intra-generational impulse the author experiences towards the construction of a collective identity. As the protagonist's view of the sky is filled with 'avionetas' (little planes)—revealingly the same diminutive as is used earlier in the text when referring to the toy—carrying messages from people on the Island, one of the phrases given particular attention by the protagonist reads: '¿Quién de nosotros escribirá el Harry Potter?' (Which of us will write our Harry Potter?) (2011: 86). While the previous mention of airplanes in the novel as a reference to the military administration's *vuelos de muerte* is still present in the reader's mind, here Semán adds another layer of cultural meaning by way of the reference to Ricardo Piglia's 1980 novel, *Respiración artificial*. By replacing Piglia's reference to Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's foundational 1845 text *Facundo* ('¿Quién de nosotros escribirá el Facundo?') with one to *Harry Potter*, Semán not only imbues the appropriated phrase with a comical—and almost sardonic—reference to his secondary societal position as a *child* of the disappeared but also, more importantly, draws attention to a contemporary generation in need of consolidation. It is through these textual strategies of constructing a collective generational perspective in the present, combined with the attempt to move *beyond* narratives of direct victimhood and dependency on the previous generation, that Semán seeks to transcend his position as solely a child of the disappeared. The incorporation of the perpetrator in *Soy un bravo piloto*, for example, gestures towards an innovative attitude in the representation of this era of Argentine history: 'Traté de desarrollar una empatía por ese otro que te parece incomprensible', stated Semán in an interview, referring to El Capitán and the imagined conversations between torturer and victim, 'pero ante quien necesitás saber por qué hizo lo que hizo, y sólo en ese contexto podía imaginar el dolor del torturador. Sin establecer ningún tipo de equivalencia moral sobre los lugares de cada uno, pero sí buscando respuestas que fueran más allá del lugar del hijo' (I tried to develop a sense of empathy for this 'other' that seemed so incomprehensible, but whom I needed to understand in order to comprehend why he

did what he did; only in this context was I able to imagine the pain of the torturer. Without establishing any type of moral equivalency between the two of them, of course, but, at the same time, looking for answers beyond the position of being a child) (cit. Frieria 2011).⁵ Avoiding any ethical or moral judgement towards El Capitán and incorporating a point of view that has thus far remained relatively unexplored in cultural representations of the Dirty War, *Soy un bravo piloto* thus can be seen as part of a new, heterogeneous generational approach to Argentina's recent past.⁶ Though, materially, the protagonist possesses just a few letters and a single photograph from which to piece together the remnants of his past, it is through the fictional re-enactment of his father's fate and the imaginative exploration of his own childhood memories that an enhanced *subjective* understanding of this past is reached; a crucial and foundational process not just for Semán, but for an entire generation struggling with a fragmented and complex cultural history, inherited as children of the disappeared.

2.1.4 Conclusion

In the closing pages of the novel, a discussion between Rubén and Raquel encapsulates the novel's position towards the problematic heritage of the father's death. Presented as both the narrative impetus of *Soy un bravo piloto* and as something that must be processed and understood in order to allow any further progression to take place, Semán writes:

- 'Pero yo también soy eso que queda atrás. Yo soy Abdela'.
- 'Y tus hijos serán Abdela, como que hay un Dios. Pero tenés que saber cuál es *tu* puerto, adónde vas a desembarcar con toda tu Abdelez a cuestas. Si no vas a ser siempre el equipaje de algún otro viaje'. (2011: 274)
- [– 'But I am what's left behind. I am Abdela'
- 'And your kids will be Abdela, sure as there's a God above. But you need to know which is *your* port of call, where to get off with all the Abdela-ness that's weighing you down. If not, you'll always be someone else's baggage'.]

Echoing Maurice Halbwach's celebrated assertion that 'individual memory is nevertheless a part or an aspect of group memory' (1992: 53), Rubén's attempts to overcome this inherited generational baggage

are heavily informed by the participation and assistance of the other characters of the novel. The first narrative strand of the novel, for example, takes place almost entirely in his terminally ill mother's apartment, while all three characters join in collectively remembering certain blurry episodes from their past. Not only in 'La Ciudad', but also in the two parallel narratives, individual memory is presented not as a single rational line of facts, but as the interpellation of many strands of thought which, though often opposing and overlapping, are comprised of both personal and collective memoirs and are, perhaps most importantly, dominated by the primacy of *present* anxieties. In this way, *Soy un bravo piloto* thus becomes a literary quest to find a way to acknowledge and surmount the problematic past of the father's disappearance and the societal restrictions placed on the cultural memory of the dictatorship, and to reflect on the capacity of these memories to assert a contemporary sense of agency through the creative power of fiction.

As the protagonist nears a new understanding of the memories and episodes he is confronted with whilst on the Island, we read in the final few pages of the novel that 'cuando [él] baj[ó] a la playa para tratar de ver hacia adentro de La Isla de nuevo, todo se había desvanecido. No había nada, ni la habitación en la que habían estado hablando, ni la figura de Abdela, ni Capitán, ni nada, *sólo un fondo blanco*. Levant[ó] la mirada. [...] Lejos, en lo que podía ser un oasis, los únicos rastros de lo que había sido La Isla' (when he went down to the beach to have another look at The Island, everything had vanished. There was nothing; neither the room in which they had been talking or the figure of Abdela, or The Captain, nothing, *only a blank space*. He looked up. [...] Far away, in what could have been an oasis, there were the last few signs of what had once been The Island) (2011: 275, my emphasis). The allegorical journey that the protagonist undergoes in comprehending his past and in assimilating the various disparate strands of information surrounding his father's death thus provides the space for an ongoing reconciliation between child and disappeared parent. Crucially, this resolution also authorises a recuperation of agency and a generational position that is forged from the *fondo blanco* he finds in place of the Island. 'No puedo quedarme para siempre acá', affirms the protagonist at the end of his journey, 'lo sabemos desde el principio' (I can't stay here forever, but we've known that since the very beginning) (2011: 275).

2.2 PART TWO: BRINGING MEMORY HOME: HISTORICAL MEMORY AND *EL ESPÍRITU DE MIS PADRES*

‘Yo se lo entregué y entonces él comenzó a cortar las piezas en trozos minúsculos y carentes de sentido’, writes the young narrator of Patricio Pron’s *El espíritu de mis padres sigue subiendo en la lluvia*, recalling a childhood episode in which his father fails to be impressed by the completion of a simple children’s jigsaw: ‘No se detuvo hasta que hubo cortado todas las piezas y cuando acabó me dijo: Ahora armalo, pero yo nunca pude volver a hacerlo’ (I handed it to him and he started to cut the pieces into tiny bits, void of any meaning. He didn’t stop until he had cut up all the pieces and when he finished he said, ‘Now put it back together’, but I was never able to do it again) (2011: 129). In a novel which progressively constructs circular narratives and parallel plots, this early episode provides a reflection for what is happening on a much wider level in the text as a whole. As the young protagonist returns to Argentina from Germany and embarks on a quest to understand the life of his dying father, a final attempt to piece together the parts of his own life which have thus far remained suppressed below a haze of medication and illegal drugs, he swiftly becomes aware that the last few weeks of his father’s life had been spent on a similar, parallel quest for information—namely, the ‘misterioso caso’ (mysterious case) of Alberto Burdisso, a murdered resident of El Trébol whose sister, Alicia, had been disappeared during the military dictatorship some thirty years before (2011: 58). Examining the files of newspaper cuttings and articles left behind by his father and gradually becoming more engrossed in the case’s intricacies and various loose threads, the protagonist is also drawn more deeply into the parallel search to understand his father’s life by completing this distinctly adult puzzle he has unintentionally inherited. ‘Esta vez’, however, he realises that the stakes have changed significantly from those of his childhood: ‘las piezas eran móviles y debían ser recompuestas en un tablero mayor que era la memoria y el mundo’ (This time the pieces were moveable and had to be put together on larger table-top, which was memory and the world) (2011: 129).

Both in Argentina and indeed on a much wider global scale, the recent increase in historical fiction and the growing attraction towards the subjectification of the past is symptomatic of what Andreas Huyssen has flagged as contemporary society’s reorientation towards

a ‘hypertrophy of memory, not history’ (2003: 3). In *Present Pasts*, Huyssen points to the particularity of the postmodern experience, in which history, once an anchor for ‘the ever more transitory present of modernity’ and a ‘guarantee [of] the relative stability of the past in its pastness’ (2003: 1), has entered into a dialogic relationship with memory, the erstwhile faculty ‘for the poets and their visions of a golden age’ (2003: 2) that once had little or nothing to add to objective versions of the past. While Western ideas of modernity increasingly realigned our gaze to the potential of the future, Huyssen posits that contemporary society has undergone a semantic shift, causing us now to look to the past for a renewed sense of stability, labelling memory as both a ‘significant symptom of our cultural present’ and a ‘cultural obsession of monumental proportions across the globe’ (2003: 3, 16). The incursion of memory politics into social and political discourse has indeed raised many significant questions in the Argentine cultural sphere, not only surrounding the subjective revisions of ‘official’ historiography, but also concerning the authority and elaboration of testimonies which deal with personal and traumatic experiences. Taking Pron’s *El espíritu de mis padres* as the lens through which to address these critical debates, the second part of this chapter will posit that, through a negotiation of both personal and appropriated memories, Pron aims not only to destabilise dominant narratives of Argentina’s turbulent past, but also to provide answers for the affective gaps in the past and create a more comprehensive version of his own familial history. Published in the same year as Semán’s text and narrated in the first-person, the ‘subjective’ truths that are constructed within the novel’s pages through the creative exploration of his father’s legacy enable Pron to problematise the notion of secondary victimhood, and—in much the same way as Semán’s protagonist—allow for the forging of a collective position in the present from which to look imaginatively and critically towards the past. Moreover, while the Holocaust has, as Dominick LaCapra points out, become the hermeneutic and ethical model for current discussions surrounding the interrelation of traumatic post-conflict memories and their historical contexts, the limitations of applying such a model to the post-dictatorship context, and specifically to Argentina’s second generation, will be given significant consideration. By drawing attention to the mechanisms of memory transfer and underlining the distinct aspects of Argentine postmemory, this chapter will continue, as Susannah Radstone has recently advocated, to ‘Bring Memory Home’ (2012) to a firmly Argentine context.

2.2.1 *The Memory/History Debate*

In *El espíritu de mis padres*, as the protagonist becomes gradually more enveloped in his quest to understand his father's motives for investigating the Burdisso case, he finds himself in a local museum, listening repeatedly to a documentary in which his father discusses his career as a journalist, feeling at once 'algo de orgullo y una muy fuerte decepción' (a sense of both pride and very strong disappointment) (2011: 133). As the gallery prepares to close and an employee turns off the projector screen, we read: 'Mi padre dejó inconclusa la frase que estaba diciendo y yo traté de completarla pero no pude: donde estaba la cara de mi padre comencé ver la mía, que se reflejaba en la pantalla negra con todas las facciones reunidas en un gesto de dolor y tristeza que yo nunca antes había visto' (My father left the sentence unfinished, and I tried unsuccessfully to finish it: where my father's face had been, I began to see my own, reflected on the black screen with all of its features brought together in a gesture of pain and sadness that I had never seen before) (2011: 134). The inability that the protagonist encounters in engaging in any meaningful interaction with his father's image, and the sudden disappointment he feels from 'la imposibilidad de imitarle o de ofrecerle un logro que estuviera a la altura de los suyos' (the impossibility of offering him an achievement that matched his own), are countered in the next few sentences (and during the very same night) by the decision to pen the novel that his father '[siempre] le hubiera gustado escribir' (had always wanted to write) (2011: 133, 135). Though the museum provides the protagonist with a few previously unknown, peripheral facts about his father's life, it is far from being the full story that the son desires. The symbolic denunciation of the limitations of the museum and its failure to foster any meaningful connection between the protagonist and his father is revealed, in the course of the novel, as the very driving force behind its narration. The novel he intends to write, '[b]reve, hecha de fragmentos, con huecos allí donde [su] padre no pudiera o no quisiera recordar algo, hecha de simetrías [...] y más triste que el día del padre en un orfanato' (short, composed of fragments, with gaps where [his] father couldn't or didn't want to remember something, composed of symmetries [...] and sadder than Father's Day at an orphanage) (2011: 135–136), is, therefore, an active intent to complete the gaps that have been left unaccounted for in official versions of his father's past, continuing—and perhaps completing—the unfinished sentences that the museum's documentary left so abruptly truncated.

In *Pensar entre épocas*, Nicolás Casullo argues against the museumification of the past, exposing the need for ‘una contramemoria que debería oponerse a las operatorias sobre el pasado como pulcra mostración, como diseño mimético [...] que nos conducen a conflictos ya enmudecidos, ya homogeneizados, ya reciclados por una política y una ideología conciliadoras, y por ende incapacitados para abrirnos a lo que realmente nos espera más allá de las explicaciones legitimadas’ (a countermemory which resists explorations into the past that are considered neat, mimetic designs [...] and which lead us to conflicts that have already been silenced, homogenised and recycled by conciliatory politics and ideologies, and which are therefore unable to let us comprehend what is really to be found beyond legitimatised explanations) (2004: 77). In a similar vein, the Chilean cultural theorist Nelly Richard warns against both the decontextualisation of memory and the subsequent process that actively distances ‘historical memory from the network of emotionality which once made it tremble collectively’ (2004: 32). Describing memory as ‘an open process of reinterpretation of a past that unties and reties its knots so that new events and understandings are possible’ (2004: 29), she points to the continual tension between memory and history, and celebrates the resultant friction as a source of creative potential for the present. Indeed, in *El espíritu de mis padres*, while the protagonist’s textual attempts at piecing together aspects of his father’s legacy may add very little to any official museum or textbook versions of history—what Casullo refers to as ‘legitimized explanations’—they do, however, have an important and creative role to play in the coherence of the protagonist’s present sense of identity. Assmann, in her discussion of the intersections between history and testimony of the Holocaust, asserts that ‘the survivors as witnesses do not, as a rule, add to our knowledge of factual history; their testimonies, in fact, have often proved inaccurate. [...] This however does not invalidate them as a unique contribution to our knowledge of the past’ (2006: 263). These personal explorations into memory, often disregarded by historians as ‘an undisciplined activity that troubles the clear waters of historiography’, and which often contain contrasting and contradictory information, can, nevertheless, offer a ‘unique contribution’ (2006: 263) to our understanding of a collective, shared past: that is, not as attempts to discern exactly what may have happened, but as indications of the ongoing consequences and how they continue to influence any personal notion of identity.

‘The historian cannot be and should not be the guardian of memory’, writes Saul Friedländer in his discussion of the generational aspects of trauma inheritance, concluding in the same article that

The historian’s gaze is analytic, critical, attuned to complexity, and wary about generalizations. But the historian should not avoid the precise definition of interpretive concepts and categories in a domain so wide open to extraordinary flights of imagination or malicious denials in interpretive endeavours. [...] The victims’ voices radically widen the narrative span. (2000: 13)

Closely echoing Assmann’s claims, for Friedländer, these ‘mythic memories’—as he labels them in an earlier article—do not obfuscate or detract from the authenticity of history itself, but possess the potential to introduce an extra dimension of coherence ‘within the overall representation of this past without its becoming an “obstacle” to “rational historiography”’ (1992: 53). In the novel’s epilogue, Pron openly gestures towards the mediated nature of the incidents contained within the text’s pages, and acknowledges that ‘[a]unque los hechos narrados en este libro son principalmente verdaderos, algunos son producto de las necesidades del relato de ficción, cuyas reglas son diferentes de las de géneros como el testimonio y la autobiografía’ (while the events told in this book are mostly true, some are the result of the demands of fiction, whose rules are different from the rules of such genres as testimony or autobiography) (2011: 198). He then adds: ‘[E]n este sentido me gustaría mencionar aquí lo que dijera en cierta ocasión el escritor español Antonio Muñoz Molina, a modo de recordatorio y advertencia: «Una gota de ficción tiñe todo de ficción»’ (For that reason, I would like to mention here what the Spanish writer Antonio Muñoz Molina once said, as a reminder and as a warning: “A drop of fiction taints everything as fictional”) (2011: 198). While Pron actively endeavours to discover the aspects of his father’s life that have hence remained lost behind the more dominant modes of historical narrative, he openly admits to his intent to achieve this task, much like Semán, through a subjective, imaginative process which is neither bound by the laws of rational historiography nor runs counter to its aims.

Though Pron openly highlights the mediated nature of his own writing, he does, moreover, also make certain gestures towards the fallible

nature of officially accepted history itself, undermining the manner in which subjective testimonies may be used in the construction of a public historical discourse. Having examined a large number of the articles that his father had amassed and having investigated the details surrounding the death of Alberto Burdisso, the protagonist reads one further report which leads him to a rather sardonic conclusion:

[N]o aportaba información complementaria pero sí datos ligeramente diferentes: aquí Burdisso tiene sesenta y un años y no sesenta, Marcos Brochero tiene treinta y dos años y no treinta y uno, Juan Huck tiene sesenta y uno y no sesenta y tres, [...] Burdisso se ha quebrado cinco costillas y no seis y los dos hombros en lugar de un hombro y un brazo, como en la versión anterior. (2011: 117–118)

[The article did not contribute any additional information but did offer slightly different facts: Here Burdisso is sixty-one and not sixty, Marcos Brochero is thirty-two and not thirty-one, Juan Huck is sixty-one and not sixty-three, [...] Burdisso broke five ribs and not six and both shoulders instead of a shoulder and an arm, as in the previous version.]

Though the newspaper articles and other sources may not—and, perhaps, may never—correspond on many points of the incident, Pron does however highlight their nature as ‘detalles menores’ (minor details) (2011: 119) and emphasises the innocuous quality of the discrepancies for the story as a whole—no matter how many bones were broken or the relative distance of the house from El Trébol, the story of Alberto Burdisso still remains one of tragedy. For Pron, and indeed for many of his contemporaries, as this book will show, the assertions of memory have an important role to play in any discussion of the past, even when they fall short of the objective accuracy of factual truth. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, Dori Laub recounts a story in which a group of professional historians discredited a survivor’s story because she ‘incorrectly’ remembered the number of chimneys that had been destroyed during an insurrection in Auschwitz. ‘The woman was testifying’, justifies Laub, ‘not to the number of chimneys blown up, but to something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence. One chimney blown up in Auschwitz was as incredible as four. The number mattered less than the fact of the occurrence. [...] She testified to the breakage of a framework. *That was historical truth*’ (1992: 60, my emphasis). The factual

inaccuracies and contrasting information presented in *El espíritu de mis padres*, which reflect the gaps and disputes in any mediated process of remembering, are not presented by Pron as attempts at advancing a definitive version of his father's quest, but merely as a complementary way of approaching the situation as a whole. Moreover, paratextually, the chapters of the novel themselves are labelled incorrectly, often omitting or confusing numbers, pointing to the unavoidable gaps in the protagonist's (hi)story that can never be filled by any one totalising narrative. Reflected in the narration of the novel itself, with these narrative ellipses and parallel plots, Pron clears a path for the 'historical truth' of his own personal story of his father's militancy to exist alongside historical narratives of the same era.

2.2.2 *Generational Transfer and Postmemory*

Writing in the specific context of post-dictatorship Argentina and focusing on generational acts of memory transfer, the sociologist Jelin discusses the inherent danger of overlooking the marginal aspects of memory, these unverified, and indeed often unverifiable, mutating retentions that form the basis of any act of recollection. 'To be the bearer of pain and memory after having been a victim or direct witness grants a certain power and symbolic authority through the "monopoly" of the meaning and contents of truth and memory' (1995: 141), she remarks, in reference to the critical debates that have characterised Argentina's post-dictatorship era. She then offers a warning: 'This power can, in turn, stifle the mechanisms of the intergenerational transfer of memory, by the refusal to grant new generations the permission to reinterpret—in their own ways and from their own historical circumstances—the meaning of the experiences that are being transmitted' (1995: 143). Richard, too, underlines the importance of the ability to offer reinterpretations of the past through the generational act of mnemonic transfer. In *Cultural Residues*, she writes:

The remains of the disappeared – the remains of a disappeared past – must first be uncovered (un-undercovered) and then assimilated: that is to say, reinserted in a biographical and historical narrative that allows them to be tested and placed alongside coexisting meanings. To release memories from a past that pain or blame have encrypted in a sealed temporality, various interpretations of history and memory must be liberated,

interpretations capable of accepting narrative conflicts and revealing, from the multiple disparate fractions of contradictory temporalities, new versions and rewritings of events which transfer the past to the unedited networks of historical intelligibility. It does not entail, therefore, looking toward the history of the dictatorship in order to record the contemplative image of suffering and resistance from a present in which said image becomes mythically embedded as memory, but rather to create fissures in the meanings that history has rendered past and finite, to chip away at its unilateral truths with the creases and folds of critical interrogation. (2004: 41–42)

For both Richard and Jelin, and indeed for Pron and his contemporaries, it is only through a dynamic process of continual reinterpretation, and the dialogic incorporation of distinct memories, that this shared past may remain relevant for any sense of a new collective identity.

This reinterpretation, however, does therefore admittedly include a creative aspect which is not strictly *true*, but which attests, as Laub confirms, to a historical truth that transcends the official and accepted modes of narrating this recent history. While discussing a newspaper poll, which had been carried out to assess general public opinion over the whereabouts of the then missing Albert Burdisso, the protagonist writes:

Por cierto, si se suman los porcentajes mencionados anteriormente el resultado es 99,99 por ciento. El 0,01 restante, que falta o solo está presente como una carencia en la estadística, parece ocupar el lugar del desaparecido; parece estar allí como aquello que no se puede decir, que no se puede nombrar siquiera; en el lugar de todas las posibles explicaciones a la desaparición que los redactores de la encuesta han omitido mencionar –y que pueden mencionarse aquí brevemente, incluso aunque se sepa que son improbables o falsas: ha ganado la lotería, ha decidido iniciar un viaje y en este momento está en Francia o en Australia, ha sido abducido por extraterrestres, etcétera– y que están allí para probar tan siquiera que *la realidad es absolutamente irreductible a una estadística*. (2011: 72–73, my emphasis)

[By the way, if the aforementioned percentages are added up the result is 99.99 per cent. The remaining 0.01, which is missing or simply represents an error in the survey, seems to occupy the place of the disappeared man: he is there as that which cannot be said, that which cannot even be named. The writers of the survey left out some possible explanations for the disappearance that we can briefly mention here, even though they're

admittedly improbable—he won the lottery, he is in France or Australia, he was abducted by aliens, et cetera—which prove that *not even reality can be absolutely reduced to a statistic.*]

The creative investment—the 0.01 per cent remainder—that here breaks free from the available official versions of history and which, throughout the novel, allows the protagonist to construct an imaginative narrative which facilitates an understanding of his father's life, also points to a much wider aspect of Pron's generation as a whole. In *The Generation of Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch argues that the disconnectedness of the second generation from the traumatic events that have preceded them does not prevent them from engaging with these memories, but enables them to appropriate them affectively as postmemories and endow them with a new agency for contemporary notions of the past. For Hirsch, the addition of the prefix *post* does not imply that subsequent generations are 'beyond memory', but that memories of events they did not experience or were too young to recall have, at a generational remove, been 'transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right' (2012: 5). Indeed, while the criticism surrounding the distinctiveness of postmemory and its relation to memory proper have already been discussed in the Introduction to the book, here it is this separate strand of Hirsch's theory of postmemory, focusing on the *character* of the process rather than its form, which is relevant for the present discussion. Driving a wedge between first-person testimony and the creativity of postmemory, Hirsch brands this imaginative investment as an emancipatory process that distances itself from official versions of the past, and as one that, importantly, does not run counter to their aims. 'Postmemory's connection to the past', writes Hirsch, 'is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. [...] These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present' (2012: 5). In a society still experiencing the economic and political fallout from the turbulent period of the Dirty War and its neoliberal aftermath, these inventive aspects of postmemory consequently allow second-generation survivors to appropriate their parents' stories and use them creatively to construct versions of the past which have, essentially, a much stronger link with preoccupations of the present.

In a particularly significant part of the novel's narrative the protagonist addresses related questions of coherence and authenticity, as this

intergenerational tension is made manifestly clear. Discussing his decision to pen his father's novel despite a lack of familiarity with the entire story, he writes:

[M]e dije que yo tenía los materiales para escribir un libro y que esos materiales me habían sido dados por mi padre, que había creado para mí una narración de la que yo iba a tener que ser autor y lector, y descubrir a medida que la narrara [...]. Qué hubiera pensado mi padre de que yo contase su historia sin conocerla por completo, persiguiéndola en las historias de otros como si yo fuera el coyote y él el correcaminos y yo tuviera que resignarme a verle perderse en el horizonte dejando detrás de sí una nube de polvo y a mí con un palmo de narices; qué hubiera pensado mi padre de que yo contara su historia y la historia de todos nosotros sin conocer en profundidad los hechos, con decenas de cabos sueltos que iba anudando lentamente para construir un relato que avanzaba a trompicones y contra todo lo que yo me había propuesto, pese a ser yo, indefectiblemente, su autor. (2011: 144–145)

[I told myself that I had the material for a book and that this material had been given to me by my father, who had created a narrative in which I would have to be both the author and the reader, discovering as I narrated. [...] What would my father think of my telling his story without understanding it completely, chasing after it in the stories of others as if I were the coyote and he the roadrunner, and I had to resign myself to watching him fade into the horizon, leaving behind a cloud of dust, the wind taken out of my sails; what would my father think of my telling his story—the story of all of us—without really knowing the facts, with dozens of loose ends that I would knot up slowly to construct a narrative that stumbled along contrary to everything I'd set out to do, in spite of my being, inevitably, its author.]

By way of the reference to a children's cartoon, a literary trope which abounds in texts from the Argentine second generation, Pron problematises the mnemonic process of generational transfer and, towards the end of the novel, comes to a conclusion which both legitimises the act of writing and highlights the necessity of such an endeavour.⁷ He declares, in the concluding pages of the text: 'A veces pienso también que quizá yo no pueda nunca contar su historia, pero debo intentarlo de todas formas, y también pienso que, aunque la historia tal como la conozco sea incorrecta o falsa, su derecho a la existencia está garantizado por el hecho de que también es mi historia. [...] Que ellos [el padre y sus compañeros]

digan las palabras que sus hijos nunca hemos escuchado pero que necesitamos desentrañar para que su legado no resulte incompleto' (Sometimes I also think that perhaps I can never tell this story but I should try anyway, and I also think that even though the story as I know it may be inaccurate or false, its right to exist is guaranteed by the fact that it is also my story. [...]) [If that's true, if I don't know how to tell their story, I should do it anyway so that [my father's generation] feel compelled to correct me in their own words, so that they say the words that as their children we have never heard but that we need to unravel to complete their legacy) (2011: 190–191). As Hirsch attests, the children of those directly affected by collective trauma 'inherit a horrific, unknown, and unknowable past' that needs to be narrated, shaped all the while by 'the child's confusion and responsibility, by the desire to repair' (2012: 34). This act of reconstruction by means of fiction not only enables Pron to come to terms with his father's inherited legacy, but represents, through the very nature of the past that is being remembered, both a requirement *and* a prerogative for the author and his contemporaries.

2.2.3 *Bringing Memory Home*

Since the beginning of the aforementioned global expansion of interest surrounding historical memory, theories of postmemory, testimony and the communication of trauma have largely been elaborated, as has already been discussed, through the historical context of the Holocaust, providing a rich and remarkable body of literature which has been invaluable in post-dictatorship Argentine cultural studies. In *Multidirectional Memory*, Michael Rothberg considers contemporary global applications of the Holocaust and discusses how historically, politically and geographically discrete conflicts can nevertheless uncover similarities and open up debates over the nature of trauma. 'Memory', he writes, 'is not afraid to traverse sacrosanct borders of ethnicity and era' (2009: 17). Huyssen, too, confirms memory's capacity to bridge eras and contexts: 'The global circulation at once decenters the event of the Holocaust and certifies its use as a prism through which we may look at other instances of genocide' (2003: 25). It is, however, important not to overlook the distinctions inherent in each individual context of memory politics, and, more specifically for this study, for the historical and cultural specificity of Argentina's post-dictatorship society. In a recent article entitled, 'Bringing Memory Home: Location, Theory, Hybridity', Radstone

advocates the necessity of emphasising ‘identity and locatedness in the face of trauma and loss’, underlining the importance of configuring ‘[h]ow a politics of memory grounded *in* memory’s relations *with* specificity, location and identity might be forged without denying the limits on identification imposed by acknowledging these specificities’ (2012: 335, emphasis in original). In a similar vein, the sociologists Cecilia Sosa and Alejandra Serpente, writing in reference to Chilean and Argentine second-generation artists, also stress the significance of anchoring ‘travelling concepts in the global field of memory studies’ to particular historical conflicts, thus exhibiting a heightened sensitivity to their ‘new contested attires when they reach southern scenarios’ (2012: 160).

There are, indeed, significant pitfalls when reconciling the application of memory theory—and particularly for this study, theories of post-memory—with the generational particularities of a specifically Argentine context. Both Hugo Vezzetti and Nicolás Casullo have argued against the use of Holocaust (post)memory as the hermeneutic model for contemporary Argentine cultural studies.⁸ Though both critics refrain from entering into discussion over the specific characteristics which separate both regimes, Vezzetti does make reference to the ‘*construcción propiamente política* del programa dictatorial’ (*strictly political construction* of the dictatorial regime) (2002: 61). These markedly political aspects of the Argentine case of memory transfer are, indeed, a significant feature to accentuate; while there are parallels to be drawn between the Holocaust and the Dirty War as institutional apparatuses of repression, including but not limited to structural and processual similarities⁹ and the concealed nature of the victim’s fate, questions of political agency complicate the Argentine case beyond the intelligible limits of Holocaust theory.¹⁰ The ‘moral imperative to remember’ (1993: 5), as posited by James E. Young in his discussion of Holocaust memorialisation, *The Texture of Memory*, takes on a noticeably different ethical spin when applied to Argentina’s second generation and the actions of their parents. While the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany was based firmly on racial grounds, the systematic disappearance of Argentine citizens during the military’s administration was *largely* aimed at leftist militants who had taken the active decision to risk their lives, and the wellbeing of their families, in pursuit of political ideals.¹¹ To deny the distinctly political nature of the repression in discussions of the generational transfer of memory, or to relegate it to secondary importance, would be to fail to understand the complexities of the ‘locatedness and identity’ of the Argentine case.

While Holocaust studies have, for the most part, been concerned with the application of trauma theory to literary, cinematic and artistic representations from second-generation survivors, contemporary explorations into memory—and not just within Argentina—must call for a more diverse theoretical lens. As Huyssen asserts in *Present Pasts*, ‘It has been all too tempting to some to think of trauma as the hidden core of all memory. [...] But to collapse memory into trauma, I think, would unduly confine our understanding of memory, marking it too exclusively in terms of pain, suffering, and loss. It would deny human agency and lock us into compulsive repetition. Memory, whether individual or generational, political or public, is always more than only the prison house of the past’ (2003: 8). In *Representing the Holocaust*, LaCapra also critiques the obsessive focus on trauma that has come to characterise postmodern Holocaust studies and its application in other contexts, warning against the ‘tendency to “trope” away from specificity and to evacuate history by construing the caesura of the Holocaust as a total trauma that is un(re)presentable and reduces everyone (victims, witnesses, perpetrators, revisionists, those born later) to an ultimately homogenizing yet sublime silence’ (1994: 97). While notions of trauma cannot, of course, be completely disregarded from analyses of the works of Pron and his contemporaries, to restrict our perception solely to the traumatic would be, as Huyssen concludes, an insurmountable obstacle in ‘understand[ing] the political layers of memory discourse in our time’ (2003: 9). Pron’s novel points to a wider reticence on the part of the children of *desaparecidos* to inherit the passive role of victim. As Huyssen has affirmed elsewhere on this very point, ‘memory must not be victimhood’ (cit. Bardotti 2010). Similarly, the French philosopher Alain Badiou has highlighted a contemporary tendency to transform suffering into a form of entertainment, resulting in a ‘suffering’ or ‘spectacular body’, which is devoid of any political thought. ‘It is necessary’, he instructs, ‘that the victim is testament to something other than himself’, to form a ‘creative body’ (2004: 28) which is re-inscribed with agency and the capacity for political action.

This re-inscription of the political into readings of the past can, for example, be seen in the 2007 documentary *M*, by Nicolás Prividera. From the perspective of a son of the disappeared, Prividera’s documentary recounts the story of his mother’s involvement with the Montonero movement during Videla’s dictatorship, opening the film with an epigraph from William Faulkner: ‘Su niñez estaba poblada de nombres, su propio cuerpo era como un salón vacío lleno de ecos de sonoros

nombres derrotados. No era un ser, una persona. Era una comunidad' (His childhood was populated by names, and his own body was like an empty room, full of the echoes of resonant, defeated names) (2007). Rather than presenting his mother as a victim of the military administration's repression, and then appropriating this traumatic label, the director instead examines the memories surrounding her disappearance, highlighting militancy as her own choice, and in this way transcends his position as passive victim by both critically engaging with the dominant historical narratives of the period and refocusing the emphasis towards the contingent political and social difficulties of the present. As one critic writes while discussing the documentary, such works from the second generation '[e]stablecen fisuras en las narraciones establecidas, [...] situando su práctica como derecho y a la vez como deber, para recuperar lazos entre lo que es y lo que fue' (establish fissures in established narratives, [...] situating their work as both a right and a duty, in order to recuperate a relationship between what is and what was) (2009: 52). No longer an 'empty room, full of echoes', the director's own voice, just like Pron's, becomes a legitimate political force in itself. In this way, many of the children of disappeared militants may indeed overcome the restrictive and repetitive nature of past trauma, creating narratives that both look to the past *and* to the future, and enable a recuperation and appropriation of generational agency *through* the lens of the present. It is, both for Pron and Prividera, primarily the political, and not the traumatic, which fuels the transfer of these memories in their distinctly Argentine contexts.

2.2.4 *Political Agency, Postmemory and Pron*

While describing a family photograph, the protagonist of *El espíritu de mis padres* gestures towards the one-sided nature of his present endeavour of rescuing his father's memory. He writes:

En la fotografía, mi padre no me mira, no repara siquiera en que le estoy mirando. [...] Yo no sabía aún, sin embargo, que mi padre conocía el miedo mucho mejor de lo que yo pensaba, que mi padre había vivido con él y había luchado contra él y, como todos, había perdido esa batalla de una guerra silenciosa que había sido la suya y la de toda su generación. (2011: 23)

[In the photograph, my father isn't looking at me; he doesn't even notice that I am looking at him [...] I didn't yet know that my father knew fear much better than I thought, that my father had lived with it and fought

against it and, like everyone, had lost that battle in a silent war that had been his and his entire generation's.]

Reminiscent of Gabriela Bettini's photograph (Fig. 1.1) which was discussed in the Introduction to this book, Pron's image of parental disconnection and misunderstanding cannot but be imbued with political reference. While Bettini uses the *Nunca más* report in her photograph as the metaphor for the legal and cultural upheavals in Argentine society since her grandfather's death, here Pron highlights the unfathomable fear with which his father's generation carried out their militant activities as a metonymic indicator of the generational (and political) chasm that must be understood in order to be effectively processed. Richard claims that it is these political residues, the 'fragments of experience that were no longer speakable in the language that survived the catastrophe of meaning', which must be creatively reworked in order to re-establish contemporary significance and underline that which has been irrevocably *discarded* (2004: 5). Adding a further nuance to the contextual differences between Argentine and Holocaust postmemory, it is against the backdrop of Argentina's attempts at national reconciliation, which aimed, as outlined in the Introduction, to relegate the past firmly to the past through official amnesties and laws of impunity, that these 'aesthetics of the discard' are, as Jon Beasley-Murray states, 'reelaborated and reworked, allusively and indirectly, to indicate the fissures and lapses within the contemporary discourse of political consensus, economic prosperity, and cultural homogeneity' (2005: 127). Indeed, as previously argued, the contemporary socio-political uses of memory and justice under the Kirchner administrations heighten the need for specificity when dealing with the recuperation of political agency and, in Pron's case, when offering a new—varied and polemical—understanding of 1970s left-wing militancy.

In contrast to earlier works by this generation, however, Pron makes an explicit reference to his reticence to evaluate the justifications for his parents' militancy.¹² Towards the end of the novel, he writes: 'También comprendí que tenía que escribir sobre él y que escribir sobre él iba a consistir ya no tan solo en averiguar quién había sido él, sino también, y sobre todo, cómo ser un detective del padre y reunir toda la información disponible pero no juzgarlo y ceder esa información a un juez imparcial que yo no conocía y tal vez no fuera a conocer nunca' (I also understood that I had to write about him and that writing about him was going to

mean not only finding out who he had been, but also, and above all, finding out how to write about one's father, how to be a detective and gather the information available but not judge him, and give all that information to an impartial judge whom I didn't know and perhaps never would know) (2011: 184). There are, of course, reflecting the generic and ideological ambiguities that lie at the very heart of this post-dictatorship generation, many differing opinions towards the political interventions of the previous generation. Here, it is important to note that Pron's parents were part of the non-militant *Guardia de Hierro*, an organisation they left before it combined with the Montoneros. In an interview with *Página/12*, Pron admits that while he personally takes comfort in the fact his parents were not responsible for killing anyone, the necessity to understand the *present* significance of their particular historical moment is what forms the basis of his novel. He explains:

Los supuestos derrotados de la historia, la generación de mis padres, introdujeron cambios sociológicos y políticos sin los cuales la sociedad argentina sería inconcebible. Creo que era el momento de pensar si algo del espíritu del proyecto político de mis padres era pertinente y merecía ser rescatado. De hecho no es una novela acerca del pasado, no es una novela destinada a glorificar la experiencia política de mis padres y de su generación. Es una novela que tiene la finalidad de pensar cuánto de todo aquello es pertinente y útil aquí y ahora. (Frieria 2011)

[Those who were supposedly defeated, my parents' generation, introduced social and political changes without which Argentine society would be unrecognizable. I believe it was time to think about whether something of the spirit of their struggle was pertinent and worthy of being rescued. In fact it is not so much a novel about the past, or a novel destined to glorify the political experiences of my parents and their generation. The novel has as its main aim a consideration of how much is pertinent and useful here and now.]

El espíritu de mis padres is, for Pron, not only an exploration into the contemporary value of his parents' political actions, but also a reflection on the very mechanisms of memory transfer that allow such an inheritance to be processed.

The novel is not, therefore, a simple transferral of political thought between generations, free from any moral imperative or ethical legacy. The socio-historical contexts of the two generations provide significantly

different obstacles, and this act of transfer, although primarily driven by the inheritance of political agency, is a creative one which nevertheless appropriates elements of the past and reconditions them in accordance with the exigencies of the present. It is through this process that parallels may be drawn between eras and, as the protagonist suggests in the course of the novel, that the reactivation of political heritage is enabled despite the contemporary incongruity of his parents' ideals:

Mi padre había comenzado a buscar a su amiga perdida y yo, sin quererlo, había empezado también poco después a buscar mi padre y ése era un destino argentino. Y me pregunté si todo aquello no era también una tarea política, una de las pocas que podía tener relevancia para mi propia generación, que había creído en el proyecto liberal que arrojara a la miseria a buena parte de los argentinos durante la década de 1990 y les había hecho hablar un lenguaje incomprensible que debía ser subtítulado; una generación, digo, que había salido escaldada pero algunos de cuyos miembros no podíamos olvidar. (2011: 184)

[My father had started to search for his lost friend and I, without meaning to, had also started shortly afterward to search for my father. This was our lot as Argentines. And I wondered whether this could also be a political task, one of the few with relevance for my own generation, which had believed in the liberal project that led a large proportion of the Argentine people into poverty in the 1990s and made them speak an incomprehensible language that had to be subtitled; a generation, as I was saying, that had gotten burned, but some of us still couldn't forget.]

By both responding to 'ese legado y ese mandato' (this legacy and mandate) (2011: 168) passed down from the previous generation and referencing the economic and social continuities of his father's era in the present, the protagonist intertwines ideas of loss and defeat with their 'lot as Argentines'. Despite the differences in their concepts of what 'transformación social y la voluntad' (social transformation and struggle) (2011: 168) may entail, there is, as the protagonist comes to understand, 'algo en esa diferencia que era asimismo un punto de encuentro, un hilo que atravesaba las épocas y nos unía a pesar de todo y era espantosamente argentino: la sensación de estar unidos en la derrota, padres e hijos' (something in that difference that was also a meeting point, a thread that went through the years and brought us together in spite of everything and was horrifically Argentine: the feeling of parents and

children being united in defeat) (2011: 39). While both father and son are brought together in the face of political loss, this focus is a testament not only to how it is political agency which drives the act of memory transfer and creates links between generations, but also to how notions of the political are appropriated and transformed in the present, endowed with new significance for both the second generation and contemporary Argentine society as a whole. It is at this point, as Assmann contends, where ‘testimony acquires the quality of testament: an inter-generational memory is transformed into a transgenerational memory’ (2006: 271).

2.2.5 Conclusion

While discussing his parents’ involvement in militancy and describing certain aspects of left-wing militant protocol, the protagonist of *El espíritu de mis padres* centres on one ploy that was utilised during the 1970s as a means of survival if arrested. He writes:

Un minuto. Un minuto era una mentira, una cierta fábula que mi padre y sus compañeros inventaban todo el tiempo por el caso de que los detuvieran; si el minuto era bueno, si era convincente, quizá no los mataran de inmediato. Un minuto bueno, una buena historia, era simple y breve e incluía detalles superfluos porque la vida está llena de ellos. Quien contara su historia de principio a final estaba condenado, porque ese rasgo específico, la capacidad de contar una historia sin dubitaciones, que tan raramente se encuentra entre las personas, era para quienes les perseguían una prueba de la falsedad de la historia mucho más fácil de determinar que si la historia tratara de extraterrestres o fueran cuentos de aparecidos. (2011: 169)

[A minute. A minute was a lie, a cover story that my father and his coworkers were constantly inventing in case they were arrested; if the minute was good, if it was convincing, maybe they wouldn’t be killed immediately. A good minute, a good story, was simple and brief but included superfluous details because life is full of them. Anyone who told his story from beginning to end was doomed because the ability to speak without hesitation—which is so rare in people—was, to their persecutors, much stronger evidence of the story’s falseness than if it was about aliens or ghosts.]

This ‘minute’ does, of course, closely mirror the protagonist’s own ambitions in writing the novel. Breaking free from the constraints of the

hegemonic public discourses surrounding 1970s militancy, Pron provides a story which aims to advance a fuller understanding of the past, injecting the narrative with a creativity that allows him to uncover the aspects of his own past that had thus far remained both unknown and unknowable through available official accounts. Already struggling with memory loss from years of taking both prescribed and illegal drugs, the protagonist finds, for example, that it is not through the obsessive and laborious listings of the books of his parents' bookshelves or ingredients in their recipe books that the keys to understanding the past are provided; it is, instead, the imaginative reworkings of personal and collective memories, fuelled by the subjective force of postmemory, which allows him to reach his conclusion.

The parallel quests to come to terms with his father's heritage and the unresolved case of Alberto Burdisso draw the protagonist deeper into a search which questions the very mechanisms of the generational transfer of memory, revealing both its inherent complexities and the potential catharsis it may come to facilitate. The specificity of the Argentine case, with its emphasis on the political rather than the traumatic, allows Pron to reactivate this inheritance in the present, shifting the focus to contemporary concerns rather than, as Huyssen has written, 'deny[ing] human agency and lock[ing] us into compulsive repetition' (2003: 8). It is through this distinctly Argentine postmemorial process that the protagonist is able to note similarities between his generation and that of his father, but, at the same time, also account for the political backdrop that distinguishes them. Denying an inherited position as victim or a passive and secondary role as a child of the disappeared, the protagonist refocuses the emphasis on the present and both reveals the subjective mechanisms of testimony itself and creatively exercises his right to account for the fissures in his own past by means of a process which is posited as entirely justifiable when the familial stories one inherits are fragmentary, incomplete and objectively unknowable.

2.3 CONCLUSION: POSTMEMORIAL F(R)ICTIONS

In 'Postmemory, Postmemoir', Leslie Morris defines the works of the post-Holocaust generation as 'all poised between fact and fiction; experience and imagination; the immediacy of lived, remembered experience and mediated, transmitted, imagined memory, the memory as it is

handed down in image, text, voice. The postmemoir is inexact and liminal and poetic and sudden [...]—it is there as trace and as echo and also as fact’ (2002: 291). Indeed, as this chapter has shown through the parallels that are to be drawn between the post-Holocaust and Argentine second generations, the semi-autobiographical works from Pron and Semán also point to memory not as the source of any objective or official history, but to its inherent quality as a subjective, delayed and experiential construct. While both novels exhibit a varying dependence on memories that are passed down from one generation to the next in the form of photographs, letters and anecdotal information, there is, however, also a significant reliance on both the creativity of fiction and on the appropriation and modification of these memories *among* and *by* the contemporary generation. The narrative core of each novel revolves around the deathbed of a parent, as this affective material—the very substance of postmemory, as Marianne Hirsch confirms—is corroborated, challenged and shared between the remaining members of the family. By pointing precisely to the problematic generational inheritance that characterises such a transmission of cultural memory, the two novels posit a different interpretation of testimony, with their central protagonists avoiding the appropriation of the label of victim and using their families’ histories to forge a position in the present from which they can look collectively and critically towards the past.

As the protagonist of *El espíritu de mis padres* narrates his arrival at Buenos Aires airport at the beginning of the novel, and recounts seeing a figure resembling the footballer Diego Maradona, the postmemorial impetus of the novel is revealed. After imagining the stranger with ‘una mano enorme, que golpeaba un balón para convertir un gol en un Mundial cualquiera’ (an enormous hand that hit the ball to score a goal in whatever World Cup), we read:

Como quiera que sea, aquel encuentro, que ocurrió realmente y que, por tanto, fue verdadero, puede leerse aquí sencillamente como una invención, como algo falso. [...] Fue verdadero pero no necesariamente verosímil. [...] Yo pensaba que había venido de los oscuros bosques alemanes a la llanura horizontal argentina para ver morir a mi padre y para despedirme de él y prometerle —aunque yo no lo creyera en absoluto— que él y yo íbamos a tener otra oportunidad, en algún otro sitio, para que cada uno de nosotros averiguara quién era el otro y, quizá, por primera vez desde que él se había convertido en padre y yo en hijo, por fin entenderíamos algo;

pero esto, siendo verdadero, no era en absoluto verosímil. (2011: 24–25, 26–27)

[Whatever happened, that encounter, which really happened and was therefore true, could easily be read here as an invention, as something false. [...] It was *real*, but not necessarily *realistic*. [...] I thought that I had left the dark German forests to come to the flat plains of Argentina to watch my father die and to say goodbye to him and to promise him—even though I didn't really believe it myself—that he and I would have another opportunity, in some other place, for each of us to figure out who the other one was, and that, for the first time since we had become father and son, we would finally understand one another; but that, although it was real, was not entirely realistic.]

While the protagonist's explorations of his own childhood memories and the recollections of his remaining family members may be openly inconsistent with the objective 'truth' of dominant historical narratives of the era, they do, however, provide the author with an opportunity to discover the details of his father's life that have thus far remained absent from museum displays and official documents. This re-staging of the past is, for both Pron and Semán, a task which is realised through a subjective, imaginative process of continual reinterpretation, one which is neither bound by the laws of rational historiography nor one which runs counter to its goals. Through this act of reconstruction *by* fiction, the authors are not only able to negotiate their fathers' inherited legacies and imbue them with contemporary importance, but they also present this task as both a requirement and a prerogative for them and their contemporaries.

Nevertheless, the decidedly political nature of these Argentine expressions of postmemory calls for a different approach to the application of post-Holocaust theory. By reappropriating the political aspects of their parents' militancy and recasting them in light of contemporary social concerns, discussed at length in the next chapter, these authors overcome the restrictive and repetitive nature of the solely traumatic and, while looking at once to the past *and* the future, avoid the adoption of the label of victim. Indeed, the allegory of the Island in *Soy un bravo piloto*, whose 'forma y tamaño y peso cambiaban con el tiempo' (shape and size changed over time) and which 'podía ser totalmente diferente de acuerdo a cada uno, en cada momento, a cómo la viera cada uno' (could appear totally different to everyone, at any moment, depending on how

you viewed it) (2011: 83), not only reflects the mutating and transformative nature of memory itself, but points additionally to an exploration of the past that resists definitive explanations and instead appears as a constant and dialogic process for the members of Semán's generation. The disappearance of the Island in the novel's final few chapters does not represent the assimilation, mastery and subsequent closure of the past, but, rather, the realisation of the fundamental need the author perceives in understanding this past and recognising its significance for the present. Despite the criticism the work of the second generation has attracted, this act of appropriation does not surface in either *El espíritu de mis padres* or *Soy un bravo piloto* as a frivolous display of the lack of intent to understand the previous generation; it is, conversely, both an acknowledgement of a history that remains a powerful, regenerative source for contemporary notions of identity and an attempt to exercise the right to account for the fissures in this past, ultimately constructing an experience for an entire generation which functions, as Morris suggests, as 'echo and also as fact' (2002: 291).

NOTES

1. The protagonist jogs frequently throughout the novel and records his routes, providing a metaphor for movement and direction, but also reflecting the circularity that characterises the novel's narrative.
2. Throughout his *oeuvre* on historical trauma and the Holocaust, LaCapra, drawing on the psychoanalytic work of Freud, distinguishes between 'acting out' and 'working through': the former as the repetition or revisiting of an original trauma; the latter as the successful resolution of said trauma (1994, 1998, 2001).
3. Although Hoffman's text is a critical work on the post-Holocaust generation, it does indeed take much of its material from the author's own life as a child of *Shoah* victims and displays a similar attitude towards the function of memory in historical narratives.
4. Discussing the Ford Company, Rudolf explains: 'Imagínese algo más o menos así: Los turistas llegan [...]. Ahí mismo ponemos en uno de los Falcon a dos o tres represores y un desaparecido, podemos hacerlo con armas falsas, como sea. Atrás ponemos otro Falcon con represores, con anteojos oscuros y toda la pelota, y atrás el resto de los Falcon con los turistas, manejados por un represor en cada auto. En el viaje, los tipos leen los folletos con toda la historia, el juicio a las juntas, todo' (Imagine something like this: Tourists arrive [...]. Then we put two or three

repressors into a Falcon along with a *desaparecido*, with fake guns, whatever we want. Then we'll put another Falcon behind them, with more repressors, with blacked-out windows and everything else, then the rest of the Falcons with the tourists behind that, all driven by a repressor. During the trip, they'll all read leaflets that detail the whole history, the Trial of the Juntas, everything) (p. 265).

5. The inclusion of the military officer and torturer also occurs in other fictional accounts of the Dirty War and its aftermath, namely Félix Bruzzone's *Los topos* (discussed in Chap. 3) and, briefly, in Benjamín Ávila's *Infancia clandestina* (discussed in Chap. 4).
6. Although very few texts have attempted to portray the relationship between torturer and victim in post-dictatorship Argentina, it is worth mentioning Luisa Valenzuela's *Cambio de armas* (1982), Marta Traba's novel *En cualquier lugar* (1984), Eduardo Pavlovsky's play *Paso de dos* (1990) and Marco Bechis's film *Garage Olimpo* (1999).
7. See, for example, references to The Invaders in Marcelo Figueras' *Kamchatka* (2002), the recurring metaphor of Batman and Robin in Félix Bruzzone's *Los topos* (2008), or the animated Playmobil sequences in Albertina Carri's *Los rubios* (2003).
8. See Vezzetti's *Pasado y presente* (2002) and Casullo's *Pensar entre épocas* (2004).
9. See Feierstein (2011) for a detailed comparative study of the structural organisation of both regimes.
10. As Diana Taylor asserts (among others), the complete elimination of the body of the *desaparecido* results in an 'interrupted mourning process' (1997: 191) similar to that of Holocaust victim's family, whereby any acceptance of the victim's death is postponed due to the lack of grave or body.
11. While the persecution in Nazi Germany was largely racial, there were also, of course, other political, sexual and ethnic elements to the regime's discrimination. As Daniel Feierstein remarks in his sociological comparison of the Holocaust and Argentina's Dirty War: '[P]olitical and ideological affiliation [in Argentina] seems to form part of a consciously constructed identity: political activists "choose" militancy; they accept the risks such activism may bring, actively assuming their identity. [...] The Nazis essentialized Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and other groups as being "subhuman" and a biological threat to the human species' (2014: 33, 35).
12. For example, in *Los rubios* (2003), the actress playing Albertina Carri questions: 'Me cuesta entender la elección de mamá. ¿Por qué no se fue del país? me pregunto una y otra vez: ¿Por qué me dejó en el mundo de los vivos?' (It's hard for me to understand the choice my mum made. Why didn't she leave the country? I ask myself over and over again: Why

did she leave me here in the land of the living?). In *Papá Iván* (2000), directed by María Inés Roqué, the voiceover states: 'Hubiese preferido tener un padre vivo que un héroe muerto' (I would have preferred to have a living father than a dead hero). Connected issues of generational criticism will be discussed at greater length in Chap. 4 of this book.

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