MEMORIES OF MILITANCY:
EXPERIENCE AND IDENTITY IN THE NARRATIVES OF
LEFTIST EX-MILITANTS IN ARGENTINA

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Abstract

_Memories of Militancy_ examines the relationship between memory and narrative in works by leftist ex-militants in Argentina, former participants in the numerous armed revolutionary organizations of the 1960s and 70s. These were turbulent decades in Argentina and indeed throughout South America. Argentina’s “disappeared” are a well-known part of the country’s history but the experiences of ex-militants have not been explored to the same extent. This dissertation aims to contribute to post-dictatorial studies as well as to the field of memory studies.

_Memories_ looks specifically at autobiographical or testimonial accounts of experiences in armed revolutionary organizations that, for the purposes of this dissertation, will be referred to as “narrative of militancy.” The study of these works is organized around three thematic categories: narrative genre, militant identity and revolutionary violence. These works tend to blend genres, drawing in part on the significant body of post-Holocaust testimony and on the Latin American _testimonio_ movement as well as on the work of Argentine militant and journalist Rodolfo Walsh. Chapter 1 is therefore dedicated to exploring the variety of genres encompassed by “narratives of militancy,” from testimony and autobiography to the influence of journalism and the novel. Chapter 2 addresses questions of militant identity and subjectivity, tracing the long tradition of leftist writing on the tensions between the individual and the collective, from Gramsci and Lukács’ ideas on the ideal socialist man to Guevara’s writings on becoming a revolutionary. This is followed by an analysis of specific narratives to explore how these tensions are reflected in the writing of Argentine ex-militants. Finally, Chapter 3 addresses the thorny topic of revolutionary violence. It begins by returning to some of the ideas regarding revolutionary violence that were in circulation in the late 1960s and 70s and then turns to several texts, including an account in which an ex-militant reflects on assassinations he participated in.
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Introduction

“Without a felt relationship to the present, a portrayal of history is impossible.”
- Georg Lukács

The year is 1969. Four young boys, brothers, are seated in a row and peer uncertainly out of a black and white photograph. Their short hair is neatly combed, eyes alert. Gaze uncertain, inquisitive. Next to it, there is a second photograph, this time in color. 2006. In it, three men, several decades older, are seated in a row in the same order and same positions. Their poses reveal a deliberate imitation of the first photograph, exposing the carefully executed composition, belying spontaneity. To the right, however, there is an even more important difference in the second photograph. An empty space, an absence. The fourth brother is missing. “Disappeared.”

The photographs are part of a series by Argentine artist Gustavo Germano called “Ausencias.” They form a powerful and evocative illustration of absence in a manner that is at once both painfully literal and artistically compelling. Photographs taken prior to the brutal 1976 dictatorship, photographs of friends, families and couples, collected from family photo albums are paired with more recent photographs in which Germano carefully reproduced the original poses and revisited the original locations, thirty years
The one described above is the most personal and revealing of the collection because the four boys, the three men, are Germano and his brothers.

Fragments of the past, the strong presence of an absence, Germano’s project to imitate and reproduce the original photographs, represents a disturbing depiction of an impossible return. A brother or sister, husband or friend, disappeared. Many of those absent in the second set of photographs, as noted in the brief biographies accompanying the series, were involved to varying degrees in a diverse range of leftist organizations, including Germano’s missing brother. According to Roland Barthes in Camera Lucida (1981), “Every photograph is a certificate of presence” (87). Barthes defines the essence of the photograph, its noeme, with the term “ça a été” or this-has-been. The photograph as an “emanation of the referent” is an assurance that the referent has been there, that this moment existed. For Barthes, this is a reminder of our own mortality, a kind of death foretold: “I read at the same time: This will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. [...] Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe” (96). There is an inherently haunting quality about the photograph’s noeme. This element is even stronger in Germano’s second set of photographs, for here it is not the referent that haunts the viewer, but rather the absence of the referent, revealed in the comparison between the two. In the second set of photographs, in place of the referent, there is only empty space, a landscape, a background. The referent is denied even the state of revenant and all that is left is an irresolvable absence. An image of disappearance. In this way, the photographs themselves become signifiers of loss. Fragments, like the “fragments and ruins” that critic Idelber Avelar speaks of in The Untimely Present (1999), in his description of what
he refers to as “mournful literature” (3), components of a post-dictatorial mourning which is never concluded and which holds no exchange value. Fragments which “can trigger the untimely eruption of the past” (3), that, like remainders of an equation, resist a tidy resolution.

Germano’s photographs, representing two distinct points in time, hinting at a “before” and an “after,” can also be read as implicit narratives of change. By means of contrast, the photographs reveal the passage of time through subtle alterations in the settings and obvious differences in age. The majority of the first group are in black and white while in the second, Germano reveals a world of color; the boy has become a man, the middle-aged mother, an old woman. Barthes’ conception of the photograph as catastrophe, an image of death foretold, brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, turned towards the past, contemplating the wreckage of catastrophe piling up at his feet (257). For Benjamin, in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”: “The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. [...] For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (255). Yet this flash, this instant of emergency, represents the possibility of resisting oblivion, the hope for a future that retains a memory of the past. Germano tells a story of absence, the disappearances speak loudly in his photographs. They are fascinating because they communicate something horrifying without directly depicting the violence or brutality of the dictatorship. The absence in itself, this silence is gripping and unsettling. Yet like the reverse colors in a photographic negative, there are other stories here as well, beneath the surface. In the play of presence and absence,
“visual narratives” and silence, personal memory and history, I found myself examining the faces of those who appeared in both sets of photographs, the changes that resulted from the interim thirty years, the impact of the tangible loss. And I wondered, those who appear in both photographs, those who had not disappeared, what were their stories? Like many of the “disappeared,” their friends and family, had they resisted the dictatorship and fought for revolutionary ideals as well? In particular, and straying from the literality of the photographs, what of those men and women who had participated in leftist armed struggle and survived? What had taken place in the lapse between the two photographs and what was the epilogue to 1976, ’77, ’78, the years of most disappearances?

Narratives of experience, these are the stories of leftist ex-militants in Argentina and the focus of the present work as a valuable source of the voices of those with first-hand experience of armed struggle, both before and during the 1976-93 dictatorship.

“Narratives of militancy” can therefore be defined as predominantly testimonial or autobiographical accounts written by ex-militants regarding their experiences in leftist armed organizations. Many of these works combine elements of different genres, adopting characteristics of the novel, adventure stories, historical accounts as well as the essay. The main focus of this dissertation is narratives written and published after 1983, when the 1976 dictatorship was no longer an immediate threat and direct censorship was no longer an issue.

I will approach the intersection of memory and militancy in these narratives of experience, these are the stories of leftist ex-militants in Argentina and the focus of the present work as a valuable source of the voices of those with first-hand experience of armed struggle, both before and during the 1976-93 dictatorship.

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1 Political militancy here is interpreted as “the active championing of a cause or belief” often in a “combative” manner. In English there is no particular word which adequately reflects the commonly used “militancia” in Spanish which can range from simple “political involvement or affiliation” to more extreme and violent forms of political action. Although “militant” in English does not adequately reflect this range, it is less narrow in scope than other possibilities including “revolutionary” or “guerrilla.”

2 An extensive list of “narratives of militancy” is included in the Appendix.
narrative snapshots through the lens of three analytical categories: narrative genre, militant identity and revolutionary violence. Each of these is the subject of one of the following chapters. Before turning to them, however, I would first like to say a few words about memory.

The politics of memory

The appearance and significance of these narratives, published between 1983 and the present, can be read in a variety of contexts. If memory, as sociologist Elizabeth Jelin states, is a “space of political struggle” (6), it will be of no surprise that a general reemergence of interest in the 1960s and 70s coincided with and responded to more recent political events in Argentina over the past decade. Although I will discuss this in greater depth later in this chapter, I wish to briefly mention a few of these factors. They include the 2001-02 Argentine economic crisis, a symptom of the failure of a neoliberal program initiated thirty years prior, under the 1976-83 dictatorship and pursued throughout the decade of the 1990s. Another factor was the election of president Néstor Kirchner in 2003. Kirchner, a proponent of social reforms and vocal critic of neoliberalism and the 1976-83 dictatorship, made human rights a key part of his campaign platform, highlighting instead of hiding his ties to 1970s militancy. It was under his government that the decades-long struggle led by social movements and human rights organizations, such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, finally gained centrality. Kirchner was also instrumental in carrying out important changes in the Armed Forces as well as the Supreme Court. Support for these moves was reaffirmed through the subsequent election of his wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, to the presidency in
2007 as well as the public outpouring of support at his death in 2010. Lastly, decisions taken by the Supreme Court in 2003, allowed trials of those accused of human rights violations to move forward after having essentially been blocked for decades. How to remember the events of the 1960s and 70s is still very much a subject of debate. Each of the “narratives of militancy” represents a contribution to this discussion, one vision vying for space in the collective imaginary.

The expanding field of memory studies has also had an impact on the proliferation of works on memory in general, and within this context, on a renewed interest in the history and significance of the armed struggle, including the production of “narratives of militancy.” In Present Pasts (2003), Andreas Huyssen describes the dramatic shift from what he terms “present futures” to “present pasts.” In his view, the first half of the twentieth century was characterized by a sense of optimism, faith in progress, the utopian ideals of the “new man” and modernist culture. In the latter part of the century, Huyssen traces a distinct turn towards the past and the crystallization of what he refers to as the “culture of memory,” similar to what Jay Winter has termed the “memory boom.” Huyssen traces the initial shift to decolonization movements and historical revisionism and points out that by the early 1980s, Holocaust memory had become a key part of memory culture. Since the 1980s, the number of theoretical works on memory has been growing at a significant rate.

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3 Winter in Remembering War (2006) defines the term as “the efflorescence of interest in the subject of memory inside the academy and beyond it” (1). For more on the “memory boom” in the context of Argentina see Gabriela Cerruti’s article “La historia de la memoria” (2001).

4 These include significant works by Maurice Halbwachs, Paul Ricoeur, Reinhart Koselleck, Pierre Nora, Tzvetan Todorov, and Yosef Yerushalmi, among others. There are also a number of interesting works that explore the politics of memory in the context of post-dictatorial Argentina, many of which are cited in this dissertation. In addition to the series “Memorias de la represión” edited by Elizabeth Jelin (2002; 2003; 2004; 2005) and The Untimely Present (1999) by Idelber Avelar, cited above, the question has also been
Memories of Militancy envisions “memory” both as a cognitive function as in the act of remembering but also, following the French mémoire derived from the Latin memoria, in its meaning as “a record” or “notes for remembrance.” The Spanish “memoria” captures both of these meanings. These two aspects of memory underline the thematic orientation of the three chapters that follow: memory and narrative genre; memory and identity; memory and revolutionary or leftist violence. Each chapter consists of an exploration of the central theme it addresses followed by the analysis of specific texts. While the importance of these texts, many written as personal reflections by the protagonists themselves, does not necessarily lie in their value as literary works, they hold value as individual representations of personal experience and personal memory located in a specific historical time and place. Furthermore, there is a general absence of critical works on leftist armed militancy and analyses of the protagonists’ experiences. Involvement in militancy is rather unique in that it implies voluntary participation—unlike the civilian victims of war or trauma—yet it is predicated on a particular worldview, circumstances within a given time and place, that inspired participants to partake in what may be considered extreme political practices. These are instances in which context is of paramount importance in understanding the logic behind actions and contain a political component which must not be ignored. The political, at the same time, is also what makes memories and recollections of militancy contentious, especially with respect to the topic of violence, which is why I dedicate an entire chapter to this issue. The topic of memory is also key given the significant temporal gap between the act of remembering and the experiences described.

addressed by Pilar Calveiro (2005); Nicolás Casullo (2004); José Pablo Feinmann (2003); Beatriz Sarlo (2005) and Hugo Vezzetti (2002; 2009).
In my analysis of “narratives of militancy,” I rely on the theoretical conception of memory expressed by Elizabeth Jelin as cited above, memory conceived of as a “space of political struggle.” It is a dynamic space where readings of the past are constantly submitted to reconsideration and re-evaluation with respect to the present context, especially valuable in this case considering the defeat of the paradigms of the left in the years in question. Memory, in Jelin’s work, is envisioned as a constantly evolving space, open to the existence of multiple narratives in the place of a single unifying one, each contributing its own internal logic and arguments, each vying for space and for recognition. Memory is therefore changeable in the sense that it is open to re-interpretation. Thus the plurality of the “memories” referred to in the title. The publication and circulation of these narratives, motivated by an often explicitly stated need to share and communicate experiences, are also important in the formation of a more diverse “collective memory” which according to Jelin’s definition, consists of “memorias compartidas, superpuestas, producto de interacciones múltiples, encuadradas en marcos sociales y en relaciones de poder [...] el entretejido de tradiciones y memorias individuales, en diálogo con otros, en estado de flujo constante” (22). Beyond this struggle, however, it is also a space in which the ties of community can be forged given that “la experiencia y la memoria individuales no existen en sí, sino que se manifiestan y se tornan colectivas en el acto de compartir. O sea, la experiencia individual construye comunidad en el acto narrativo compartido, en el narrar y el escuchar” (Jelin 37). The communication of these collective experiences can also become and act of community-building.
The theoretical framework of this dissertation with regards to memory is also guided by the Foucauldian concept of “counter-memory” as redefined by George Lipsitz in *Time Passages* (2001). According to Lipsitz:

Counter-memory is a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal. Unlike historical narratives that begin with the totality of human existence and then locate specific actions and events within that totality, counter-memory starts with the particular and the specific and then builds outward toward a total story. Counter-memory looks to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives. But unlike myths that seek to detach events and actions from the fabric of any larger history, counter-memory forces revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past. (213)

In a post-dictatorial context, excluded narratives take on a particular significance. The response of the 1976-83 dictatorship to leftist militancy was repression and disappearance, the latter comprising part of an effort to quash opposition, to erase it completely, leaving no trace. In this context, the particular and the specific, the personal and political, take on increased significance as forms of opposition to imposed hegemonic narratives. Lipsitz acknowledges that Foucault is concerned with the implications of a kind of thinking that seeks closure and totality. Yet, he points out, we need to strive for totality nevertheless. “We may never succeed in creating a truly total story inclusive of the plurality of experiences on our planet, but the pursuit of such totality is essential” (214) given that “refusal of all totality could [...] obscure real connections, causes and relationships—atomizing common experiences into accidents and endlessly repeated play” (214). Along these lines, Nicolás Casullo in *Pensar entre* Emilio Crenzel in *La historia política del Nunca más* (2008), emphasizes the extreme nature and deliberateness of this shift: “Las desapariciones [...] implicaron un quiebre en la historia de la violencia política en la Argentina, pues propusieron un desafío inédito para el ejercicio de la memoria en ese plano al desplazar la presencia pública y con responsables de la muerte política por su ejercicio clandestino y anónimo. Antes del golpe [de 1976], los asesinatos políticos eran asumidos por sus autores, los cadáveres aparecían en la via pública y los hechos eran difundidos por la prensa. Ahora, el terror no se basaba, de manera privilegiada, en la presencia espectral de la muerte sino en su discurrir oculto y en su indeterminación” (35).
épocas (2004) also warns of the “museumification” of the past, proposing the concept of “counter-memory” as a form of resistance. Counter-memory, as defined by Casullo, would contemplate the uncomfortable coexistence of the past with the present without attempting to neatly close it off or leave it relegated to the past. It is a memory that interrupts, that thinks critically, questions and resists easy resolution. In doing so, it would resist the tendency encouraged by market logic and backed by official consensus (particularly during the 1990s in Argentina) to favor a perpetual present, for in Casullo’s view, “En este desacople entre presente y pasado que se miran sin verse, la misma crónica de la violencia y la muerte de los setenta pierde sustentabilidad y comprensión” (120).

Within this juncture between memory and militancy, I propose to look at the experiences captured in specific, often very personal texts. How are these texts constructed? How are they narrated? What is the relationship between content and the choice of genre? And how are some of the most complex issues, such as questions of individual versus collective identities and conflicts over political violence either intentionally or unintentionally reflected through narrative? Before I address these questions directly, however, it may be helpful to take a brief look back at the events of the turbulent 1960s and 70s and the emergence of the leftist political-militant organizations in question.

**Historical background**

Without an understanding of the political and historical contexts, the actions of the thousands who participated in or supported the leftist armed struggle may seem
incomprehensible at best. The armed leftist groups which emerged in the 1960s and 70s in Argentina were shaped by both national and international factors. To begin with, the Argentine left, originally comprised mainly of the Communist and socialist parties, became much more complex in the latter half of the twentieth century with the advent of Peronism and the proliferation of many smaller groups, both armed and unarmed, each with their own ideological and political particularities.\(^6\) Loosely defined, the left in 1960s and 70s Argentina can be considered those sectors that supported social reforms, equitable distribution of wealth and an anti-imperialist, primarily anti-American, agenda. The majority opposed the strongly conservative and repressive dictatorial military regimes that emerged in the late 1960s, and later, the rise of neoliberalism.\(^7\)

The 1960s was a decade marked by student and worker protests (Prague, Mexico City, Berkeley and Paris, to name a few), the Vietnamese resistance, rights movements for women and minorities, decolonization movements in Africa and the advent of the Third World Priests movement, among others.\(^8\) Much of the world was divided into two by the Cold War. The triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 marked the beginning of a period of armed struggle in Latin America and lent support to ideas of socialist

\(^6\) Peronism, a movement that originated with Juan Domingo Perón, president of Argentina from 1946-55 and 1973-74, draws from a broad spectrum of ideologies including socialism, syndicalism, corporativism and nationalism. It defies classification in terms of the traditional division into political left and right, instead blurring the boundaries between the two. One of the most important aspects of Perón’s legacy was the empowerment of previously marginalized sectors, most importantly a sizeable working class. For interesting and insightful analyses of the complex phenomenon that is Peronism see Estudios sobre los orígenes del peronismo (1971) by Miguel Murmis and Juan Carlos Portantiero, Ricardo Sidicaro’s Los tres peronismos (2002) and Los cuatro peronismos (2005) by Alejandro Horowicz.

\(^7\) The Communist Party is a notable exception given that it initially supported the 1976 dictatorship.

\(^8\) There is a growing body of work looking back at the social movements of the 1960s. The following are a very limited selection of this ample bibliography that far exceeds the scope of the present work: The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage (1987) by Todd Gitlin, Terry Anderson’s The Movement and the Sixties (1996), David Burner’s Making Peace with the 60s (1996), The Sixties (1998) by Arthur Marwick, The Spirit of ’68 (2007) by Gerd-Rainer Horn and Diana Sorensen’s A Turbulent Decade Remembered (2007).
revolution and anti-imperialism. The budding revolutionary left in Latin America was also inspired by the victory of the National Liberation Front (FLN) in Algiers, the break between China and the Soviet Union and a few years later Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s fledgling guerrilla group in Bolivia. Meanwhile, as Marie-Monique Robin explains in her extensively-researched book Escuadrones de la muerte: La escuela francesa (2004), French army officials were disseminating new “counter-insurgency” methods, including the use of torture and “clandestine assassination” purportedly “perfected” in the French war on Algiers and Indochina, to select members of the armed forces throughout South America. The French had begun training Argentine military representatives as early as 1953, long before there were any leftist revolutionary groups in the country. The Americans had already tested out these new ideas in Vietnam and high-ranking officials in Argentina (and other South American countries) were eager to try them out.

By the mid-1960s, within South America, Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil and Bolivia were under military rule. Chile and Uruguay both suffered coups in 1973. The military governments in these six countries would later go on to form a part of “Operación Condor,” which coordinated the repression of leftist movements and organizations through the various de facto governments and national armed forces, putting into practice many of the methods Robin describes in her book. In was in this context that ideas regarding armed struggle and the need for violence “from below” in order to combat violence “from above,” for some, came to be seen as the only effective possibility of bringing about truly revolutionary social, economic and political change. At a 1967 conference in Havana attended by representatives of numerous Latin American
militant groups, for instance, armed struggle was declared inevitable in the continental fight for socialist revolution (Anzorena 99).

The use of violence and torture by the State to resolve political conflicts has a long history in Argentina. Between 1930 and 1976, the country endured six coups, including a particularly violent one in 1955 during which president Juan Domingo Perón was ousted. Perón had been president beginning in 1946 and was responsible for important changes that would have lasting effects over the next several decades. Well-known for blurring the lines between the traditional left and right, during his first term in office, Perón granted important and unprecedented advances to workers in terms of rights and benefits, thereby encouraging the consolidation of a fiercely loyal working class. Once ousted, the incoming government banned the Peronist party and sent Perón into what turned out to be eighteen years of exile from where the former leader essentially encouraged the formation of a Peronist resistance in Argentina. After the 1955 coup, workers’ unions experienced severe setbacks, uniting to resist the “ofensiva antilaboral de los años 1956-1958” (Rapoport 430). This, in addition to a combination of other factors, led to the consolidation and radicalization of Perón’s supporters over the years following the coup, many of whom were later to play an important part in armed leftist groups, several of which declared themselves Peronist.

Though present as early as 1964, the armed left really only began to take root under the dictatorship of Juan Carlos Ongania which began with another coup in 1966. Unlike the preceding dictatorships which had portrayed themselves as brief interruptions for the good of the country, often setting up new elections and stepping down afterwards,

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9 Critic José Pablo Feinmann (2005) traces this violence to Argentina’s struggle for independence as a country while historian Pilar Calveiro (2005) points to the growing use of violence and military presence beginning in the 1930s with an increasingly cozy relationship between the ruling class and the military.
Onganía proposed to undertake radical, long-term changes in society, announcing that he would be in office for whatever duration necessary. Under his program, dubbed the “Argentine Revolution,” political parties were banned, public universities lost their long-standing autonomy, the press was largely censored and, in general, any signs of resistance were quashed (Rapoport 513-514).\(^{10}\) Aligned with the more conservative elements of the Catholic church, Onganía’s government depicted itself as the moral watchdog of the people, vowing to restore “Western and Christian” values in the country. Beginning in 1967, Onganía’s government began to implement its economic plan which essentially benefited foreign capital over national industry while effectively reducing workers’ salaries (Rapoport 542). At the same time, unions were dominated through the use of repressive measures. Two years after the plan was instated, in May of 1969, crisis broke out in the form of the “Cordobazo,” a protest of virtually unprecedented scale in Argentina’s history, led by workers and other social sectors, ultimately marking an end to Onganía’s government.

Though there are few comprehensive, well-researched histories of the armed struggle in Argentina and, indeed, in Latin America as a whole,\(^{11}\) it is clear that the number of political militant groups increased dramatically around this time as did the number of those integrating the armed and unarmed left (Pozzi and Schneider 55). The first years of Onganía’s government saw the creation of several of what would become the most important groups over the next decade: the Peronist Armed Forces (FAP),

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\(^{10}\) As Calveiro aptly observes, “Ante la imposibilidad de desaparecer al peronismo, que reaparecía en las alianzas políticas y la lucha sindical, se optaba por desaparecer la democracia e incluso la política” (Política 30).

\(^{11}\) John Beverley has noted that “Part of the problem of rethinking the armed struggle is that […] there is no history—at least none that I am aware of—that deals with the armed struggle as a general historical phenomenon or epoch in Latin America” (“Rethinking” 48).
Descamisados (literally the “shirtless ones”), the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) and the Armed Forces of Liberation (FAL) (Romero 189). Two more groups, those that eventually became the most significant, at least in terms of numbers and popularity, announced their existence in 1970: the Montoneros and the People’s Revolutionary Army (ERP), the militant branch of the Workers’ Revolutionary Party (PRT). The Montoneros identified themselves as a revolutionary Peronist group and had nationalist origins as well as progressive Catholic roots tied to the Third World Priests movement. Descamisados, the FAR and the FAP which also identified as Peronist eventually merged with the Montoneros while the PRT-ERP had a Marxist orientation. Inspired by Guevara and with a firm belief in socialist revolution, they were at the same time decidedly anti-Peronist. Both the Montoneros and the ERP, however, shared many similarities in terms of modus operandi.

Between Onganía’s dictatorship (1966-69) and the 1976 coup, Peronism enjoyed a brief resurgence, celebrated by the Montoneros and harshly criticized by the PRT-ERP. Though Perón was still effectively in exile, in 1973, Héctor Cámpora, often referred to as “Uncle Cámpora” for his loyalty to Perón, was elected in democratic elections. Though his presidency lasted mere months, it was a brief and euphoric triumph for many on the Peronist left. Shortly thereafter, Cámpora voluntarily resigned, new elections were held and Perón won with 62% of the vote. His third term as president, however, was brief as he died less than a year after returning to office. Before his death, he managed to alienate

\[12\] For more on the PRT-ERP see A vencer o morir (2004) by Daniel De Santis or Los últimos guevaristas (2005) by Julio Santucho, brother of the assassinated leader of the group, Roberto Santucho. Gustavo Plis-Sterenberg’s book Monte Chingolo: La mayor batalla de la guerrilla argentina (2006) although it focuses specifically on the event named in the title also provides general insight on the history of the PRT-ERP. One of the first comprehensive books written on the Montoneros was Richard Gillespie’s Soldiers of Perón: Argentina’s Montoneros (1982). See also Juan Gasparini’s Montoneros: Final de cuentas (1999) or the more recent Montoneros: El mito de sus 12 fundadores (2005) by Lucas Lanusse who polemizes with the previous two authors.
most of his leftist supporters, specifically the Montoneros, in a historic speech in which he called them “stupid” and “immature” and to which they responded by filing out of the Plaza de Mayo in front of the government building where he was giving his speech, leaving him facing a much reduced public. When he died a month after this incident, in July of 1974, his wife and then vice president, Isabel Martínez was left in power. Hers was a weak and chaotic government controlled easily by military interests thus paving the way for the subsequent coup (Rapoport 556-557).

On March 24, 1976, a military junta made up of one representative from each of the three branches of the Armed Forces declared a coup, initiating what they termed the “Process of National Reorganization.” Conditions at the time, including an economic crisis in 1975, the situation of violence and upheaval within the country and a political crisis created by weak and inept presidential leadership meant that many Argentines were ready for a change. When the anticipated coup finally took place, it was greeted with broad-based support. Of course, it is unlikely that many could have anticipated the brutality of what was to come. The 1976 dictatorship was different from previous ones in significant ways. It was the first time that a clandestine and systematic campaign to “eradicate subversion” and eliminate “undesirable” political opponents through disappearance had been attempted. An estimated 30,000 people—students, political activists, union members, and family members—were disappeared during this period

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13 It is important to note that the repression aimed at leftist groups was already taking place well before the coup. In particular, a paramilitary group known as the Triple A (Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance), which had links with Isabel Perón’s administration, was actively assassinating and disappearing people as early as 1974 (Rock 363).

14 The 1976-83 dictatorship was led by a series of four juntas. Those in power were: Jorge Videla, Emilio Massera and Orlando Agosti (1976-80); Roberto Viola, Armando Lambruschini and Omar Graffigna (1980-81); Leopoldo Galtieri, Basilio Dozo and Jorge Anaya (1981-82); and Cristino Nicolaides, Rubén Franco and Augusto Hughes (1982-83). Videla, Viola and Galtieri were designated the presidents of the first three and Reynaldo Bignone was president during the last period.
Detention camps were set up throughout the country. Victims were often arrested at home or work or directly abducted off the streets by police, military or paramilitary groups. It is also by now well known that many victims were drugged and then thrown alive from planes in “death flights” that flew over the river off the coast of Buenos Aires.

The dictatorship instilled a general sense of fear among the population. Definitions of “subversion” and “political opponent” were often used indiscriminately and the victims of the repression sometimes included family members or acquaintances of militants or political activists, some of whom had no political involvement at all. When someone was kidnapped in broad daylight, fear often kept onlookers from reacting. The phrase “algo habrán hecho,” meaning “they must have done something,” became a commonplace expression of the belief, or desire to believe, that police or military action must be justified, that to be kidnapped or detained one must have done something wrong.

During the first two years of the dictatorship, the Montoneros and PRT-ERP were all but destroyed (Romero 218). After 1978 virtually nothing remained of any of the leftist militant groups. Many of their members had been “disappeared”; others had managed to leave the country or go into hiding within Argentina’s borders.

The evolving image of militants

There are relatively few narrative accounts of the experiences of militants before the return to democracy in 1983. This can be attributed directly to the political context which logically generated a climate of fear and censorship. However, with few exceptions, over a decade of democratic rule passed before the majority of “narratives of
militancy” began to appear in the mid-1990s. What was it that caused almost an entire decade to elapse before ex-militants began to narrate their stories? How has the perception of the image of ex-militants changed over the last several decades?

The answers are connected in large part to the political and social contexts of the years following the dictatorship, including the fall of the Berlin wall, the triumph of neoliberalism and the political defeat of the left in Argentina and abroad. Additionally, important judicial rulings within Argentina helped shape attitudes regarding political militancy. As the image and perception of participants in leftist armed groups shifted over the years, so too has the possibility for them to narrate their experiences, facing decreased social stigmas. Images have shifted from subversive to militant, terrorist to idealist. While it is true that many individuals can be considered victims or survivors as well as ex-militants, the narratives focused on in this thesis deal specifically with the experience of militancy as the product of a conscious decision. And while there are many works dealing with victim or survivor memory and with the trauma associated with kidnapping and disappearance, the experience of militancy has not been explored to such a degree. Images continue to shift and change, always in relation to the present and it is still not clear how militants will be remembered in future years. The narratives currently being published are, as Elizabeth Jelin would argue, vying for space in that future memory.

15 There are many books about disappeared children, parents, spouses, journalists and authors, among others. Escritos en la memoria (2005), for instance, is a compilation of writing by disappeared or assassinated authors and the similar, Palabra viva (2005). Obsesiones y fantasmas de la Argentina (2005) by Adrián Melo and Marcel Raffin deals with topics related to disappearance and death during and after the dictatorship. Reynaldo Castro’s Con vida los llevaron (2004) explores memories of family members of the disappeared while La imposibilidad del olvido (2001) edited by Patricia Flier and Bruno Groppo is a collection of essays about memories of the repression in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay. Finally, books like Betina Kaplan’s Género y violencia en la narrativa del Cono Sur (1954-2003) (2007) address the way in which trauma and violence are reflected in literature and film. These are just a few examples of the rich bibliography pertaining to this aspect of the period.
Beginning in the mid 1960s during Onganía’s government, military and government discourse defined fledgling guerrilla groups and their participants as “subversive,” while those sympathetic with the leftist armed struggle called them “guerrilleros” or “militantes.” Later, under successive governments, with the exception of a brief period in 1973-74, as militant groups formed and became more active, they continued to be considered subversives and terrorists, enemies of the nation. The label, however, was often applied broadly and indiscriminately by both politicians and the media. For instance, according to Jorge Videla, leader of the 1976 junta, in a quote published in a major national newspaper at the time, “el terrorismo no es sólo considerado tal por matar con un arma o colocar una bomba, sino también por activar a través de ideas contrarias a nuestra civilización occidental y cristiana a otras personas” (cited in Bisquert and Lvovich 17).16 According to this definition, a subversive was not only someone who belonged to an armed group or was suspected of carrying out specific acts of violence, but rather anyone who through their ideas opposed the values of the regime in power or incited others to do so. As Bisquert and Lvovich explain in _La cambiante memoria de la dictadura_ (2008), “los definidos por el nuevo régimen como subversivos no eran considerados argentinos sino delincuentes apátridas que respondían a

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16 Despite Videla’s wide-ranging definition that basically applied to anyone opposed to the junta’s policies, it is important to note that terrorism and militancy as used in the context of this work are not synonyms. As Pilar Calveiro explains, “El terrorismo se caracteriza por tratar de generar terror social con el objeto de producir una parálisis tal que le permita imponer una determinada política. Para ello desata actos de violencia que debe ser indiscriminados, de manera que cualquiera pueda sentirse blanco de los mismos. […] Las organizaciones armadas argentinas no realizaron ataques de este tipo” (“Antiguos” 14-15). It is clear, both in documents issued by the various groups as well as testimony from ex-militants, that violence was seldom, if ever, used indiscriminately. The target was never the civilian population and the idea was not to terrorize the population —in fact, exactly the opposite. Some groups aimed to highlight the popular nature of the revolution they were undertaking —distributing “reappropriated” goods to poorer neighborhoods and circulating explanatory pamphlets in public places, for instance. Although groups carried out assassinations of members of the dictatorship and those associated with repression and torture, efforts were taken to avoid unintended deaths and injuries (Calveiro “Antiguos”).
los intereses de un terrorismo conspirativo internacional. El signo ideológico de sus
pensamientos era un dato crucial para reconocerlos, ya que el marxismo o cualquier
inclinación de izquierda denotaban su carácter subversivo” (17-18). This image,
especially the notion that they were foreign or anti-Argentine, was often used to justify
repressive actions taken against them.

With respect to the changing image of leftist ex-militants over the last several
decades of democratic rule, three distinct periods can be distinguished. The first begins
in 1983 with the presidency of Raúl Alfonsín and continues until the mid-1990s. Shortly
after Alfonsín assumed office in December 1983, as the first democratically elected
president following the dictatorship, he formed a National Commission on the
Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP) to study the disappearances and alleged human
rights violations. The result was the well-known Nunca más report (1984) which
documented around 9,000 disappearances and thousands of cases of kidnapping, torture
and imprisonment. The report was prefaced with a prologue by the commission’s
president, Ernesto Sábato, in which he presented what later became known as the “theory
of the two demons,” a very influential and pervasive image that persisted to varying
degrees for decades. The theory depicts a largely innocent population caught terrified
between the “terror” of the “extreme right” and the “extreme left.” State terrorism and
repression on the part of the military juntas are essentially equated with acts carried out
by armed leftist groups, although the former is clearly criticized for heavy-handedness: “a
los delitos de los terroristas, las Fuerzas Armadas respondieron con un terrorismo
infinitamente peor que el combatido” (CONADEP 11). Ex-militants were therefore recognized as victims, in the cases documented, yet at the same time are still referred to as “terrorists” in the prologue, and as one of two “demons” considered partially responsible for the State terrorism used in response to their actions.

There was a slight change in this image during the first trials of the leaders of the military juntas carried out in 1985. The trials further emphasized ex-militants and the “disappeared” as victims. For the purpose of justice, testimonies focused on the acts perpetrated against them. Despite the efforts of the defense lawyers who wished to use it as justification, it was ruled that the victims’ political and ideological affiliations were irrelevant in the trials (Bisquert and Lvovich 39). The dominant image therefore shifted from that of a “dirty war” carried out to defend the nation from subversive elements to a systematic plan of terror and disappearances carried out by a terrorist State against primarily depoliticized victims. It was at this time that the first movies and books about the period began to appear. There had been earlier attempts, some quite notable, but they were largely marked by a fear of censorship and the overhanging threat of the dictatorship. The Oscar-winning La historia oficial (1985) was one of the first and perhaps most well-known films dealing with the topic and reflects aspects of the “theory

17 For a more in-depth discussion of the Nunca más report and its effects, see both La cambiante memoria de la dictadura (2008) by Jaqueline Bisquert and Daniel Lvovich and La historia política del Nunca más (2008) by Emilio Crenzel.

18 Despite widespread popular support for the trials, those associated with the military continually resisted and in the end pressured the Alfonsín government into issuing controversial laws limiting the possibility of further judicial action.

19 Regarding the tendency of the CONADEP to depoliticize, Julie Taylor in Body Politics (1994) comments: “all who passed through this process then, accused and accusers—actors in highly political dramas where they had represented clashing world views and collective strategies for implementing them—were refigured as innocent or transgressing individuals with individual rights and obligations. [The truth commission’s] opposition of the order of law and the chaos of violence further led to the omission of collective motivation not only of victimizers... but of victims as well, who were defended as individuals whose human rights had been violated rather than as political activists’” (197).
of the two demons.” The protagonist begins to wonder if the child she has adopted might be a child of the “disappeared.” Despite her husband’s ties to the military, she knows virtually nothing of what has happened and slowly discovers that much has been hidden behind the “official story.” Like *La historia* most early works address the “disappeared” and the horror of what had taken place. Miguel Bonasso’s *Recuerdo de la muerte* (1984), discussed at length in Chapter 1, was one of the first books that portrays leftist militancy of armed groups as such, anticipating something that was to become more common over a decade later.

Alfonsín was followed by Carlos Menem, president from 1989-99, who represented a political shift to the right. Soon after taking office, he signed pardons for all but a few of those convicted in the trials. Menem called for national reconciliation and pacification, appealing to Argentines to focus on the future. According to Lvovich, the “theory of the two demons,” though initially weakened by the trials’ emphasis on atrocities committed by the regime, regained force during the first period of Menem’s government through his “teoría de la reconciliación nacional” (Bisquert and Lvovich 52). Menem reinforced the idea that the “extreme” left and right shared the responsibility for what took place by pardoning both convicted military figures as well as leftist militants. The first period was therefore characterized by the influence of the “theory of the two demons,” on the one hand, and the judicial figure of victim, on the other. In both cases, the image is in large part depoliticized. The logic behind the victims’ political involvement or participation in violent acts, omitted.

Around 1995, however, a more profound change began to take place in the memory of the 1970s, revitalizing human rights movements that had lost some force in
the previous years, initiating what could be defined as a second moment in the changing image of ex-militants. It was initiated in large part by a very public and widely televised confession by former navy captain Adolfo Scilingo. Scilingo broke the military’s pact of silence, admitting that he had participated in the “death flights” and giving details about them, although he made no indication of being repentant. Scilingo’s sensationalist “confession” was followed by others, setting off what Marguerite Feitlowitz refers to as the “Scilingo effect.” It also sparked controversy as to the nature and motives of these confessions as well as their sincerity and value. The debate provoked renewed interest in the memory of the 1960s and 70s, discussions of human rights violations and also of leftist militancy. This surge of renewed interest also coincided with the twentieth anniversary of the 1976 coup, marked by marches and commemorative acts. Dubbed the “memory boom,” there was a sudden increase in books, articles, television and radio programs on the memory of this period in general and militancy in particular. David Blaustein’s documentary Cazadores de utopías (1996) and Eduardo Anguita and Martín Caparrós’ La voluntad: Una historia de la militancia revolucionaria en la Argentina (first volume published 1997) were active participants in a renewed interest in militancy. Ex-militants were suddenly protagonists, playing a key role along with the media in the important shift that marked this second period.

Finally, a third period began first with a severe economic crisis in late 2001 but was consolidated with the election of president Nestor Kirchner in 2003. The crisis led many Argentines to re-evaluate the decades leading up to the crisis, to look at history and questions of identity. It was Kirchner, however, who was instrumental in clarifying and

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capitalizing on many of these issues when he integrated human rights issues into his campaign platform. Shortly after being elected, he undertook a major overhaul of the Armed Forces as well as the Supreme Court, making it clear that it was no longer acceptable to sympathize with the previous dictatorship or its policies. He supported annulling the laws that prevented human rights trials from advancing as well as the pardons that had protected many participants in the dictatorship from prosecution.

Kirchner’s government, as well as that of his wife, Cristina Fernández, were instrumental in incorporating the demands of human rights groups and giving them a prominent role, encouraging a re-reading of the politics and events of the 1970s and a reappropriation of the figure of ex-militant while at the same time taking a clear stance against political violence. The thirtieth anniversary of the coup, in 2006, saw another surge of interest in the topic as well. New books appeared, old books were reedited. The topic of militancy, the values championed and questions of violence among other aspects of the period were debated in journal and newspaper articles, public debates and conferences. With respect to leftist militancy, discussion of the topic seems to have diminished to some degree since around 2006-07 although it still continues. Overall, the changes that have occurred over the last several decades are quite significant.

Conceptual framework

As we will see in this work, the production of “narratives of militancy” responds to different needs and impulses. There are multiple reasons and motivations behind the desire to write and publish personal accounts on the topic. Narratives of armed struggle by ex-militants are vying for space in the memory of this period, signs of their authors’
concerns for having their voices heard, presenting their own “personal stories” in opposition to the “national or official narratives” sanctioned by the state. Chilean cultural critic Nelly Richard in *Residuos y metáforas* (1998) has explored memory as an “open process of reinterpretation of the past.” It is the product of a constant tension that allows the past to acquire new meanings in the present. Richard also warns of the decontextualization of memory, the separation of “historical memory” from the “network of emotion.” In this sense, narratives of militancy are an invaluable part of the memory of the 1970s as they tie together the personal and the political, history and aspects of daily life. Richard underlines the importance of a kind of living memory open to debate and reinterpretation, in process rather than static.

Another concept which will serve as a useful guide in the following chapters is that of Idelber Avelar’s “mournful literature” presented in his book *The Untimely Present* (1999). Although Avelar primarily addresses works of fiction, this concept which aims to acknowledge the elements of loss and a certain degree of nostalgia without losing sight of the political, is also relevant with respect to the works analyzed in the following pages. Mournful literature has at its core aspects of what Avelar refers to as the “untimely present,” the unresolved and untidy, and struggles to reconcile past and present: “In the very market that submits the past to the immediacy of the present, mournful literature will search for those fragments and ruins—remainders of the market’s substitutive operation—that can trigger the untimely eruption of the past” (2-3). If mourning is an allegorical process in which the mourner seeks to find a substitute for that which has been lost, the work of mourning is never done because ultimately this substitution is impossible. Furthermore, in a world marked by the quick substitution of one product for
another where “market logic absorbs even the documentation of disappearances and tortures as yet another piece of the past for sale” (22), mournful literature resists. It holds, what Avelar terms in reference to Marx, “memory value,” a paradoxical type of value, for it is in essence irreducible and utterly resistant to exchange (5). “Narratives of militancy” represent the recuperation of some values and the simultaneous questioning of others. Following Avelar’s reasoning, they tend to restore importance to the political in the face of the depoliticization favored by market logic and in this way offer opposition not only to the dominant narratives of the history of the 1960s and 70s but also to the market society that was established in the wake of the defeat of leftist militancy during this period.21

However, as John Beverley argues in a recent essay entitled “Rethinking the Armed Struggle in Latin America” (2009), the dominant tendency over the past several decades has been to view the armed struggle of the 1960s and 70s as an “error” (49). Beverley cautions against falling into the trap of what he terms the “paradigm of disillusion”: the implicit and retrospective association of the progression from the ideals and beliefs of the 1960s and 70s to the more “mature” neoliberalism of the 1980s and 90s to a “biographical narrative of personal maturation.” Beverley explains:

According to this narrative, the illusion of the revolutionary transformation of society that was the inspiration for armed struggle was our Romantic adolescence. It was a generous and brave adolescence, but also one prone to excess, error, irresponsibility, and moral anarchy. By contrast, our biological and biographical maturity, represented by our role and responsibilities as parents and professionals, corresponds to the hegemony of neoliberalism in the eighties and nineties. (50)

21 Other important contributions to the body of theoretical works on memory and dictatorship in Latin America include the previously mentioned series “Memorias de la represión” coordinated by Elizabeth Jelin; Hugo Vezzetti’s Sobre la violencia revolucionaria (2009) in which argues against what he sees as a very partial memory, a “romantic reconstruction” that has focused on glorification and ideals rather than moral and political responsibilities and the work by historians Vera Carnovale, Federico Lorenz and Roberto Pittaluga on memory and oral testimony (2006).
Even though today, looking back, the failure of the armed struggle may seem inevitable, Beverley reminds us that from the viewpoint of the 1960s and 70s, things looked quite different. The period of the 1960s and 70s in general, and the armed struggle specifically, merit serious critical reconsideration. That is not to say that armed struggle would be a useful tool in the present or that it is necessarily justified. Moreover, conditions today are significantly different as are the possibilities for change. However, rather than a facile dismissal of the armed struggle, a serious and critical look at the beliefs and events of the period is both necessary and overdue.

The limited albeit growing number of works that have been produced on the experience of militancy pertain almost exclusively to the fields of history, political science and sociology. These include works previously mentioned by Calveiro, Feinmann and Vezzetti.\(^\text{22}\) Aside from a few exceptions, there are virtually no studies of narratives by ex-militants.\(^\text{23}\) The intention of this dissertation, therefore, is to take a small step towards remedying the lack of critical attention to the voices of leftist ex-militants in post-dictatorial studies and the cultural history of the left. Beyond the historical relevance of the texts included for analysis in the present work, an analysis of their formal and literary components, drawing on the theoretical framework mentioned earlier, will represent a valuable contribution to an understanding of how personal and collective

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\(^{23}\) To my knowledge, analyses that specifically deal with “narratives of militancy” in the context of Argentina are limited to *Voices of the Survivors* (1998) by Liria Evangelista, *Memorias en montaje: Escrituras de la militancia y pensamientos sobre la historia* (2006) by Alejandra Oberti and Roberto Pittaluga and Ana Longoni’s book *Traiciones: La figura del traidor en los relatos acerca de los sobrevivientes de la represión* (2007). The first two dedicate only a section of their analysis to actual “narratives of militancy,” given their more broad overall focus, while the third deals specifically with the topic of betrayal.
memories are constructed as well as the ways in which literature intervenes in the politics of memory. In addition to this, as “terrorism” continues to hold power as a buzzword as well as a concern of global scope, a renewed discussion of political and non-state violence is taking place around the world. Does the militancy of the 1970s have anything in common with the wave of terrorism of the last few years? What can we learn from the revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 70s that can contribute to this more recent debate? Memories of Militancy in its exploration of leftist violence through the words of the participants themselves, enters into this ongoing debate within the cultural and political history of revolutionary violence.

Guided by the concepts outlined above, we will take a closer look at memories of militancy particularly with respect to the questions of narrative genre, militant identity, and revolutionary violence. Each of these is the focus of one of the three chapters that follow. As Peter Middleton and Tim Woods state in Literatures of Memory (2000):

Genre is too often treated as a formalism, as if it were no more than a form of prosody that could be copied out of a manual. It is better thought of as a code of practice constantly under negotiation between texts and their readers, listeners, publishers, academics, and reviewers, which advises them how they are expected to respond to the text. Genre is a projected biography of a text’s circulation. It is this temporal extension out into the long history of the interactions of the text which takes it beyond formalism and makes it possible for genre to inscribe a specific technics of memory. (7)

With this in mind, this dissertation aims to explore the intersection of genres, the combinations and hybrids that many “narratives of militancy” represent and the implications this has in terms of the memory of the period.

Identity is another key concept shaping this work. Victor Burgin in In/Different Spaces (1996) argues: “There is no identity—national, cultural, or individual—which does not imply both a place and a time. There is no identity that is not both mise-en-
scène and narrative—in personal memory and common history” (193). This study therefore aims to explore subjective identity as revealed through “narratives of militancy,” keeping in mind Paul Ricoeur’s idea of narrative as a “model of intelligibility,” a mediating force which allows us to understand human experience in time. Considering the discursive construction of identity, many of these works can be seen as part of a quest to reconstruct or rearticulate a personal sense of identity, specifically a reflection of the potentially intense transition in and out of a militant organization, given that, as linguist Emile Benveniste states, “It is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject” (40).

The third thematic current is revolutionary violence. The use of non-state violence is a much more contentious subject than the repression carried out by the dictatorship and paramilitary squads. Many ex-militants were adolescents or in their early twenties and as Pilar Calveiro, author of Política y/o violencia (2005), comments,

Es preciso entender que, para estos jóvenes provenientes de la clase media en su mayoría, ‘idealistas revolucionarios’, algunos de ellos con una formación cristiana y los más reemplazando la mística religiosa por la mística revolucionaria, el hecho de haberse permitido asaltar bancos, robar coches, secuestrar industriales, enfrentar tiroteos y matar, a veces en defensa propia y otras cumpliendo las órdenes de exterminio emanadas de la conducción [...] significaban rupturas muy profundas e inquietantes con su formación moral original. (178)

In this respect historicization and contextualization are very important. A critical discussion of political violence has only recently begun. As Calveiro points out, far from being a sudden violent anomaly in Argentina’s history, the revolutionary violence of the 1960s and 70s has deep social and historical roots (Política 130). By studying the events as recounted by the protagonists in their own words, it may be possible to gain an
enriched understanding of the significance and interpretation of the use of revolutionary violence as a political tool for those involved.

Although a more detailed description of works follows in Chapter 1, I would like to add a word here about the sources consulted in researching this project. The majority of the “narratives of militancy” were obtained at local bookstores in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In the years directly before and after the thirtieth anniversary of the 1976 coup, bookstores often featured displays dedicated exclusively to the topic of militancy or the 1960s and 1970s in general, suggesting a heightened degree of public interest in these subjects. Archives, such as the important collection at CeDInCI (Center for Documentation and Research of Leftist Culture in Argentina) or Memoria Abierta’s significant compilation of oral testimonies, were also very helpful. In addition to the growing number of books on the topic of the 1970s, from history, the social sciences and, to some degree, literary criticism, several journals were very useful in presenting thought-provoking approaches to the topic, most especially Lucha Armada en la Argentina and Políticas de la Memoria. Finally, interviews with a number of ex-militants who were very generous with their time, including Sergio Pollastri (Montoneros) and Luis Mattini (PRT-ERP), provided me with the opportunity to ask numerous questions first-hand.

With this in mind and to conclude this Introduction, I would like to present a brief overview of the present work. Chapter 1 begins by defining and identifying what we are referring to when we speak of “narratives of militancy” and focuses on questions of narrative genre. The majority of these narratives resist categorization as they tend to blend genres. At the same time, they are the product, whether intentionally or not, of a

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For more on Memoria Abierta’s archive of oral testimonies, see the series of essays compiled by Vera Carnovale, Federico Lorenz and Roberto Pittaluga in Historia, memoria y fuentes orales (2006).
focus on testimonial and autobiographical writing particularly since the 1970s and 80s. The chapter therefore explores this genealogy as well as tensions between narrative genres. This is followed by the analysis of two “narratives of militancy” that could be considered essentially straightforward works of testimony: *Perejiles: Los otros Montoneros* (2004) by Adriana Robles and *Nada a cambio: Una historia militante* (2009) by Cacho Narzole. Neither Robles nor Narzole is a writer by profession. In fact, both present rather frank, unpolished testimonies with a focus on the quotidian aspects of militancy. Robles identifies herself as having formed a part of the lowest rank of the Montoneros while Narzole was a member of the PRT-ERP. Despite participating in distinct organizations, the experiences they describe share many points in common. The chapter then looks at the influence of Argentine writer and political militant, Rodolfo Walsh, assassinated in 1977. Walsh combined genres, mixing journalism, testimonial and crime-writing with novelistic elements, creating a unique form of novelized non-fiction. Bridging the worlds of political militant and intellectual, Walsh served as a model for some of the earlier narratives such as Miguel Bonasso’s *Recuerdo de la muerte* (1984) and the three-volume *La voluntad* (1997; 1998) by Eduardo Anguita and Martín Caparrós. Chapter 1 closes with an analysis of Bonasso’s *Recuerdo*, with a particular focus on questions of narrative genre and Walsh’s influence. *Recuerdo* is described by its author as a “novela-real” or alternatively, “realidad-novelada,” playing at the complex border between reality and the novel. The work, narrated mostly in the third-person, essentially reads as an adventure novel. While Bonasso seems to have taken Walsh as a model for his own work, in privileging aspects of the novel over other elements, he also represents an important divergence from the latter.
Chapter 2 will take a closer look at the question of militant identity, particularly the transition militants underwent in their shift from individual to part of a collective or group, often depicted as an intense experience. For many it involved choosing a *nom de guerre* and conforming to strict moral codes as well as compartmentalizing, effectively dividing their lives into militant and non-militant or, if forced to go clandestine, severing ties with former friends and sometimes family. Fellow militants often occupied the place of brothers, a substitution for the lost family. We will begin by tracing the progression of ideas about the complexity of militant subjectivity. From Gramsci’s concept of the “collective man” and Lukács’ “conscious collective will” to the legacy of Ernesto “Che” Guevara and socialism’s “new man,” these ideas shaped the thinking of many of the participants in leftist militancy. This profound shift in identity undergone by many who integrated armed militant organizations was paralleled by a later transition out of the organization as they left it or it disbanded, back to redefining themselves as individuals, as *ex*-militants. The chapter focuses on two particular works, *Las violetas del paraíso* (2004) by Sergio Pollastri and *La voluntad: Una historia de la militancia revolucionaria en la Argentina* (1997; 1998) by Eduardo Anguita and Martín Caparrós. In the case of the former, Pollastri narrates his own experiences through multiple voices contrasting different points in time and thus different stages in the complex transformation in subjectivity undergone by his autobiographical protagonist. This is emphasized through the contrast of successive names assumed by the protagonist in the process of his militancy as his personal aspirations come into conflict with his commitment to his ideals. *La voluntad*, on the other hand, represents a very different approach. Anguita and Caparrós carefully reconstruct the militancy of roughly two dozen protagonists based on
hours of interviews and archival work. *La voluntad* is particularly significant in that it was one of the first to reclaim the figure of the militant and portray them as protagonists with agency over their actions. The inclusion of an almost excessive number of protagonists can be read as an attempt to recover the collective nature of militancy.

Finally, Chapter 3 addresses the thorny topic of revolutionary violence. The chapter begins by reviewing some of the ideas regarding revolutionary violence that were in circulation in the late 1960s and 1970s. Views on the role of violence have changed dramatically over the past decades and it is of essence to consider past perspectives in order to better understand the subsequent events. Following this, the chapter explores a relatively recent debate sparked by Argentine philosopher Oscar del Barco. Del Barco’s polemical letter, first published in December 2004, is written from the perspective of an ex-militant, who subsequently distanced himself from the use of violence. It was his controversial position that set off a lively debate among predominantly left-leaning readers, among them, many ex-militants, and a closer look at that discussion can give us a sense of current views on the topic and how it is approached today, more than thirty years after the events it refers to. Many of the articles and letters responding to del Barco have been compiled and published in a book called *No matar: Sobre la responsabilidad* (2007). Chapter 3 closes with the consideration of one of the most candid albeit complex and at times, contradictory narratives by ex-militants. José Amorín’s *Montoneros: La buena historia* (2005) is an autobiographical account of his experiences as part of the leadership of the Montoneros. Amorín’s revealing account is marked by violence, not only in what he recalls but also in how he structures his account. His views on revolutionary violence as well as the tone of his work offer a strong contrast to those of
del Barco and reveal how difficult it can be to write a coherent personal narrative of one’s unresolved past.
Chapter 1: Narratives of Experience

“Writing my life for others, examining it again and again as objectified in words, allowed me slowly to recognize my social condition, to reconcile past and present, to understand life as a process, and to refuse the imposition of the ‘ex,’ -militant or -guerrillera, that fragmented my identity.”
- María Eugenia Vásquez Perdomo

“Lo que no fue un problema en 1970 hoy necesita explicaciones” (135) declares cultural critic Beatriz Sarlo in her book *La pasión y la excepción* (2003) in reference to actions of leftist militants in Argentina that year and in the years that followed. She explains that her book was inspired by a desire to understand events in her own past and to this end singles out the “exceptional” moment of ex-president Pedro Eugenio Aramburu’s assassination in 1970 by the armed militant group, Montoneros, as a point at which to re-read this past. Recalling the moment, she writes:

Festejé el asesinato de Aramburu. Más de treinta años después la frase me parece evidente (muchos lo festejaron) pero tengo que forzar la memoria para entenderla de verdad. […] Cuando recuerdo ese día […] veo a otra mujer (que ya no soy). Quiero entenderla, porque esa que yo era no fue muy diferente de otras y otros; probablemente tampoco hubiera parecido una extranjera en el grupo que había secuestrado, juzgado y ejecutado a Aramburu. (11, italics are mine)

Sarlo’s struggle to understand this “other woman” and the difficulty she encounters in doing so are emblematic of a particular manner of approaching this past, a past that to many seems utterly foreign to Argentina’s present reality. By isolating this event as something exceptional and extreme, approaching the period through her reading of this

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25 Prior to being named de facto president of Argentina, General Pedro Aramburu participated in the 1955 bombing of the Plaza de Mayo and the “Revolución Libertadora,” the military coup which ousted Perón. In a deliberate campaign to “de-Peronize” the country, under Aramburu’s regime, the Peronist party was dissolved and Peronism was banned (uttering Perón’s name was even sanctioned) (Rapoport 423). The following year, a Peronist rebellion led by General Juan José Valle was quashed and under Aramburu’s command more than two dozen military and civilian participants were executed (Rapoport 422). This episode became the subject of Rodolfo Walsh’s *Operación Masacre* (1957), discussed later in this chapter. In their execution of Aramburu in 1970, the Montoneros cited his role in these events as well as the disappearance of Eva Perón’s cadaver.
particular moment, Sarlo actually distances herself in her desire to understand this “other woman.” She effectively detaches this moment from the political, social and historical contexts that might make it seem less exceptional—and might bring her, and her reader, closer to an understanding of the period.\(^{26}\)

Sarlo deems it an advantage that in her view enough time has passed that Aramburu’s assassination can now be considered through a “sensibilidad histórica” rather than “subjective memories” (136): “ha cumplido un ciclo y ha desaparecido o sólo se manifiesta, disimulada por las denegaciones y subterfugios de la mala conciencia, entre quienes mantienen lazos subjetivos con esa sensibilidad de época” (La pasión 136). The distance from which she approaches this event thirty years later (unable to recognize her former self) is the condition, according to Sarlo, which allows her a much more accurate reading of the event than the testimonial voice of ex-militants who may actually have been present, given that the latter are susceptible to unreliable distortions. Similarly, in another of her books, Tiempo pasado (2005), Sarlo takes aim at the type of memorialisation of the past found in these narratives which “a diferencia de la buena historia académica, no ofrecen un sistema de hipótesis sino certezas” (16). Sarlo therefore argues against what she terms the “giro subjetivo,” clearly marking her preference for what she sees as reliable academic history over “subjective memories.” It is notable that the type of “subjective memories” that the Argentine cultural critic discredits in Tiempo pasado are precisely the type of narrative she confesses in La pasión

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\(^{26}\) Sarlo explains the exceptionality of the moment as follows: “Hubo violencia política antes y, de modo creciente en intensidad y en cantidad de acciones, después del asesinato de Aramburu. Pero este hecho no se suma sencillamente ni como comienzo cronológico (porque no lo fue) ni como una culminación (que tampoco fue). Sencillamente no se suma a otros, sino que tiene el efecto precisamente inverso: divide un antes y un después, y dentro de la sucesión empírica de los hechos es una anormalidad por su carácter de irrepetible” (La pasión 194). However, the “abnormality” and “unrepeatable nature” of this event as opposed to other historic events is not altogether clear.
she cannot write given that she is unable to reconcile what she views as her past self with that of the present. In the end, Sarlo is evidently no closer to understanding “esa mujer” of thirty years prior as she was before her analysis of the text describing Aramburu’s death. Her principal difficulty lies in the unbridgeable ethical distance between herself and her object of study, a tacit rejection of the actions of this “other woman” and along with it, the “subjective” aspect of the memories surrounding the event and the complexity of the political context. It is precisely these elements which would allow her to move towards a deeper understanding of her object of study.

In contrast, Pilar Calveiro argues in favor of a political memory over an ethical or moral reading. For Calveiro, with respect to this period in Argentine history, “hacer una memoria política [en lugar de ética o moral] tendría el objeto de recuperar los sentidos de aquella práctica, la de los años setenta, y su relación con la violencia en las circunstancias en las que se desencadenó” (“Antiguos” 6). Moreover, while Sarlo shows a clear preference for objective over subjective, academic over personal testimonies, she also implicitly rejects a nuanced and contextualized reading of the content of these “subjective memories.” In reality, both are indispensable in coming to a deeper understanding of any historical period. It is also true that while academic histories are extremely useful, the notion of the possibility of any completely objective account devoid of interests should be seriously questioned. As Calveiro explains, “El discurso académico suele ser engañoso porque, en la mayor parte de los casos, desdibuja al sujeto que enuncia, creando la ilusión de que estamos frente a la sola ‘realidad’ del sujeto-objeto enunciado”
Narratives written by ex-militants themselves therefore represent an important contribution to a more complex and nuanced reading of this past.

While a certain degree of distance is undoubtedly useful in forming a critical reading of the past, it is these “subjective ties,” a felt connection to this past, that provide a particular type of narrative and often the ability to understand or explain the logic behind events from the protagonists’ point of view that may otherwise, from a distance of decades and a completely different worldview seem unintelligible. Genre forms a part of this question, defined by Peter Middleton and Tim Woods in Literatures of Memory (2000) “as a code of practice constantly under negotiation between texts and their readers, listeners, publishers, academics, and reviewers, which advises them how they are expected to respond to the text. Genre is a projected biography of a text’s circulation” (7). Genre can influence the manner of approaching and reading this history. What perspectives are revealed in the protagonists’ first-hand testimonies of the period? How are they shaped by related existing genre traditions? What aspects might be revealed through testimony that may otherwise be absent from “academic histories”? And finally, if genres serve to shape reader expectations and responses, what happens when several are combined?

“Narratives of militancy” are as different and varied as their authors. Part testimony, part adventure story, part non-fiction novel: one of the difficulties in categorizing these works is that they tend to blur genre definitions. Tzvetan Todorov in Genres in Discourse (1990) defines genre as a “codification of discursive properties”

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27 Calveiro also cautions: “Por su parte, el testimonio podría ser igualmente engañoso, aunque en un sentido inverso. La primera persona puede sugerir la perfecta coincidencia entre el sujeto que enuncia y lo enunciado, una suerte de ‘calca’ de uno sobre el otro que nos permitiría escapar de las posibles discrepancias y establecer una ‘verdad’ última desde el ‘yo estuve ahí’” (“Testimonio” 76-77).
“the classes of texts that have been historically perceived as such” (17). Todorov explains that they influence both the conventions that dictate how a text is approached by the reader as well as the author’s creation. “It is because genres exist as an institution that they function as ‘horizons of expectation’ for readers and as ‘models of writing’ for authors” (18). Most importantly, however, genres as the product of a particular intersection of ideology and language, “depend quite as much on a society’s linguistic raw material as on its historically circumscribed ideology” (10). With this in mind, we will first look at “narratives of militancy” that are products of a specific tradition of genre. Concretely, two instances of testimony and the influences and traditions that shaped them. From there we will move to more experimental territory. Considering that “a new genre is always the transformation of an earlier one, or of several: by inversion, by displacement, by combination” (15), the work by “disappeared” author and militant, Rodolfo Walsh, embodies the tensions between the two and the outcome is a particular blend of genres. Walsh, precursor to this generation of “narratives of militancy,” for example, had a direct influence on Miguel Bonasso, which is evident in his book *Recuerdo de la muerte*. Bonasso also experiments with the limits of genre and while Walsh may be his model, they are different in important ways. Each devised their own unique blend of genres to reflect their subject matter and the period in which they were writing.

Overall, although they have certain elements in common, each of these narratives is the product of a unique combination of fiction and non-fiction elements, drawing traits from autobiography, testimonial, the non-fiction novel, history and the essay, among others. *Recuerdo de la muerte*, published in 1984, was one of the first. While Bonasso
makes an appearance in his work and did form part of the organization he writes about, his book is not strictly autobiographical, focusing instead on other members of the organization. Nor are several more of the first works to appear such as Marta Diana’s *Mujeres guerrilleras* (1996) or Martín Caparrós and Eduardo Anguita’s *La voluntad* (volume 1, 1997). In the case of the former, despite the name, there is very little mention of armed militancy. Rather, the focus is on the women’s personal lives. The latter, discussed at length in Chapter 2, is based on interviews of ex-militants from numerous groups and significant archival research. Both are attempts to recapture the collective nature of the struggle and are based on the testimonies of numerous participants.²⁸

Later works such as Miguel Angel Mori’s *Las rondas y los sueños* (1997), *Los compañeros* (2000) by Rolando Diez, Cacho Narzole’s *Nada a cambio* (2009), Sergio Pollastri’s *Las violetas del paraíso* (2003), *Perejiles* (2004) by Adriana Robles and José Amorín’s *Montoneros: La buena historia* (2005) are significantly more autobiographical, focusing more on the individual experiences of their authors. The first three deal particularly with experiences of militants who participated in the PRT-ERP while the authors of the others were members of the Montoneros. Although there are perceivable

²⁸ Although limited in number, similar narratives have been published throughout Latin America. These include *Todos los días de la vida* (2010) by Enérito García Concha, participant in the Chilean MIR, *La montaña es algo más que una inmensa estepa verde* (2002) by Omar Cabezas, former member of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, *Sendero en tinieblas* (2004) by Alberto Ulloa Bornemann from Mexico, *O baú do guerrilheiro: memórias da luta armada urbana no Brasil* (2004) by Ottoni Fernandes Júnior who participated in Brazil’s Ação Libertadora Nacional (ALN) and *Escrito para no morir: Bitácora de una militancia* (2000) by María Eugenia Vásquez Perdomo, ex-militant in Colombia’s Movimiento 19 de Abril (M-19). Ulloa Bornemann’s narrative is characterized by a somewhat repentant stance with respect to his militancy as well as an emphasis on the time he spent in prison. Vásquez Perdomo, on the other hand, prefaced her book with a powerful and personal introduction in which she grapples with the contradictions and unresolved aspects of her identity and past, highlighting the role that the process of writing plays in moving towards resolving some of these issues. Although the published works that have gained recognition, nationally or internationally are few in number, what is interesting is that despite different national experiences and significantly different political situations, in many cases, they still share many similarities. Though this dissertation focuses exclusively on Argentina, little work has been done on this aspect of ex-militants in Latin America suggesting ample possibility for future studies.
differences in the figure of the militant as represented in the earlier works compared to
those published more recently, it is very difficult, perhaps impossible, to separate these
works into distinct periods with specific characteristics.29 Bonasso’s Recuerdo de la
muerte resists most attempts at categorization, while other works written during the late
1980s or 90s were not published until much later, often due to difficulties in finding a
publisher willing to accept them. They are all, however, accounts of experiences of
leftist militancy shaped by the influence of autobiography or testimony.

The question of genre, from trauma to testimonio

The term “testimony” has multiple meanings and is used in a variety of contexts.
Essentially, it is a public statement or narrative that can have a juridical purpose as well
as be destined to communicate an experience witnessed either by someone who has
“lived” it directly or by someone who has observed an experience although was not
directly involved. As historians Marina Franco and Florencía Levin explain:

> el concepto es polisémico y suele usarse sin demasiada precisión para referirse al
> carácter jurídico del relato de un testigo, a la narración de experiencias
> traumáticas transmitidas con intenciones informativas o de transmisión
> experiencial, a las narraciones más tardías con intenciones estéticas o de crónica
> personal, a las narraciones tomadas por un profesional con intenciones de
> producir conocimiento. (44-45)

Though elements and forms of it have existed for centuries, the genre of testimony in its
current form was a product of war, though most especially the Holocaust. Annette
Wieviorka, author of The Era of the Witness (2006), comments “No other historical
event, not even World War I—when the practice of recording testimonies first became
common—has given rise to such a movement, which is so vast and long-lasting that no

29 For more on the evolving image of militants see the Introduction of the present work.
researcher can pretend to master it in its entirety” (xi). A period of relative silence immediately following the end of World War II changed dramatically beginning with the Eichmann trial in the early 1960s after which the role of witness and the act of giving testimony were suddenly the objects of a new focus on memory (Wieviorka 87-89). This focus continued to grow, developing into what, by the end of the 1970s, Wieviorka terms “the era of the witness.” The publication of an increasing number of Holocaust testimonies spurred debates with respect to the production and reception of testimony of such an extreme experience with a focus on individual narration, questions of memory as well as the difficulty of bearing witness. Some wondered whether it was even possible to give testimony of an extreme experience. Holocaust studies have influenced the production of a significant body of literature on trauma theory which has been applied in many cases to studies of the post-dictatorship. These include works such as Writing History, Writing Trauma (2001) by Dominick LaCapra, the well-known Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History (1992) by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub as well as Cathy Caruth’s Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History (1996). All three of these works have been extremely influential in the field.

It should be noted that while trauma theory has been a productive approach in reading Holocaust testimonies, there are significant differences between “narratives of

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31 Other works such as Liria Evangelista’s Voices of the Survivors: Testimony, Mourning, and Memory in Post-Dictatorship Argentina (1998) apply this theory to an Argentine context. In her focus on testimonies of militancy and the topic of defeat, her work represents one of the few extensive critical analyses of narratives of militancy.
militancy” and Jewish accounts of suffering under the Nazis. In particular, in the context of militancy, questions of agency and a recuperation of the political stand out as key elements. To exclude the political implications of the production and reception of narratives of militancy or to focus on suffering or loss to the exclusion of other aspects would be to echo, to some degree, the attempt by the dictatorship to “disappear” the political projects and aspirations of leftist militants. Andreas Huyssen in *Present Pasts* (2003) cautions of the risks in reading through the lens of psychoanalysis and trauma, warning that important aspects of memory may be overshadowed. Huyssen argues: “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” (8). Although Huyssen acknowledges that it is important to recognize personal and historical trauma suffered by individuals and groups, he contends that the trend towards the psychoanalytic discourse of trauma is not a very useful tool for understanding the “political layers of memory discourse” (9). For in this debate, not only the past, but also the future are at stake given that these “memory discourses are absolutely essential to imagine the future and to regain a strong temporal and spatial grounding of life and the imagination in a media and consumer society that increasingly voids temporality and collapses space” (Huyssen 6). In this sense, “narratives of militancy” may have more in common with Latin American testamento.

*Testamento*, which gained formal recognition in 1970 as a new category in the prestigious Casa de las Américas literary prize, has specifically political roots and is directly associated with militancy in Central America, narratives of experiences of the
Cuban Revolution, for instance, or the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Testimonio also grew to include experiences of the marginalized, often illiterate. In these cases, the protagonists tell their story with the aid of an author or editor. John Beverley who has written extensively on the topic, defines testimonio as “a novel or novella-length narrative in book [...] form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a ‘life’ or a significant life experience” (“The Margin” 24). He adds that it must “involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on, implicated in the act of narration itself” (26). Beverley envisions a primarily illiterate narrator or at least one without much formal education, a “lack of writing ability or skill on the part of the narrator,” a narrator who “speaks for, or in the name of, a community or group, approximating in this way the symbolic function of the epic hero, without at the same time assuming his hierarchical and patriarchal status” (27). In contrast, George Yúdice argues that the “speaker does not speak for or represent a community but rather performs an act of identity-formation that is simultaneously personal and collective” (42). Yúdice considers “testimonial writing” in the context of the postmodern rejection of what Jean-Francois Lyotard terms “grand or master narratives”: “The rejection of the master narratives thus implies a different subject of discourse, one that does not conceive of itself as universal and as searching for universal truth but, rather, as seeking emancipation and survival within specific and local circumstances” (44). Yúdice’s description coincides with what we find in “narratives of

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32 Angel Rama describes in Literatura y clase social (1983) how he proposed testimonio as a new category in the Casa de las Américas literary prize (220). Incidentally, Rodolfo Walsh sat on the first jury for the prize.
militancy.” The protagonists do not usually claim to speak on behalf of a community. However, the struggle depicted is a collective one.

“Narratives of militancy” also share similarities with autobiography as well as what critic Barbara Harlow in her book *Resistance Literature* (1987) defines as “resistance narratives.” With respect to the first, for Beverley, the major difference between autobiography and *testimonio* is that “Testimonio represents an affirmation of the individual subject, even of individual growth and transformation, but in connection with a group or class situation marked by marginalization, oppression, and struggle” (“The Margin” 35). Linda Craft, author of *Novels of Testimony and Resistance from Central America* (1997), expresses a similar view when she contrasts the intertextuality of testimony, “an extension of the collective, and in many cases plural” to autobiography with its “unique, superior, and exemplary” hero (21). “Narratives of militancy” fall somewhere between these two parameters. Due to the collective nature of their struggle, as we will see, ex-militants have a tendency to speak in the context of a shared cause, from the perspective of the youth of their generation, a community of fellow militants. However, we are far from Rigoberta Menchú’s “My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people” (1). In other ways, “narratives of militancy” resemble “resistance narratives,” particularly in the “connection between knowledge and power, the awareness of the exploitation of knowledge by the interests of power to create a distorted historical record” (Harlow 116).

Like *testimonio*, resistance narratives seek to tell a different story, to resist the imposition

33 *Testimonio*’s loose definition allows it to take on numerous forms. Craft’s definition, for instance, is indeed very broad: “The form of testimony may vary, adopting narrative discourses such as autobiography, historical novel, interview, photographs, prison memoirs, diary, chronicle, letter, newspaper article, anthropological or social science documentary; it can be fiction or nonfiction. It can even coexist with poetry” (22).
of an “officially sanctioned history.” “Narratives of militancy” often explicitly seek to offer alternative visions of militants to those adopted at various points over the last several decades by a series of governments and the political right-wing.

However, *testimonio* and “resistance narratives” also differ from “narratives of militancy” in several significant ways. Principally, the authors of the latter tend to be educated, middle class and urban. They have access to the means to write their own stories, and the education and freedom to do so. In this sense, they have little in common with Beverley and Yúdice’s “subaltern.” Another important difference is that these narratives, though at times expressing an urgency, are in most cases written more than a decade after the events they describe. Unlike Harlow’s prison memoirs which are written from prison and use writing itself as a form of resistance, “narratives of militancy” are more concerned with piecing together memories. This does not mean that they do not contain an element of denunciation, however the tone tends more towards one of reflection. The goal is to recuperate the experience of militant struggle rather than to deliver an urgent plea for social justice. Furthermore, it is questionable as to whether the authors of these narratives speak as members of a collective, as Beverley and Harlow both suggest, or offer more of an individual perspective. Authors who recount their experiences in “narratives of militancy” were active participants and highlight this aspect over their experience as victims. They acknowledge a certain degree of responsibility for their actions and tend to emphasize the logic and rationale behind their militancy. Unlike some of the victims of the dictatorship who were targeted only because of their filial relationship to a militant, such as mothers of the disappeared, those who participated in armed militancy made a conscious decision at some point to be involved, to assume an
active role and were usually therefore psychologically prepared, at least to some degree, for the possibility of being detained or even tortured. The role of militant implies a particular reading of the world, of politics and the armed struggle. In writing of their experiences against the backdrop of another decade, whether it be the judicial proceedings of the 1980s, the neoliberal influence of the 1990s or the re-appropriation and re-reading of the past that has taken place under the Kirchner government, at least two distinct moments are at play: the past as recalled and the present from which the authors write.

*Walsh and the non-fiction novel*

Beyond Holocaust studies and Latin American *testimonio*, perhaps the greatest influence on “narratives of militancy” is represented by a single Argentine author: Rodolfo Walsh. As both a journalist and a committed militant in the Montoneros, Walsh embodies the tension between writing and militancy. His struggle to reconcile his desire and need to write with his strong commitment to politics and especially militancy was notable and explicit. Walsh’s legacy lies in the product of this struggle, the creation of a new genre known as the “non-fiction novel.”[^34] In *Operación Masacre* (1957), as in later books such as *¿Quién mató a Rosendo?* (1969) and *El Caso Satanowsky* (1973), he combined elements of investigative journalism and crime fiction. Incorporating actual documents into the body of the text yet carefully structuring his narrative in order to create suspense for the reader, Walsh anticipated a style championed by Truman Capote and others over a decade later. Ana María Amar Sánchez in *El relato de los hechos*

[^34]: Walsh is also remembered for his powerful and well-known “Open Letter from a Writer to the Military Junta” written on the first anniversary of the coup, March 24, 1977 and mailed to several prominent political figures. The following day he was detained, shot in public and “disappeared.”
(2008), an insightful analysis of Walsh, defines the genre as reflected in his works as follows:

Tienen como premisa básica el uso de un material que debe ser respetado (distintos ‘registros’, como grabaciones, documentos y testimonios comprobables que no pueden ser modificados por exigencias del relato), sin embargo el modo de disponer ese material y su narración producen transformaciones: los textos ponen en escena una versión con su lógica interna, no son una ‘repetición’ de lo real sino que constituyen otra realidad regida por leyes propias con la que cuestionan la credibilidad de otras versiones. (12)

The non-fiction novel, as Craft points out, commonly shares several traits with testimony as defined earlier in this chapter. These include the “appeal of veracity,” a “claim to truthfulness” and “journalistic-style discourse.” However, although lines between genres are persistently difficult to define in an absolute manner, the non-fiction novel tends to place more emphasis on the aspect of narrative, on the structure and flow of the story, on engaging and maintaining the reader’s interest.

In Operación Masacre, Walsh returns to the brutal quashing of a Peronist uprising led by José Juan Valle under the Aramburu dictatorship in 1956. In retaliation for the rebellion, several men loosely suspected of playing a part in the uprising were rounded up and shot. The incident was effectively covered up until Walsh learned that several of the victims survived. From there he begins to piece together the events of the book. Operación is divided into three sections, “Las personas,” “Los hechos” and “La evidencia,” in which Walsh matter-of-factly presents the corresponding information. It is structured to involve the reader in the process of the narrative recreation of the facts, thereby creating suspense and engaging the reader’s interest. In uncovering this episode which had almost effectively been erased from the history sanctioned by the military government in power, Walsh questions not only the official version of history but also the
structure and legitimacy of the ruling government’s authority.\textsuperscript{35} This is what historian Jeremy Adelman refers to as “public counter-memory” (390).

Walsh himself describes his convictions with respect to writing in an oft-cited interview with Ricardo Piglia (1973), justifying his preference for the non-fiction novel:

Es evidente que la denuncia, traducida al arte de la novela, se vuelve inofensiva, no molesta para nada, se sacraliza como arte. [...] No concibo hoy el arte si no está relacionado directamente con la política. [...] Occidente ha hecho del escritor la prostituta del barrio, para desacralizar ese papel tenés que cuestionarle todo. Ningún escritor de derecha se plantea si debe seguir haciendo literatura, solamente se plantea este problema el escritor de izquierda. (cited in Casullo 59)

For Walsh, the novel was too easy to ignore, its demands neutralized by its status as an artistic object. Although politics demanded something more, Walsh left open the possibility that the novel, itself, might still have some value:

Vos tenés que hablar, tenés que decir [...]. De todos modos no es tarea para un solo tipo, es una tarea para muchos tipos, para una generación, volver a convertir la novela en un vehículo subversivo, si es que alguna vez lo fue. Desde los comienzos de la burguesía, la literatura de ficción desempeñó un importante papel subversivo que hoy no está desempeñando, pero tienen que existir maneras de que vuelva a desempeñarlo. Entonces, en ese caso, habrá una justificación para el novelista en la medida en que se demuestre que sus libros mueven, subvierten. (cited in Casullo 12)

And he was driven to do just this in \textit{Operación masacre} where he commented, in the book’s original prologue:

Sé perfectamente que en este país un jefe de Policía es poderoso, mientras que un periodista—oscu ro por añadidura—apenas es nada. Pero sucede que creo, con toda ingenuidad y firmeza, en el derecho de cualquier ciudadano a divulgar la verdad que conoce, por peligrosa que sea. Y creo en este libro, en sus efectos. Espero que no se me critique el creer en un libro—aunque sea escrito por mí—cuando son tantos más los que creen en las metralletas. (195)

\textsuperscript{35} In a prologue of \textit{Operación masacre} written for a later edition of the book, Walsh comments on the degree to which the story had been covered up: “Es cosa de reírse, a doce años de distancia porque se pueden revisar las colecciones de los diarios, y esta historia no existió ni existe” (20).
Although his influence is most notably evident in Bonasso’s *Recuerdo de la muerte*, which we will presently turn to, Walsh is representative of the juncture between writing and militancy and a paradigmatic figure in the blend of genres that forms the non-fiction novel. Without doubt, many of the authors of narratives of militancy, even of the more traditional testimonies, had him in mind when writing their own stories. Some, like Adriana Robles, even make direct reference to him (58-59).

Before analyzing Walsh’s influence on Bonasso and the non-fiction novel in greater depth however, we will turn to two works that could be regarded as closer to straightforward testimonies. *Perejiles: Los otros Montoneros* (2004) by Adriana Robles and *Nada a cambio: Una historia militante* (2009) by Cacho Narzole are works without strong literary pretensions, that instead focus on offering accounts of personal experience and details of the day-to-day of militant life. They offer a view from within their respective organizations of the decisions faced by their protagonists, the atmosphere and interactions between militants and a myriad of other elements often absent from the academic histories privileged by Sarlo, and in doing so, contribute to a potentially more complex understanding of militancy.

“Writing my life for others”

Robles’ *Perejiles* (2004) and Narzole’s *Nada a cambio* (2009) are two very personal accounts of militancy, portraits of daily life within the Montoneros and the PRT-ERP, respectively. Using straightforward, first-person narrative, both books follow a largely chronological progression and provide a reflection of the motivations and rationale behind the protagonists’ decisions. Despite the fact that the books offer a
portrait of militancy in two very different organizations, their experiences are similar in many ways and touch on multiple aspects shared by both. As we will see, these works represent individual attempts to capture and reflect on personal experiences of militancy, privileging the desire and need to retell their stories over any particular aesthetic function, offering simple yet valuable accounts of daily life and practices within these organizations.

*Perejiles*, as anticipated by its title, is a brief testimony of the author’s experiences as a *perejil* in the lowest ranks of the Montoneros, part of “la base menos formada e informada de las organizaciones político-militares. Los desconocidos, los que muchos no saben quiénes fueron” (15-16). The work is comprised of a collection of anecdotes and reflections, commentaries and explanations, as well as memories from the author’s childhood and roughly four years of militancy, beginning in 1974. The focus is on Robles’ upbringing and education, entrance into militancy and her brief career as a Montonero ending finally with a “trial” carried out by the organization for “ideological weakness” and exile within the country. Robles is especially concerned with depicting the people who had an emotional impact on her during those years, fellow militants or romantic involvements, for instance. Stylistically, Cacho Narzole’s work is very similar. *Nada a cambio* traces his experiences from his initial inspiration to join the PRT-ERP around 1972 after witnessing a Robin-Hood-like milk distribution action on their part in the slum where he worked as a volunteer. Narzole narrates his first contacts with the

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36 *Perejil* was a derogatory term used in the 60s and 70s to refer to the lowest ranking militants in an organization. Literally meaning *parsley*, it may have come from the fact that the leafy green was sold very cheaply, often added to purchases for free due to its little value. It may also have its origins in popular riddles about “Perez Gil,” *gil* meaning slightly stupid or gullible. The connotation in terms of militancy is that these base militants were duped or sucked into the organization. The fact is that due to the political-military organizations strongly hierarchical structures, a great number of militants were, in fact, *perejiles* which the organizations depended upon.
group and his slow integration into their ranks around 1974 or ’75, along with his wife, Juanita. Because Narzole spent much of his time as a militant working in the organization’s propaganda branch, overseeing the publication of the PRT-ERP newspaper among other things, much of the book is concerned with explaining the process of setting up a clandestine printing press, writing, publishing and organizing the publication’s complex distribution system. Much of his experience of militancy centers around problem solving. Orders come down from above and the militants must come up with ways to achieve what at first appears impossible. The book ends with the author’s escape from Argentina in 1977, along with his wife and two daughters, following PRT-ERP orders. Unlike Robles, however, Narzole uses his militant pseudonym and his narrative reads almost like an account of a model militant. His is a kind of “memory” that leaves no room for doubts, detailed, assured and coherent, leaving the reader virtually unable to glimpse the identity beyond the pseudonym. In this respect, the contrast between the two is notable.

Both testimonies share the drive to communicate, to relay experience, and in both cases, this is greater than the aesthetic care taken with the text. “Mi hacer no es la escritura, mi oficio no es escribir” (13) states Robles in the opening sentence of her testimony. From the outset, she adopts a deliberately simple tone, emphasizing the fact that she is not a writer but rather, in her words, “maestra y militante” (13). Though Narzole does not make explicit mention of the fact, his narrative demonstrates a similar simplicity, beginning at the absolute beginning (with his birth) and following it with a brief explanation of world politics in order to contextualize his decision to become a militant. It should be noted that both authors are university educated professionals, the
former was trained as a school teacher while the latter worked as an accountant, and they had access to the means to write their own narratives despite the fact that they are not writers by profession. In this respect, they are very different from the testimonios described earlier in this chapter. However, as Linda Craft explains, in testimonial works such as these, it is common for content to take precedence over form or, in other words:

Frequently, the referential function –to use Roman Jakobson’s terminology- of the language of a testimonial text equals or surpasses the poetic (or aesthetic) function. Because language is basically social, the text turns outward, as Georg Lukács theorizes, and the writer works to restore human dignity. Ethics, urgency, and a utopian vision drive the witness/writer’s production. (5)

This is indeed true in these two works which are characterized by repetitions and an almost excessive preoccupation with details. Pilar Calveiro in an article entitled “Testimonio y memoria en el relato histórico” comments on several of the identifying characteristics of testimony that are certainly relevant in this case:

Su obsesión por los detalles se explica en su propia incertidumbre, que lo lleva a hacer referencia constante a qué le pasó —y qué no—, qué vio u oyó —y qué no—, es decir, qué sabe y qué no sabe. Dado que tiene un relato que reconoce como incompleto, busca obsesivamente en él todo lo que pueda “dar de sí,” todo lo que pueda ser significativo, más allá aun de la propia valoración. Es como si el testimonio pusiera y expusiera “todo,” pero es un todo que se reconoce desde el inicio mismo de su presentación como fragmentario. (77)

Robles and Narzole tell their stories in episodes, anecdotes, fragments of memory. The obsession for details Calveiro describes is apparent and at times excessive, revealing an instance of what Paul Ricoeur refers to as the “referential pretension” of a narrative. According to Calveiro, “A diferencia del discurso académico, el testimonio es, se sabe y se exhibe como fragmentario. Por eso reclama la multiplicidad, por eso hablamos de los testimonios en plural” (79). It is not surprising, therefore that both Robles and Narzole
describe their works as “pequeñas historias,” merely two “small stories” out of a wide range of experiences.

One of the most significant contributions of testimonies like these is the strong focus on the quotidian. Their testimonies give us a portrait of militancy, of practices, analysis and, despite the fact that the two are from different militant organizations, a great number of similar experiences. These are practices that would undoubtedly be recognized by many ex-militants. The progression that extends from their initial inspiration or interest in becoming a militant to the first “cita” or meeting with a contact from their respective organizations; the choice of a *nom de guerre* and the sensation of living a “double life”; the adventure of their first “pintada” or revolutionary graffiti; “proletarization” or the experience of being integrated into a factory as a common worker—thought to move militants closer to their idealized vision of the “people” and also assist in bringing the revolutionary mandate into the factory; arms training; going “underground,” the experience of cutting ties with family and friends, among many others.

The two authors also ask themselves similar questions regarding the period, revealing shared motives in interrogating their individual pasts. Robles poses the question “¿Cómo eran los setenta? ¿Por qué pareció tan cercana la posibilidad de cambiar el mundo?” (195) while in Narzole’s book, this question is asked by a friend of the protagonist: “Me preguntaba una y otra vez porqué habíamos decidido dejar nuestra actividad profesional, nuestra casa, los amigos, la familia, la continuidad de progreso personal que ya habíamos comenzado. ¿Qué podía ser tan importante para dejar todo eso, sin recibir nada a cambio?” (83-84). Narzole, in dedicating *Nada* to his daughters
“porque merecen conocer esta parte de su prehistoria” reveals that at least part of the motivation to tell his story comes from concerns about his future, the desire to pass on his story so that future generations will know and understand what took place in the past. Robles, although she shares the same concern to some degree and also dedicates the book to family members, is more focused on the past, explaining “Por lo que ya no somos es que creo importante que testimoniemos esos años” (14). She aims, on the one hand, to recover a sense of lost community and, on the other, to correct what she sees as a false representation of ex-militants, particularly perejiles, “en visiones que nos despojan de nuestro discernimiento y nuestra voluntad” (14).

There is also a political element to remembering and narrating stories of resistance. Given that one of the objectives of the dictatorship was to not only quash dissent but to “disappear” it altogether, along with the political projects, hopes and aspirations of militants, narrating these stories can represent an act of resistance in itself. The individual memories contained in the testimonies generate tensions with the official memory the dictatorship and the neoliberal government of the 1990s attempted to impose, from the “theory of the two demons” to ex-militants as depoliticized victims. According to Robles for example:

en algunos imaginarios que recorren nuestra sociedad seguimos apareciendo como fanáticos, violentos o irresponsables de una manera que oculta de la vista de la gente la heroicidad de una generación que dio su vida por la Patria a la manera épica de los soldados de la Independencia, con sus mismas armas, en las mismas condiciones de opresión y con la única diferencia del escenario de los tiempos modernos. (80)

Narzole reveals a similar motivation when he writes:

Esta pequeña historia trata de acercar una mínima luz para oponerse a la oscuridad con que muchos desean ocultar, cuando no tergiversar, este pasado
reciente. Este pasado de frenesi político y voluntad de participación. Ese pasado en el que se entregaba todo, hasta la vida, sin pedir nada a cambio. (195)

Narzole and Robles write to justify, legitimize and explain their actions and, in doing so, write against images of them as fanatics or crazed youth, attempting to show that they acted out of a conviction for their ideals, many of which both authors still value.

Though certain aspects of their experiences are quite similar, Narzole and Robles present two significantly different visions of militancy. Nada a cambio, for example, reads like a portrait of the model militant. In Narzole’s portrayal of himself, he is eager to join the PRT-ERP and once integrated, completely identifies with the organization.

On entering the group he writes: “Mi necesidad de incorporarme rápidamente a la actividad revolucionaria se convertía en un vértigo, y cada vez eran más grandes las ganas de entrar en acción” (29). After reading Lenin’s El estado y la revolución he comments: “Ese rayo de luz que iluminó mi cabeza, había provocado una revolución dentro de mí y sentía que recién ahora estaba encontrando la manera de ser coherente con lo que había descubierto” (29). Later, after attending a two week ERP training camp, he states “Me sentía completamente integrado a la organización, y asumía como propias todas y cada una de las cosas que se referían al partido y a su accionar” (59-60). Given the tone of the book, this could be applied to practically everything said. Narzole is depicted as obedient, inspired, dedicated, hard-working and determined. Perhaps suitably, the author worked in the division of propaganda for the PRT-ERP. He uncritically reproduces the discourse of the PRT-ERP, sometimes in lengthy citations from party documents, at others through explanatory passages imbued with vocabulary typical of 1970s leftist militants. Conscious that his reader may not always be familiar
with the terms he uses, *tabicamiento*, *minuto*, *berre*, and *fierro*, for instance, Narzole occasionally distinguishes them in italics, adding explanations.

In emphasizing and repeating the phrase “nada a cambio” not only in the title of the work but in several passages within the main text, Narzole draws attention to this concept which can be read in several different ways. “Nada a cambio,” nothing in exchange, may refer to what was perceived as the selfless nature of militant participation. In the following passage, for instance: “Esta pequeña historia, trata de acercar una mínima luz, para oponerse a la oscuridad con que muchos desean ocultar, cuando no tergiversar, este pasado reciente. Este pasado de frenesí político y voluntad de participación. Ese pasado en el que se entregaba todo, hasta la vida, sin pedir nada a cambio” (195). It can also be read as an acknowledgement of political defeat; despite their participation and struggle, in the end, they received nothing in exchange. Narzole, in fact, at the end of his book concedes the defeat of the left. He tries to de-emphasize this, however, with respect to what he sees as gains worldwide: the end of apartheid, decolonization and civil rights in the United States are a few of the items in an extensive list of triumphs he attributes to the various struggles that took place around the globe in the 1970s. Reading his own militancy in this context he concludes that due to these gains on other fronts, “la militancia no había sido en vano” (195). Narzole also reveals: “No concebíamos una vida fuera de la militancia, y la posibilidad de participar en la Revolución era lo único que le daba sentido a lo cotidiano” (174). If revolutionary participation lent meaning to their lives, in questioning this, the meaning of the period is at stake. If this is revived and relived through writing, it may renew the impression that their struggle was worth it.
Robles on the other hand, specifically sets out to deliver a defense of the *perejiles*, to re-appropriate this term and this identity. She wishes to claim recognition for them and for their role in the organization. The position of the *perejiles* is different from that of higher ranked militants and in some ways, her portrayal of them is contradictory. On the one hand, she emphasizes the significance of their role as well as their heroism and the sacrifices they made: “Nosotros, los puros, los héroes, caeríamos luchando y para eso ideábamos fortalezas” (126). On the other, she admits that as the “base menos formada e informada” they seldom made decisions but rather carried out orders, “no decidíamos las acciones porque éramos destinatarios de las órdenes” (16). The difference is important because it highlights the fact that the responsibility for controversial decisions lies with the former leaders of the group. At the same time, while she praises their heroism and dedication, her depiction of herself ranges from a disciplined (though ineffective) “soldier” to an independent, slightly rebellious militant. Robles states, for instance, “Sentía que el ámbito universitario era pequeño burgués y yo me identificaba más con lo popular. Y mucho más aún, con lo militar. Con dar concretamente la vida por la Patria” (84). Yet at the same time, unlike many, she admittedly kept “contact” with daily life outside militancy, seeing movies, for instance, or taking “time off” and maintaining contact with non-militant friends. Robles recalls, “En un modo que yo creo de supervivencia, durante esos años de militancia no dejé de alimentar mi costado ‘burgués’: seguía yendo al cine, seguía leyendo más allá de la prensa y los documentos montoneros” (75). In fact, by her own admission, it was this resistance to full compliance with organization rules that kept her from ascending in rank (75).
The process of writing, in this context, also has the potential to affirm a sense of community. Robles, for instance, recognizes her work as a contribution to a community of ex-militants who have already written about the period. The author, through her writing seeks “restauración de mi propia memoria, de mi propia identidad militante,” explaining “Necesito recordarla por mí, para mí, porque hay mucho de esta etapa tan intensa de mi vida que está borrosa, que tiene baches y mucha ausencia” (14-15). Writing is part of a process of the recuperation of these memories, of this past, of identity: an antidote to forgetting. Writing is seen as a healing process, part of a making whole. It is at once a very private and very public act. And one she undertakes fully conscious of the community of ex-militants writing around her, of other narratives of militancy published before hers. This is hinted at in the dedication where, among the many names, appears a list of fairly well-known authors of a variety of books on the topic. The dedication reads, “A todos los que escribieron con más oficio y autoridad sobre los ’70 porque gracias a ellos me encontré varias veces en lugares de los que me había perdido” (5); thus showing her awareness of these existing narratives and naming the community of writers she is conscious of joining. Robles recognizes that each of these works presents its own vision of the past, an image shaped by the author’s particular memories and experiences (155-56). Writing in this sense is a way to connect, a way to return to these “lugares perdidos,” a form of building community. She reveals: “A lo largo de todos estos años y días transcurridos he leído y re-leído otras historias militantes. Y veo tantas coincidencias entre nosotros..., personas que nunca nos conocimos hemos transitado por los mismos lugares” (31). It is also connected to history, to the past and to the idea of the “hero.” Robles writes of herself “buscaba ser una de
esas combatientes que tanto nos inspiraban en las lecturas de las historias montoneras” (93). This is precisely the history into which she is now seeking to inscribe the *perejiles* and in doing so, imbue them with the qualities of heroism.

Ultimately, both Robles and Narzole deal with the impossibility of return and desires that resist resolution. Returning to Avelar’s concept of “mournful literature,” in his view, “[postdictatorial] writing is at the same time a solitary and collective, personal and anonymous, utopian and melancholic enterprise, much like the mourning it voices, and without the resolution of which postauthoritarian societies might face an unprecedented abyss of depression, barely masked underneath the triumphant neoliberal parade” (*The Untimely* 229). Compelled to write, vacillating between the tensions mentioned by Avelar, in both cases, the authors chose testimony as the most appropriate expression of their narratives. These are not stories of leaders or heroes, instead they depict mostly daily life and practices within militant organizations rather than major historic events, and in doing so, offer views that are quite often excluded from more traditional academic histories. In this sense, both narratives vie for a place within the “space of political struggle” (Jelin) that is the memory of the period. These narratives are repetitive, fragmented, sometimes contradictory, they are not designed to become bestsellers, stories of resistance neatly packaged into glossy narratives. On the contrary, they reveal the authors’ need to narrate their own stories, both to reaffirm their identities as ex-militants and former protagonists as well as to address a past that resists resolution.

At the same time, it is also interesting to look at what is *not* narrated. Though their testimonies appear to be straightforward accounts of personal experiences, it is notable that both Narzole and Robles present stories that could be considered morally
unproblematic. For instance, there is, for the most part, an absence of violence. Both receive arms training, but neither talks about having used their weapon. Neither is imprisoned nor speaks under torture. Neither knowingly betrays a friend or fellow militant. Robles ventures that the reason she can tell her story is precisely because she was lucky enough to have been spared the most traumatic effects of what was taking place around her. She reveals, “En lo personal aún me asombra haber salido indemne en todo sentido de esa experiencia. No estuve presa, jamás fui torturada, no se murió en mis brazos ningún compañero. [...] Tal vez es esa suerte la que me anima a contarlo” (32).

As a perejil, given important but basic tasks, she is relatively removed from the most brutal actions carried out by the organization. And as she admits, perhaps her particular experience facilitates not only the retelling but allows a certain nostalgic, idealized and somewhat abstract vision of this past. Quite possibly it is this relative removal from the most brutal violence that allows her to emphasize only the innocence and good intentions of perejiles like herself and avoid undertaking a more difficult critical analysis of her experience. Although Narzole seems quite dedicated to the use of arms and is eager to assume this responsibility (“Era la primera vez que empuñaba un arma y sentí una extraña sensación de euforia,” 62), nowhere in the book does he ever actually narrate being involved in any act of revolutionary violence. This leads to the question of who can tell their story and what can be narrated.

Interestingly enough, in the prologue to Perejiles, Santiago Garaño and Werner Pertot make the following observation, referring to Robles by her militant pseudonym: “María puede contar su historia porque no se quebró, porque no se vendió, porque tuvo

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37 There is one exception to this. Robles narrates an incident in which she and several militants had to escape the police in a car, all the while firing their weapons. Her weapon immediately jams and she is unable to fire (134).
una línea de coherencia política que siguió en el peronismo (siempre crítica del
menemismo). No todos sus compañeros pueden exhibir una línea de coherencia ni
resistir una autobiografía tan sincera” (9). There is a sense that certain stories are morally
permissible and others perhaps less so. The possibility of narration is guided by a degree
of coherence, the consistent defense of certain ideals and unchanging beliefs. There is an
implicit value and superiority in not having “cracked” under pressure, not having given
away names or information under torture, not having betrayed one’s struggle for a
comfortable position in the social class once considered “the enemy” and not having
supported ex-president Carlos Menem’s neoliberal agenda during the 1990s.

The dispute for memories of the past is also shaped by one’s own capacity to
remember. For Robles, there is a distinct difference between “memoria voluntaria” and
“memoria involuntaria,” or voluntary and involuntary memory. According to her
account, one can control through “memoria voluntaria” one’s memories and past, as if
able to choose what memories to have on hand:

el recuerdo que cada uno tiene sobre los mismos hechos muy pocas veces
coincide... Tal vez se podría hablar de una memoria voluntaria que es racional y
podemos tener a mano en cualquier momento y una memoria involuntaria que
irrumpe en nuestra vida como una ráfaga desde un lugar en el que se
comprometen las emociones más profundas. (78)

This would be shaped, in her case, by a tendency to privilege the good over the bad,
positive over negative. It is also what she attempts in her portrayal of the perejiles, in her
subtle aim to eclipse their image as fanatics (at least in the eyes of some) with one of
patriotic heroes (as cited above, 80). In an interesting reversal, Robles states that she has
lived her life as she remembers it, a subtle difference from remembering her life as she
has lived it:
Esta vida que he vivido la he vivido como la recuerdo y esas son las memorias que quiero rescatar. [...] Esto es simplemente un testimonio, una manera de no perder los recuerdos, una manera de no olvidar a gente muy querida, una manera de reivindicar purezas, entregas y revoluciones casi posibles. (79)

And while her work may be, as she calls it, “simplemente un testimonio,” “una pequeña historia,” it is also deliberately structured, stopping short of any political evaluation or critical considerations of her actions or decisions in the past. While she does critique the Montonero leadership—especially with respect to what she sees as a betrayal during the 1990s—the gaps in her memory prevent her from taking greater critical distance.

Narzole, on the other hand, offers a reflection of the period, a description of events that shows little evidence of having changed since the period in question. Writing under his militant pseudonym, from “within” his militant subjectivity, the language he uses, his political explanations, his appropriation and repetition of the PRT-ERP’s position on events are highly reminiscent of the 1970s. He largely leaves out any difference of opinion or reflections that may have emerged in the interim decades. There is only one instance in which Narzole even comes close to questioning his militant organization. Near the end of the book, he and his family, for a series of reasons, find themselves without a safe place to live. Following party orders, and after a great deal of hard work, they finally secure a suitable but precarious living situation, dependent on the generosity of others sympathetic to the cause. However, no sooner have they managed this than the PRT-ERP orders them to leave the country, abandoning the people who have just helped them out. Narzole, revealing his frustration, stops short, however, from directly criticizing the PRT-ERP, stating simply: “No es que dudara, pero estaba confundido” (190). This is the closest he ever comes to questioning the rationale behind orders.
It is clear that in attempting to address the past from a particular present, Robles and Narzole are guided by different impulses. Robles is at once attempting to restore memory and reconstruct her past yet at the same time, finds this is an impossible task. She experiences an inability to recall certain things, perhaps forgotten because of her tendency “de recordar sólo las cosas buenas que me suceden” (15). In Robles’ work, there seems to be a constant tension between what she reveals and what she wishes to portray. Her narration is in part shaped by desire, the desire to capture all that she feels was lost, the people, ideals, spirit, alternative futures. In her words, “Esto es simplemente un testimonio, una manera de no perder los recuerdos, una manera de no olvidar a gente muy querida, una manera de reivindicar purezas, entregas y revoluciones casi posibles” (78-79). Narzole, on the other hand, largely ignores the interim years, reconstructing a discourse steeped in language reminiscent of 1970s militancy. His work reveals the strength of his adherence to the PRT-ERP and to the discourse of the period. Narzole’s work especially demonstrates an impulse to create an overarching, all-encompassing narrative, without room for doubts, not unlike historical and political readings of their situation by militants in the 1970s. Perhaps it could be suggested that while Robles work, written in the wake of the events of the 1990s and the 2001 economic crisis, represents a contribution to the “counter-memory” of the period, as defined by Lipsitz, Narzole, writing several years later, during a period of much greater acceptance and integration of the demands of human rights organizations and 1970s leftist militancy in general on the part of the government and society in general, does not experience the same need for denunciation.
**Novel reality**

In contrast to the testimonies by Robles and Narzole, *Recuerdo de la muerte* (1984) by Miguel Bonasso is perhaps the most experimental of the “narratives of militancy” published to date. It is also, as stated previously, notable for its early appearance, very shortly after Argentina transitioned from dictatorship to democracy, during a period in which the perpetrators of the human rights crimes that Bonasso describes still had some degree of influence.\(^{38}\) Not only because Bonasso’s work, which he refers to as a “novela-real” or “realidad-novelada,” resembles Walsh’s “non-fiction novel,” but also because the work itself is traversed by the tensions between reality and fiction that play themselves out in a constant counterpoint in his work. Amar Sánchez, in her analysis of Walsh, comments, “El género [de la no ficción] se juega en el cruce de dos imposibilidades: la de mostrarse como una ficción, puesto que los hechos ocurrieron y el lector lo sabe y, por otra parte, la imposibilidad de mostrarse como un espejo fiel de los hechos” (18-19). In fact in his use of two alternate terms, Bonasso’s own categorization of his work is ambiguous. One implies that the novel and perhaps literature or fiction prevails, the other, presents it as a reflection of reality. Throughout the work, these two “impossibilities” are in constant contact. What is clear, however, is that Bonasso positions himself as a successor to Walsh. Like Walsh, Bonasso was a journalist and a Montonero. He not only refers to Walsh as “mi maestro” but also makes repeated references to him and several of his works throughout the text. Beyond the direct references, however, there are particular aspects of the text, stylistic and otherwise, that are evocative of New Journalism in general and Walsh’s style in particular.

\(^{38}\) The 1987 “carapintada” uprising is one example of this. Though the military was generally unpopular by that time, they still held sway in some circles of power.
However, *Recuerdo* is at the same time marked much more strongly by a strictly literary tradition. As we will see, Bonasso chooses to vary from Walsh’s blend of genres in significant ways, reflecting distinct preoccupations and privileging the creation of a narrative of memory over denunciation.

Genres, in Tzvetan Todorov’s view, are a product of both particular historical movements and “discursive realities” which are not limited to a specific moment in time (19). As a product of ideology, a given society will privilege the production of certain genres over others. Particularly interesting, therefore, are moments of generic instability, moments of transition or tension between genres. Thomas O. Beebee, author of *The Ideology of Genre* (1994) comments:

As a form of ideology, genre is also never fully identical with itself, nor are texts fully identical with their genres. Furthermore, if genre is a form of ideology, then the struggle against or the deviations from genre are ideological struggles. Jameson locates literature outside the constraints of genre; I locate it in those texts where the battle is most intense, where the generic classification of a text determines its meaning(s) and exposes its ideology. (19)

It would be logical therefore, that the appearance of ambiguous and hybrid forms, texts marked by the tensions that define them, would take place at moments of ideological crisis. Rodolfo Walsh’s creation of the non-fiction novel, characterized by this tension between genres, could be considered one such moment. Its reappearance as represented by Bonasso’s *Recuerdo*, represents another stage in its evolution in Latin American literature.

Bonasso’s book is divided into three parts, the first entitled “Primera temporada en el infierno,” followed by the second and third seasons, likely in reference to Arthur
Rimbaud’s *Une saison en enfer* (1873). Though *Recuerdo* weaves together several stories, the main focus is on protagonist Jaime Dri, a Peronist politician and member of the Montoneros. The book follows Dri through his detention and time as a prisoner, during which he has essentially been “disappeared.” The first “season in hell” documents his time in the ESMA, one of the most infamous clandestine detention centers run by the Argentine Navy. In the second part of the book, Dri is handed over to the Army which transfers him to a small, clandestine and rather strange detention center in the countryside. Here, prisoners are not chained down and generally not tortured physically, though, as Dri soon discovers, the psychological pressure is intense and there is a thin line between remaining a loyal Montonero and passing over to the other side as many of his fellow prisoners seem to have done. While Dri is held captive, a fellow Montonero and prisoner, known as Tucho, is sent to Mexico by the Army on an operative designed to capture the remaining Montonero leadership, which has escaped to Mexico, by using Tucho as “bait.” The lives of Tucho’s wife and son, as well as Dri and the other prisoners, are held as guarantees he will carry out this mission. Tucho is therefore forced to choose between party loyalty and his own family while Dri and the others wait in terror. Finally, during the “last season” Dri has been once again transferred to the ESMA from where he eventually escapes.

The story is preceded by an “Epílogo a manera de prólogo” and followed by two epilogues. The prologue narrates an episode chronologically posterior to Dri’s saga, setting the book up as a “flashback,” while the first of the two epilogues, “Crónica final,”

39 Incidentally, *Une saison en enfer* is also ambiguous with respect to narrative genre. A poem in prose, it melds traits of autobiography and literature fused with religious references. C. A. Hackett in *Rimbaud: A Critical Introduction* (1981) comments: “*Une saison en enfer* can be read as a self-contained narration, with a beginning, a middle and an end, as a work of art complete in itself; but it does not fit neatly into any definite genre. It defies classification” (86).
narrates an episode from the same period. The second, “Paredón y después,” was added several years after the book’s initial publication and reflects on the real-life events that took place in the interim. Additionally, interspersed into the main narrative, Bonasso includes a series of short chapters entitled “Lejanías” which contain reflections linked to other moments in Dri’s life, his youth or the death of his father, for instance. These chapters are also, however, associated with important moments of Argentine history and especially the history of Peronism. They allow Bonasso to elaborate on chronologically diverse moments but also to emphasize the parallels between “un segmento en la vida de un hombre y un pueblo” (435). In one of these chapters, he includes the following reflection:

Como el niño aquél de la parábola de San Agustín, que simulaba meter todo el mar en un pozo de arena, yo quise también encajar a través del ventanuco de las ‘Lejanías’ ese océano de acontecimientos que solemos llamar ‘una época’. Y, como era de esperar, sólo puedo presentar unas pocas postales, sin aparente ligazón entre sí. Escombros que remueve la memoria. (397)

Within this heterogeneous structure, Bonasso combines fiction and non-fiction strategies through a variety of means including the use of multiple voices, abundant literary references, extensive use of metaphors and dialogue as well as intertextuality, incorporating documents such as reproductions of victims’ testimonies, newspaper articles and organization communiqués (135-144, for instance).

In his journalistic emphasis on details, subtle irony, and heterogeneous, non-chronological structure, Bonasso’s style resembles that of Walsh. The two authors also employ similar narrators, narrators that know more than the characters, using foreshadowing, at times very subtly, to create a degree of suspense. In both cases, the narrators give the reader clues about events to come. For instance, in *Operación masacre*
Walsh writes, “Carranza va desarmado. Se dejará arrestar sin resistencia. Se dejará matar como un chico, sin un solo movimiento de rebeldía. Pidiendo inútilmente clemencia hasta el balazo final” (35) and then returns to the present in which Carranza gets off a bus, unaware of his impending death. Bonasso uses a similar technique at times. For example, near the beginning of the book, the protagonist’s father is in the Plaza de Mayo: “Miró distraído las consabidas palomas que ilustraban todos los libros escolares y a las que se exhibía como símbolo de civismo [...]. Ignoraba que otra clase de pájaros iban a surcar ese mismo día de 1955 el cielo de la Capital” (32). The experience of the bombing of the Plaza leaves the protagonist’s father in a state of shock and he takes so long to return home that his family assumes he must have died. When he does eventually appear (dying shortly after returning home), the narrator again reveals more than the characters themselves know: “Al abrazar a su padre, Jaime, un muchacho de trece años, estaba lejos de imaginar que veintidós años después sus hijos también lo darían a él por muerto” (40). Bonasso, like Walsh, moves constantly back and forth in time, hinting at future events, imbuing them with a certain degree of fatality.

In some ways, the book has a similar structure to Operación masacre. Both begin with a prologue presenting a later event in the story’s chronology which then leads into a flashback structure, from present to past. In Walsh’s case, it is six months earlier while in Recuerdo, it is a little over a year (January, 1979 to December 1977). Events are “shown” to the reader rather than “explained.” Bonasso’s book opens with one group of men hunting another in Rome: “Manuel no se llamaba Manuel; era en realidad el Teniente de Navío Miguel Angel Benazzi. Tampoco el fusil que desarmaba en aquel residence romano era un fusil destinado a la caza mayor, salvo que, por una curiosa
licencia poética, incluyamos dentro de ese deporte la caza del hombre” (11). The opening also suggests a play between reality and appearances; Manuel is not a real name, the gun, although passed off as a hunting accessory, is not what it appears to be. The uninitiated reader is given few clues as to the identity of the characters in question until several pages into the book when it is revealed that Manuel “era uno de los primeros oficiales de inteligencia que ingresaron al Grupo en 1976” (18) and is working for the Argentine government. Several pages later we learn that his “prey” is one of “treinta de los hombres más buscados por la dictadura” (20). In this way, as in Operación masacre, the reader is pulled into the plot with only a partial and, at first, less than coherent picture of the events in question, similar to the partial knowledge of the characters regarding the events they are involved in. Additionally, Walsh and Bonasso both appear as characters in their own works, journalists who are involved, perhaps even reluctantly, in eventually denouncing through their works events that they are made aware of. In Recuerdo, for instance, (the character) Bonasso makes the following suggestion:

—Vos tendrías que escribir esta historia—propuso Bonasso.
Tucho se quedó pensativo. Luego admitió.
—Sí, debería escribirla. (227)

In the end, however, it is Bonasso himself who writes the story.

One of the problems both Bonasso and Walsh encounter when chronicling real life events is the problem of an ending. Both authors add additional prologues or epilogues to later editions, in an attempt to account for additional events that unfolded after the initial publication of their respective works. In Bonasso’s case, this takes the form of a second epilogue entitled “Paredón y después: De como la vida continuó este libro más allá de su pretendida ‘Crónica final.’” In it, Bonasso explains “Las novelas
basadas en hechos reales tienen una incómoda ventaja sobre las de ficción: no se acaban nunca. No, al menos, hasta que se mueren todos sus personajes. Hasta que se clausura la época que los parió y renace como historia” (447). The story continues, events refuse to conform to a comfortable resolution appropriate for a novel. In fact, Bonasso describes this discovery quite vividly in one of the epilogues: “En febrero de 1984 viajamos a Europa cargando los originales y comenzamos a confirmar, traumáticamente, que lo que traíamos en el bolso no era una novela, un universo cerrado, un objeto inerte que se anima cuando el lector lo abre y lo resucita, sino materia viva y cambiante, dispuesta a producir nuevos hechos al margen de sus progenitores” (465-466). The events not only exceeded the book, but the book itself also began to have an effect on events. As historian Gabrielle Spiegel points out, “texts both mirror and generate social realities” (77) and this certainly holds true in the case of Recuerdo. Despite its many literary qualities, Bonasso reveals in this second epilogue, that Recuerdo “fue usado y abusado en la esfera judicial. Para bien o para mal, de una manera o de otra, estuvo presente en casi todos los juicios vinculados con Montoneros y la represión clandestina” (466).

If Recuerdo attempts to present itself as a reflection, mirroring reality and therefore aiming to conceal its own constructed nature, it is also traversed at the same time by an abundance of metaphors and other rhetorical figures, a heavy reliance on poetic description and a web of literary influences. Stylistically speaking, Recuerdo is closer to the novel than to journalistic writing. Critic Isabelle Bleton notes what she refers to as the double referentiality of Bonasso’s text, both internal and external: “La référence externe est constituée par la corrélation entre texte et documents réels, texte et savoir historique du lecteur, et la référence interne par la manière dont les faits sont
représentés et créent des résonnances fictionnelles, convoquant chez le lecteur des references litteraires” (142). And indeed, the tension between testimony and novel, reality and fiction is inscribed in the text from the very beginning. A small paragraph in homage to Manuel Buendía, a Mexican journalist, friend of Bonasso who had helped him with aspects of the book, opens the book, preceding the main text and alludes to his assassination. “Lo puse como personaje en este libro” declares Bonasso (8). From memoriam to character, the blend of registers, of the interior and exterior worlds of the book begins here. This tension is also evident in a certain inconsistency as to the extent of the often omniscient narrator’s knowledge. At times, the narrator is constrained—as in Walsh—by available sources and left to hypothesize about possible motives or actions of characters when no source is available. The narrator, for instance, is not sure what happened to Jaime’s father after the historic bombing of the Plaza de Mayo. There is a period of days for which he cannot account, having no witness or knowledge of the events that took place. “Es conjeturable que...” begins the narrator, giving a hypothesis as to what happened during those days. At other times however, characters’ dreams and soliloquized reflections are clearly invented and certain elements, such as death, are given anthropomorphic qualities and a character-like presence at certain points in the work: “La Muerte entra callada en la enfermería y se sienta discretamente en un ángulo de la cama” (325). At other points, the threat is something less defined and more ominous. As Tucho walks through Mexico, under “un cielo de apocalipsis” his surroundings are described in almost surreal terms: “El monstruo ocupada todo el entorno. Respiraba fuego. Trasegaba el vaho negruzco del torrente metálico. Parpadeaba verde y rojo en los
One of the most notable aspects of literariness Bonasso incorporates into his narrative is the high degree of intertextuality and the abundance of literary references that pepper the text. The book opens with a quote from Francisco de Quevedo, from which Bonasso derives the book’s title, and later includes references to Saint Augustine, Cervantes and Shakespeare, among others. While a series of references are tied to these canonical European authors, another group seems to refer to a specifically Argentine literary tradition including W.H. Hudson, Macedonio Fernández, Roberto Arlt and, of course, Walsh. Many of these references are cursory, quite often only consisting of a passing mention of a particular author or work. For instance, in one scene Montonero leader Rodolfo Galimberti is conversing with Bonasso, who appears as a character at various points in the book, and says to him, “Me estás mirando como a un personaje de novela, hijo de puta. Yo siempre dije que vos vas a ser nuestro Malraux” (209).

Malraux, in fact, can be considered representative of a third series of references that are associated with war literature or prison narratives and include Miguel Hernández, G.K. Chesterton and Julius Fucik. Beyond the mere mention of names, Bonasso is clearly attempting to inscribe both his book as well as the segment of history he narrates, into a literary tradition. For instance, in narrating the protagonist’s father’s experience of the 1955 coup, Bonasso writes: “La Plaza de Mayo, espacio inaugural del peronismo el 17 de octubre de 1945, se había convertido ahora en el campo de Agramante donde quedaría
prefigurada su primera caída. Como en una tragedia griega cada persona fue ocupando su lugar” (36). Peronism is imbued with mythological, epic and Biblical references. Constant attempts are made to convert the particular into the universal, to give the narrative a weight and significance that transcend the specific historical moment.

This indulgence in literary references, the desire to locate the text in a particular tradition is in some ways contradictory to New Journalism’s characteristic opposition to “literature.” Amar Sánchez explains: “La adopción de formas no canonizadas implica ya una toma de posición frente a la literatura como institución” (33). Walsh even when writing “non-fiction novels,” believed as he once explained in an interview with Ricardo Piglia: “la denuncia traducida al arte de la novela se vuelve inofensiva” (Un oscuro día 63). Yet Bonasso is notably less critical of the novel and “literariness” in this sense than Walsh. In fact, it seems that Bonasso has deliberately chosen to privilege the aspect of novel over that of denunciation. He explains in one of the epilogues: “No es por azar, tampoco, que asumió la forma novelística. La narración muestra, no demuestra. La novela permite desenterrar ciertos arcanos que a veces se niegan a salir dentro de las pautas más racionales de la crónica histórica, el testimonio de denuncia o el documento político” (443-4). Bonasso opposes the novel to the historical chronicle, testimony and the political document as more “rational” forms. According to Amar Sánchez:

Si la ficcionalidad –como se dijo—es un efecto del relato en el que los códigos narrativos organizan los diferentes registros testimoniales, el género elabora una ecuación particular en la que construir, narrar y ficcionalizar—de algún modo interdependientes y equivalentes—permiten acceder a la verdad de los hechos: en el relato puede desarrollarse una verdad que la información periodística u oficial ignora, modifica u oculta. (40)
This is the type of “truth” that Bonasso is clearly seeking. Between denunciation and the art of the novel, if Walsh leans towards the first, Bonasso favors the second, privileging persuasiveness through “less rational” means.

Finally, Recuerdo, as announced in its title, is a book about memory. The title makes reference to a sonnet by Francisco de Quevedo, “Miré los muros de la patria mía” (1613), a line of which Bonasso uses as an epigraph: “...Y no hallé cosa en que poner los ojos / que no fuese recuerdo de la muerte” (9). However, according to Bonasso in the book itself, “Recuerdo de la muerte no se llama así por casualidad, ni porque me emocionó el hermoso poema de Quevedo. Es un libro contra el olvido” (443). Memory is seen as the antidote to forgetting and the type of memory involved, for Bonasso, is in some ways a moral memory, clearly vindicating the memory of the “disappeared” and those who remained loyal to the Montonero organization. The author writes: “El olvido tiene un ejército de seguidores. La memoria, en cambio, debe contentarse con un reducido grupo de irregulares entre los que florece, cada tanto, algún espontáneo del toreo” (448). He tells a story that is censored both by the dictatorship (which would rather make it disappear) but furthermore, a story censored by the Montonero leadership, which Bonasso attacks in his portrayal of them. According to Amar Sánchez, non-fiction “reafirma y apuesta a una antigua e irreemplazable función que tiene la literatura desde la épica (y que la distingue del periodismo): la de rescatar e impedir el olvido de los hechos que deben perdurar como inolvidables” (51, italics are mine). Through his writing, his unique combination of fiction and non-fiction, Bonasso attempts to do just that.

From individual memory and identity to a debate between multiple voices and the possibility of community, narratives like those of Robles, Narzole and Bonasso
represent the multiple and distinct responses to the convergence of narrative, memory and militancy. If, as Ricoeur suggests, history is guided by veracity while memory by fidelity (135), both are necessary for a true reflection and understanding of the past. In the next chapter, we will take a closer look at questions of militant identity, the process of integrating a collective organization and the effects it may have on individual selfhood as reflected through narrative.
Chapter 2: Militant Identity and Selfhood

“El revolucionario deja de pertenecerse a sí mismo, su vida es de la Revolución y ella, la Revolución, decide, casi como un dios devorador de hombres, quién vivirá y quién no. Y mientras se vive, la intensidad es de tal magnitud que bien vale la pena el riesgo; exuberantes, alegres pero también frenéticos, los minutos del guerrillero son febriles. Por lo tanto, inolvidables.”

-Sergio Bufano

“Luchar contra el individualismo [se trata] de cambiar radicalmente las opiniones, los gustos, y afinidades sobre las cosas más corrientes y las actitudes más cotidianas frente a todos los que nos rodean. En una palabra, de desintegrar nuestra personalidad individualista y volverla a integrar, hacerla de nuevo sobre ejes proletarios revolucionarios” (Ortolani 95), instructs the pamphlet “Moral y Proletarización” (1972), a manual outlining appropriate behavior for PRT-ERP militants, distributed by the PRT in their publication La Gaviota Blindada. 41 “La construcción de una nueva moral, se pone de relieve como una herramienta tan valiosa e imprescindible para la victoria revolucionaria como la lucha ideológica, económica y política-militar” (94). The PRT-ERP’s publication is a clear example of many of the expectations placed on militants and beliefs regarding appropriate behavior, established and reinforced by organizations such as the PRT-ERP and Montoneros.42 As described in the epigraph to this chapter, the Revolution was often considered all-encompassing, to the extent that even individual

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41 “Moral” was written inside the Rawson Prison, in the southern province of Chubut, Argentina and published in 1972 attributed to Julio Parra, a pseudonym for Luis Ortolani. It was republished in the Summer 2004/2005 issue of the journal Políticas de la memoria.

42 In this case, and not unusually, the model is associated with proletarian values, following a preconceived and idealized notion of “workers.” “Moral y Proletarización” warns militants that they must guard against “individualism” in all aspects of their lives and also provides them with an ideal model to follow. “Las auténticas virtudes proletarias” include a long list of desired traits: “humildad, sencillez, paciencia, espíritu de sacrificio, amplitud de criterios, decisión, tenacidad, deseos de aprender, generosidad, amor al prójimo” (Ortolani 95). According to “Moral,” the ideal militant will strive to emulate these qualities, not only in their own lives but also “en el campo particular de la pareja, la familia, la crianza de los hijos” (99).
behaviors, modes of thinking and personal relationships were subject to scrutiny. The Revolution dominated everything, from the most personal to the most public. According to anthropologist Ana Guglielmucci:

Una serie de normas y pautas tácitas abarcaron desde una moral estricta sobre las conductas personales hasta una concepción general acerca de lo que significaba ser un ‘buen militante.’ [...] Con predominio del siguiente criterio: ‘cuanto más de acuerdo con los criterios del grupo actuaba uno, más comprometido estaba y, en consecuencia, mejor militante era.’ De esta forma, el militante debía responder a la ‘orga’ por la totalidad de su existencia. (82)

Militants were quite often judged through their compliance with these behaviors. A “good militant” exhibited the desired traits. This type of model inevitably generated tensions between the individual and the collective, as the former attempted to conform to a model considered suitable for the latter.

Indeed, in the process of formation of any group, tensions arise between the individual and the collective, a struggle between autonomy and social compromise. In the case of armed organizations, these issues could easily become questions of life and death and the practices and beliefs of members were often crucial to group survival. By many accounts, integrating armed organizations deeply marked the subjectivity of militants involved. Becoming a leftist militant in 1970s Argentina was not just something one did, it was something one was in every aspect of one’s life, at every moment. It implied a change of lifestyle and, at least in theory, a change in the deepest aspects of one’s personality. Texts like “Moral” played an important role in setting out guidelines for appropriate revolutionary behavior and thought, establishing a model or ideal of revolutionary subjectivity and reinforcing an idea of the hero.\(^{43}\) The ultimate

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\(^{43}\) The editors of Políticas de la memoria (2004/05), in which this document was republished, emphasize the significance of this pamphlet as “un documento cuya importancia ha sido resaltada en infinidad de testimonios y que constituye una pieza distintiva de la programática política de las organizaciones armadas,
question here, and one that has been addressed in many different forms, is the fine balance between individual needs and liberties, and those of the group as well as the impact of this tension on individual subjectivities. To what degree and up to what point can an individual renounce certain freedoms to integrate a group? What impact did these beliefs and the attempts to live up to this ideal have upon the subjectivity of militants involved? And how are these tensions reflected in “narratives of militancy” and other later texts?

**In theory**

In order to begin to find answers, it may be helpful to first take a closer look at the ideas and practices in question. Marxist theorists, Antonio Gramsci, Georg Lukács and Jean-Paul Sartre, standard inclusions in the “leftist (militant) library” of the 1960s and 70s, have considered these issues. Additionally, Alain Badiou has more recently revisited the concept of the “new man,” an ideal that held sway at various moments throughout the twentieth century and which was particularly influential in Guevara’s writings, among others. To begin with, Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) explored the relationship between the individual and the collective, the latter, for him, represented by the Communist Party. According to Lukács, the ceding of individual freedoms is an absolute necessity, a condition of existence for the collective. It is only through this individual sacrifice that true freedom, collective freedom can be realized. For Lukács, renouncing individual freedom:

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en tanto se propone como instrumento para la constitución de los perfiles subjetivos del militante revolucionario” (76). It is mentioned in *La voluntad*, for instance, discussed in more depth later in this chapter (vol. 2, 115).
implies the conscious subordination of the self to that collective will that is destined to bring real freedom into being and that today is earnestly taking the first arduous, uncertain and groping steps towards it. This conscious collective will is the Communist Party. And like every aspect of a dialectical process it too contains the seeds, admittedly in a primitive, abstract and undeveloped form, of the determinants appropriate to the goal it is destined to achieve: namely freedom in solidarity. (315-316)

The solution Lukács offers for the Communist Party is one of discipline, organization and awareness on the part of party members: “Its closely-knit organization with its resulting iron discipline and its demand for total commitment tears away the reified veils that cloud the consciousness of the individual in capitalist society” (339). For Lukács, the gap between individual existence and the collective will can only be bridged through strict discipline and order. These are worthy sacrifices, however, given that the aims, if achieved, are considered much greater than any single individual.

Described in Gramscian terms, the two forces in tension are the “individual man” and the “collective man.” Gramsci recognizes the problem of achieving integration, of incorporating the former into the latter. For him, it is the task and responsibility of the State to constantly seek more evolved “types of humanity” to educate and elaborate more highly evolved masses, morally suited to the economic means of production. Gramsci in a section of *Cuadernos de la cárcel* entitled “El hombre individuo y el hombre masa” (1929-32) differentiates between types of collectives, contrasting the unorganized mass acting on something akin to animal instinct, to the well-ordered, disciplined assembly. While the former is associated with obvious dangers, without the latter,

no sería posible el ejército, por ejemplo; ni serían posibles los sacrificios inauditos que saben realizar grupos humanos bien disciplinados en ocasiones determinadas, cuando su sentido de responsabilidad social se despierta lúcidamente por la percepción inmediata del peligro común, y el porvenir se presenta como más importante que el presente. (282)
Gramsci sees a positive force in this type of collective. The question is again one of discipline, but in crucial situations, this is stimulated by a sense of urgency in the face of a perceived threat.

Jean-Paul Sartre also discusses these tensions in the first volume of his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960). Sartre had revolutionary groups in mind when he defined the “group” as the negation of the “collective,” the latter consisting of a series of individuals as opposed to the former which is constituted through praxis. While the group is born out of and constantly threatening to dissolve back into the collective, its struggle is dialectic: on the one hand, it moves towards the “practical realization of a concrete objective” and at the same time resists its residues as a collective (which will always threaten to dissolve it). In struggling against the latter, Sartre argues, it must attempt to eliminate all otherness within itself, imposing violence and discipline. Of course, it can never fully do this since to do so would be to become a single organism like an individual. This tension is at the heart of what Sartre calls a “detotalized totality”: each individual is neither totally the group nor completely transcendent. This tension is the root of a conflictive process, one that gives rise to a type of identity in flux. Sartre goes on to identify several types of groups, each characterized by praxis designed to resist their dissolution back into the collective. One of these first characteristics is the “pledge” or “oath” which formally or informally marks a renunciation of individual freedom in order to form part of the group. This is the bond that ties them together and transitions them into what Sartre refers to as a “reflexive but permanent” state. To enter this brotherhood, each individual “dies” as an isolated individual to be reborn as an “individuo común” and together construct their own community.
In *El siglo* (2005), Alain Badiou in discussing the twentieth century obsession with the ideal of the “new man,” an intermediary between the individual and the collective and a model for the revolutionary subject, also comments on this process of conversion. Badiou argues that as the individual begins to feel that their revolutionary commitment far transcends anything else in terms of importance, they come to believe that the only way to fully realize their potential is by participating in something greater than themselves, in this case the revolutionary organization. The collective for Badiou, similar to Sartre’s “group,” therefore becomes the only thing of real significance. Badiou explains:

> puesto que el ser del sujeto es la falta-en-ser, un individuo sólo puede contar con atribuirse algún real subjetivo si se disipa en un proyecto que lo supera. Por eso, el ‘nosotros’ construido en ese proyecto es lo único verdadera y subjetivamente real para el individuo que lo sostiene. El individuo, en rigor, no es nada. El sujeto es el hombre nuevo, que se ubica en el punto de la falta-en-sí. Por lo tanto, el individuo es en su esencia misma la nada que debe disiparse en un nosotros-sujeto. (132)

When a real commitment has been made, the individual integrates the collective and the latter takes on more importance than the former. What concerns the collective gradually takes precedence over all else as the “we” begins to supersede the “I.” And on conflictive issues the choice comes down to one between integrating and complying with the needs or wishes of the collective or losing everything, given that the individual no longer has independent value.

*In practice*

In most leftist militant organizations, a series of practices were associated with this “subordination of the self,” reinforcing it at various levels. These included the use of
pseudonyms, adherence to a code of conduct, either implicit or explicit, and readings of specific texts, such as those described above. In addition to providing a theoretical basis for group practices, the readings often provided models of heroism and encouraged a sense of brotherhood. It was partially through these and other practices that militant organizations tended to function as a kind of totalizing force, and in this respect, as we will presently see, shared some similarities with other structures such as the Christian church.

As mentioned, one of the most obvious manifestations of the subordination of the individual to the collective, in the context of leftist militancy in Argentina, was the adoption of a pseudonym, a nom de guerre. A common practice of the Montoneros and the PRT-ERP as well as other armed organizations, this was often one of the first steps of integrating a group and assuming a role as a member of the organization. The most obvious reasons for using pseudonyms were related to security, veiling one’s real identity, even from fellow militants, to limit incriminating details to a minimum in the case of the capture or torture of one of the members of the group. However, there were also more powerful and significant effects of adopting a new name, or, in the case of going fully “clandestine,” a whole new identity. According to anthropologist Mariana Tello Weiss, “un cambio de nombre, como ritual de institución, manifiesta un cambio radical de vida, consagrada a la causa” (32). It represented a kind of baptism for the new life, a ritual to mark a beginning. A new name also permitted the freedom of a new identity, a specifically militant identity and opened up the possibility of future promise, a utopian blank slate. For former Montonero Roberto Perdía, “También implicaba fundir la historia e identidad personal en lo colectivo, pasar del ‘yo’ al ‘nosotros’ de la
organización. Constituía el acto voluntario de subordinarse, integrándose, como individuo al conjunto organizado y rebautizarse como tal” (cited in Amorín 189). Perdía highlights this process of subordination and transformation. This could be even more extreme in the cases in which militants were required to live clandestinely, for a variety of reasons, mostly security-related. In this case, militants were often required not only to change their names, but to invent fictitious pasts, regularly use false documents and even alter their physical appearance. As Tello Weiss points out,

La acción de la clandestinidad sobre la identidad tendía a alterar todos los elementos sobre los cuales se pudiera identificar a un individuo, desde los nombres hasta las características físicas, desde las historias personales y los grupos de pertenencia hasta sus otros atributos, como títulos, curriculum, y documentación en general. (32)

This radical change, erasing any original identifying characteristics and adopting an entirely new identity marked an extreme and required a constant effort to consistently maintain the new identity and to attempt to forget the previous one which could be a liability under torture.

The construction and reinforcement of a collective identity through some degree of discipline, as alluded to by both Gramsci and Lukács, was an important aspect of group cohesion. Group identity was formed not only through an appeal to commitment and belief in the cause at hand, but was constantly being reaffirmed through adherence to a social and moral code of behavior, reinforced when necessary through disciplinary action. Moral codes, such as “Moral y Proletarización,” tended to have a homogenizing effect on the behavior and even the thinking of members who voluntarily altered their conduct to conform to expectations (Carnovale “Moral” 2). One’s submission to the rules was often interpreted as a sign of commitment to the group and to the goal of
revolution: “El militante estaría realmente comprometido cuando dejara de priorizar sus
sentimientos particulares” (Guglielmucci 83). Historian Vera Carnovale, in a study on
moral codes and discipline within the PRT-ERP, traces this back to the influence of
previously existing practices on the political left:

En lo que respecta a la homogeneización encontramos prácticas bastante
extendidas ya en la Izquierda Tradicional: escuela de formación de cuadros,
lectura conjunta de la prensa y materiales partidarios, a los que se suma, dado el
carácter armado de la organización, el entrenamiento militar. En cuanto al
disciplinamiento –instrumentado generalmente a partir de prácticas punitivas–
podemos decir que encontró en la proletarización y en un control de hecho de la
vida íntima de los militantes sus ejes vertebradores. (“Moral” 6)

Though Carnovale’s work deals specifically with the PRT-ERP, much of what she says is
equally applicable to other groups such as the Montoneros. It was not just a militant’s
participation in activities pertaining to the group that was evaluated. Militants were
constantly required to demonstrate their continued allegiance through their actions,
decisions and opinions. In fact, in many cases, the personal became political in the most
extreme sense possible (Guglielmucci 80), discipline and the determination of acceptable
practices blurring the limits between the two.44

The education and “schooling” of aspiring militants and members of the armed
organizations mentioned by Carnovale was another of the practices commonly adopted
by leftist militant organizations as a method of “homogenization.” As mentioned above,
it was routine practice both in the PRT-ERP and the Montoneros as well as numerous
other organizations to assign specific texts for reading, especially to new or aspiring

44 Jeremy Varon, author of Bringing the War Home (2004), a comparison of the West German Red Army
Faction and the American Weatherman, makes similar observations in connection with the militant groups
addressed in his study. Within these groups, “armed struggle was to function as the chief medium for
forging new, revolutionary subjects who transcended their prior socialization and dedicated themselves
totally to political struggle” (9). Revolutionary violence “provided a way for them to establish the
authenticity of their commitments, to assert their dissident or ‘revolutionary’ identities, and to live what
they considered meaningful and engaged lives” (75).
militants, which were then discussed in small groups. These tended to be historical and political texts which could include, depending on the political orientation of a specific militant organization, texts by Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Mao, Sartre, Guevara or Perón, to name a few. An organization usually had its own publication as well such as *El Descamisado* (Montoneros) or *El combatiente* (PRT), for instance, which also became required reading. These readings and discussions, oriented the political thought of new members and formed a base to unify political understanding and solidify support. Organization publications often reported on heroic acts carried out by other militants. These representations also functioned as models of desired or heroic behavior. Eulogistic prose praising “fallen” compañeros hinted at the important role in “History” that militants could occupy through their participation and deeds. This was echoed in the custom of naming new groups after militants who were considered to have died heroically. In this way, texts represented not only a model but also the promise of future memorialization.

Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s influence in this respect is incomparable, and only in part due to his contemporaneity. While Guevara represented a model for countless militants, he was also aware of both the power of writing his own experiences as well as the importance of texts. His strong commitment to literature, however, highlights the potential of reading to not only reinforce the ethics of revolutionary war, but also be the trigger or the symptom of emotional struggle. Ricardo Piglia explores the intersection between reading and militancy in his essay on Guevara included in *El último lector* (2005). He depicts Guevara as an avid reader who counted books among his most valued possessions, indispensable despite the extra weight they entailed while in the field. Guevara, after hours of marching and despite the strenuous demands of his life as a
guerrilla, found time alone to read. For Piglia this reflects “una tensión entre la vida social y algo propio y privado, una tensión entre la vida política y la vida personal. Y la lectura es la metáfora de esa diferencia” (107). In Piglia’s analysis, reading has several different functions. It is a process of interpreting experience and deciphering meaning. It is both mirror and refuge. At the same time, and perhaps most importantly, literature serves as an ethical model, an exemplum. Piglia cites a wonderful passage in which Guevara finds a model for a noble, dignified death in his readings of Jack London. Guevara writes, in Pasajes de la guerra revolucionaria (1963): “Inmediatamente, me puse a pensar en la mejor manera de morir en ese minuto en que parecía todo perdido. Recordé un viejo cuento de Jack London, donde el protagonista, apoyado en un tronco de árbol, se dispone a acabar con dignidad su vida, al saberse condenado a muerte por congelación, en las zonas heladas de Alaska” (12). According to Piglia, “un lector de ficciones [...] encuentra en una escena leída un modelo ético, un modelo de conducta, la forma pura de la experiencia” (105). While Guevara a model for his actions in fiction, many militants in turn found in Guevara and his writings a model for their actions.

One of the most attractive elements of Guevara’s figure as a leader and a hero is the high degree of coherence between theory and practice. He was commonly seen as embodying his own beliefs and this perception strengthened his image as a revolutionary hero. In La guerra de guerrillas (1960), Guevara speaks of the model that leaders must offer. According to him, the guerrillero must be strong, resilient, willing to risk his life, selfless, untiring, quiet yet a good companion. “Debe tener una conducta moral que lo acredite como verdadero sacerdote de la reforma que pretende. A la austeridad obligada por difíciles condiciones de la guerra debe sumar la austeridad nacida de un rígido
autocontrol [...]. El soldado guerrillero debe ser un asceta” (39). An “asceta” and an “ángel tutelar,” an example of the “new man” and a model human being. Nor must the militant be afraid of suffering or sacrifice. In fact, as mentioned above, he must be ready to commit his life to the cause, to value the group and the revolution over his individual life. According to Piglia, “Aparece ahí por primera vez la idea de la construcción de una ética de sacrificio con el modelo de la guerrilla, la construcción de una subjetividad nueva. Y es lo que parece haber quedado como condición de la victoria y de la formación de un cuadro político” (131). It is through his writing that Guevara creates and reinforces this model.

It is also important to remember, however, that with such a model, falling short was almost inevitable. Carnovale explains the flip-side to this model of a hero:

Esta ética del sacrificio tiene sus fisuras. La heroicidad propuesta impone un modelo ‘imposible de alcanzar’ y las conflictividades y disidencias, dudas y temores avanzan en las subjetividades militantes a la par de la confrontación entre imperativos partidarios y experiencia individual. Sin embargo no hay negociación posible. Desde las tramas discursivas partidarias, y desde las prácticas que éstas imponen - y en las que otras nociones ligadas a la jerarquía y la disciplina juegan un rol determinante - sólo hay espacio para la oposición héroe-traidor/ héroe-cobardes/ héroe-quebrado. (“Jugarse” 15)

This was a model based on absolutes. Failure to fulfill the ideal could be interpreted as a reluctance to make sacrifices and therefore individual weakness due to a lack of discipline or commitment. In short, there was always room to improve, always the potential to engage in the common practice of “autocritica” or “self-critiquing,” in which a militant was to “objectively” evaluate themselves before other members of their

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45 Given this dichotomy, it is not surprising that the themes of betrayal and even cowardice appear repeatedly in “narratives of militancy.” Betrayal is a major theme running through Miguel Bonasso’s Recuerdos de la muerte, analyzed in Chapter 1 for instance, and cowardice appears as a theme in Sergio Pollastri’s Las violetas del paraíso. For more on the topic of betrayal, see Ana Longoni’s book Traiciones: La figura del traidor en los relatos acerca de los sobrevivientes de la represión (2007).
organization, indicating specific improvements they could make in their own behavior in order to greater emulate the “new man” ideal.

The religious overtones in Guevara’s writing and his ethics of sacrifice hint at an important element of militant collective organization. As Piglia remarks with respect to Guevara, “Es notable la metáfora cristiana del sacrificio que acompaña este tipo de construcción política” (135). In fact, the political-military organization tended to act as a kind of totalizing force not entirely unlike other structures such as the traditional family, the Christian church and the army.\footnote{In the case of the Montoneros, for instance, this is not surprising given their initial ties to Catholicism. For more on the origins of this group, see Montoneros: El mito de sus 12 fundadores (2005) by Lucas Lanusse.} All three have the potential of providing a sense of belonging and offer the security of a place within a hierarchy or established structure. To differing degrees they can also be considered to operate according to a specific moral code or set of rules, either implicit or explicit, and reinforced through discipline.

Carnovale, citing Horacio Tarcus, points out that this type of organization “‘se distingue por ser una forma colectiva cuyos miembros están unidos por un vínculo total’, vínculo que representa el único lazo social de sus integrantes. Hacia dentro del grupo hay identidad pura, hacia fuera sólo hay lugar para la diferencia absoluta y la amenaza” (“Jugarse” 16). As Perdía explains, the organization served as the framework for a new life: “Este conjunto, la organización, sería el instrumento para transformar la historia, el instrumento mediador entre la teoría y la práctica. [...] De hecho, la organización, más que un frío organigrama o estructura institucional era todo un sistema de vínculos y
valores dentro del cual se ordenaba y organizaba la vida personal y familiar” (cited in Amorín 189).  

Entering into this brotherhood of sorts, or “hermandad de sangre” as Guevara refers to it, was in itself a process. A militant had to be proven trustworthy and committed. This often involved making individual sacrifices in order to demonstrate this commitment. A group’s existence depended on the integrity, dedication and survival of its members. In turn, the survival of individual members of the group, depended on the security the group provided. Conformity with the rules and privileging group needs over individual ones could be a question of life or death. The process of carrying out revolution and working towards embodying the ideals of the “new man,” necessarily implied a profound shift in a given militant’s subjective identity. Traversing hardships together, especially in situations of life and death, such as armed militancy or war, lent a sense of urgency to matters and provided the grounds for fast-forming friendships as well as the intensity described by Sergio Bufano in the epigraph to this chapter.

The tension between the individual subject and collective experience gives rise to a series of questions with regards to representation. What is the most suitable way to

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47 Not surprisingly Sigmund Freud, in fact, as early as 1922 also described similarities in these structures in writing about the contrast between individual and social or group psychology. In Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (1922), Freud develops a comparison between the Christian church and the army, which in many ways is organizationally similar to leftist militant groups. In fact, Freud observes that “the socialistic tie seems to be succeeding” in supplanting the religious one (51). In his view, both are “artificial groups” requiring “an external force to keep them together” (41). Freud describes these groups as being held together by “libido” which he defines in the same text as “the energy [...] of those instincts which have to do with all that may be comprised under the word ‘love’” (37), this can include “friendship and love for humanity in general, and also devotion to concrete objects and to abstract ideas” (38). He also highlights “the individual’s lack of freedom in a group” (45). And finally, with respect to the similarities between the church, family and the army, he comments: “It is not without a deep reason that the similarity between the Christian community and a family is invoked, and that believers call themselves brothers in Christ, that is, brothers through the love which Christ has for them. There is no doubt that the tie which unites each individual with Christ is also the cause of the tie which unites them with one another. The like holds good of an army” (43).
capture and reflect this collective experience? How can stories of 70s militancy be narrated through individual and personal experiences while at the same time emphasizing the atmosphere of a shared passion and energy? We will now look at two works in particular and how these tensions are played out in narrative: *La voluntad* (1997; 1998) by Eduardo Anguita and Martín Caparrós and *Las violetas del paraíso* (2003) by Sergio Pollastri. The former represents a unique attempt to seek a narrative resolution to this tension, incorporating numerous individual stories into an overall historical arch in an effort to generate a collective narrative and emphasize that aspect of the experience. The work is characterized by a multiplicity of voices and weaves together the stories of more than twenty ex-militants. *Las violetas del paraíso*, on the other hand, while using similar techniques to narrate overlapping and simultaneous stories in multiple voices, focuses on the experiences of one protagonist in particular and his inner conflict as he undergoes the process of becoming a fully integrated member of a leftist militant organization. Many of the author’s experiences, shared through his autobiographical protagonist, closely resemble the process of transition described in the first part of this chapter.

_A single narrative of collective experience_

*La voluntad: Una historia de la militancia revolucionaria en la Argentina* (1997; 1998) by ex-militants Eduardo Anguita and Martín Caparrós represents an attempt to write a collective “narrative of militancy,” recounting the stories of numerous militants and reflecting the shared nature of their struggle. The work is particularly significant in that it is one of the first to feature leftist militants as active protagonists of this history.

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48 Eduardo Anguita was a member of the PRT-ERP and a political prisoner from 1973-84. Martín Caparrós was a member of the Montoneros while in high school followed by several years in exile in Paris.
As the authors reveal in the prologue, material was garnered from hours of individual interviews and is based on the accounts of approximately two dozen protagonists, ex-militants from various organizations. The authors converted these oral, first-person testimonies into a written, third-person account. Originally published in three volumes, corresponding to the periods 1966-73, 1973-76, and 1976-78, *La voluntad* is an ambitious project to narrate the events of more than a decade through episodes in the lives of its protagonists as well as “la tentativa de ofrecer un panorama general de la cultura y la vida en esos años” (vol. 1, 17). The materials integrated into the text are heterogeneous and include fictionalizations based on the interviews; extensive excerpts from period documents, including newspaper articles, speeches and communiqués issued by militant groups; photographs of the protagonists and numerous other details designed to evoke the period. All of these materials are combined in a kind of textual collage of alternating fragments and episodes of the protagonists’ various stories. As we will see, in an effort to blend a great variety of individual stories into a single coherent “history,” Anguita and Caparrós employ techniques and modes of narration that, in effect, renounce certain aspects of the protagonists’ individuality in order to incorporate them into a collective narrative. This process reproduces and represents the written equivalent of the process of homogenization and unification described in the first part of this chapter, as individuals renounced (in this case the depiction of) aspects of themselves to integrate the militant collective. Therefore, the fundamental tensions between the individual and collective that in many cases characterized the experience of militancy, play themselves out at the most basic narrative level in *La voluntad*, in the authors’ attempt to represent the history of leftist revolutionary militancy.
Anguita and Caparrós’ selection of two dozen protagonists is an indication of their desire to represent the wide range of people involved in leftist political militancy at the time. They include students, Peronists, Communists, Catholics, atheists and union leaders who belong to different political tendencies and come from distinct backgrounds. A diverse number of organizations are represented in the choice of protagonists and include the Montoneros and PRT-ERP, as well as lesser-known organizations such as the FAR (Revolutionary Armed Forces), MRP (Peronist Revolutionary Movement) and FAP (Peronist Armed Forces). It also includes protagonists from leftist organizations that did not directly support armed struggle, such as the Communist Party and the Third World Priests Movement.49 In the authors’ own words, “Elegimos las historias que la componen para que ofrecieran un cuadro de las corrientes y espacios sociales de la época” (vol. 1, 17). The stories are individual yet through their multiplicity, presuppose a representation of a “whole”; they represent multiple tendencies and beliefs yet are united in the overall narrative of “leftist revolutionary militancy.” However, the objective to narrate history through a multiplicity of voices is frustrated, at least in part, by a certain homogenization of these same voices. Despite an emphasis on dialogue and on depicting specific episodes and anecdotes from the lives of those involved, the three-volume work is dominated by one narrative voice, which, while it serves to unify the distinct and heterogeneous fragments of the book and help evoke the ambiance of the period, it also has the effect of eliminating otherness, erasing differences in background, economic and

49 It should be noted that despite this diversity, the majority of protagonists are of middle class origins and from Buenos Aires capital or province. Most of the protagonists are familiar to Argentine readers as either prominent intellectuals or publicly recognized figures in politics or other fields. Although the majority of the protagonists are based on extensive interviews, a few such as Carlos Goldenberg or Sergio Karakachoff, were actually killed or “disappeared,” their deaths narrated in the course of the story.
social class and even gender as all protagonists tend to use the same type of language. This essentially results in a leveling out of the variety of voices incorporated.

Additionally, all protagonists are initially presented in a similar, rather standardized manner. Details provided when they are first introduced into the story include their name; date of birth; hometown or province; background including political affiliation and occupation of their parents and occasionally grandparents; their own occupation and political affiliations; siblings and relatives and social class. In the introductory paragraphs integrating each new character into the book, this information is almost invariably included, often followed by a short family or childhood anecdote. For instance:

Eduardo Sigal había nacido en San Juan el 17 de marzo de 1950. Su padre, José, era hijo de un inmigrante judío ucraniano y anarquista: uno de los primeros técnicos en ascensores que hubo en Buenos Aires hasta que, hacia 1930, se instaló como comerciante en la ciudad cuyana. [...] Los Sigal eran militantes del Partido Comunista desde sus años en la Universidad, y en su casa se hablaba todo el tiempo de política. (vol. 1, 39)

Alejandro Ferreyra había nacido en 1948. Era el mayor de cinco varones y cuatro mujeres, hijo de una familia que, pocas décadas antes, había llegado a tener un millón doscientas mil hectáreas de tierra en la provincia. Su bisabuelo, don Ceferino Ferreyra, era el rival encarnizado de Carlos Pellegrini en los primeros tiempos del turf argentino. [...] Alejandro creció en el Cerro de las Rosas, el barrio elegante de la ciudad, pero en los recreos de la primaria jugaba con sus amigos a Batista y Fidel Castro, una versión del poliladron adaptada a las noticias que llegaban de la Sierra Maestra. (vol. 1, 281-282)

As sociologist Alejandra Oberti and historian Roberto Pittaluga point out in their book *Memorias en montaje* (2006), this uniform presentation and narration of protagonists has a further effect, attributing a somewhat misleading degree of coherency and logic to the protagonists themselves. “Los sujetos de esta historia, que no son otros que los del relato, se presentan como sujetos íntegros, fieles a sus ideales. Constituyen un conjunto conciso
y coherente donde no están ausentes las tonalidades afectivas, de modo tal que los sentidos de la narración religan ese pasado con nuestro presente de una manera moralizante” (74). Anguita and Caparrós, in converting hours of interviews with the protagonists into one unified narrative, sacrificed certain elements of individuality in favor of a consistent and coherent collective narrative. Loosely speaking, this process is similar to the one described by Sartre earlier in this chapter wherein each individual renounces certain freedoms, allowing their first person oral narratives to be rewritten, to some degree, in order for their story to become part of this colossal collective project. Just as Sartre’s “group” was in constant threat of dissolving, this impressive project exhibits some fissures in the authors’ efforts to achieve a totality.

This tension is most clearly illustrated in the epilogue where Anguita and Caparrós gave their interviewees several pages in which to include their own thoughts: “les propusimos que escribieran un breve balance de sus experiencias” (vol. 3, 466). This brief section at the end of the three-volume work is in stark contrast with the unified narrative that precedes it. Here, the real multitude of voices reveals differences that are effectively marginalized and excluded from the main body of the work. It is here that we find a wide variety of voices and views about militancy, almost as numerous and varied as their histories. Additionally, the participants show a preference for different registers and styles to reflect what they choose to express. Daniel Egea, for instance, reveals how much things have changed for him: “Hoy, en 1998, hay mucha tristeza en la gente, muchas preguntas sin respuestas, y además yo siento que tengo una vida distinta, acomodada a las circunstancias y a una realidad que, a veces, me parece que ha girado casi 180 grados” (vol. 3, 482). In contrast, Daniel De Santis, in language strongly
reminiscent of 1970s militancy, speaks of his political involvement, continuing where the main narrative of the book leaves off and making it clear that his struggle is an unbroken one, from past to present (vol. 3, 477-479). Horacio González, on the other hand, briefly reflects on the effects of the years he spent in exile (vol. 3, 491). It is evident that at least for some, the experience of having participated in the project helped them to begin redefining or reestablishing their identities, to reappropriate their militancy. Susana Sanz, for instance, admits that the process of telling her story allowed her to see herself and fellow militants in a more objective light, “reconociendo virtudes y defectos, aciertos y errores, grandezas y miserias” (vol. 3, 493). While Envar El Kadri asserts that the authors “nos han rescatado del olvido, nos han devuelto una identidad medio perdida, confundida entre tantos charletas, arrepentidos, avergonzados. Confundida también por la insidiosa teoría de los dos demonios, que pretende culpabilizar a víctimas y victimarios” (vol. 3, 488), Manuel Justo Gaggero confesses “un relativo complejo de culpa por haber sobrevivido” (vol. 3, 489) and Luis Venecio who very humbly and perhaps unintentionally perpetuates the idea that the “best” died when he asks for forgiveness from the 30,000 disappeared for not being as courageous as them (vol. 3, 500).

It is also in the epilogue that the authors reveal: “La convención narrativa de La voluntad era cruel: no había forma de incluir las opiniones actuales de sus protagonistas – o de sus autores” in the main body of the work (vol. 3, 466). Beyond an implicit recognition of the homogenization of voices already discussed, it also implies a pretense of “raw” objectivity. La voluntad is presented from the beginning as an objective reconstruction, a “history” and Anguita and Caparrós insist in a note preceding the
narrative: “Todo lo que se relata aquí es, hasta donde sabemos, cierto, y ha sido
chequeado cuidadosamente. Sólo fueron cambiados unos pocos nombres, en situaciones
que no se alteran por eso. El resto es historia” (vol. 1, 17). Detailed, chronologically
organized accounts of “historical” events are interspersed with personal memories of the
period. Events are fragmented and follow one another with no more justification than
chronology. At times, coherence and narrative continuity are sacrificed in the search for
completeness; the multiple and overwhelming details of personal and historical events
leave little room for the construction of narrative, evoking in its multiple layers, the
thickness of historical time. There is little synthesis and even less analysis as cultural,
social and political histories intersect, the abundance of historical details occasionally
hindering the advance of the narration. This predominance of history reveals a desire to
achieve a kind of encyclopedic totality, to capture every aspect of the period down to the
most minimal of details. As an effort to present an “objective” historical narrative
through a novelized representation of the protagonists, based on first-person interviews,
La voluntad could also be considered an attempt to bridge the distance between the
“objective academic history” held up as a model by Beatriz Sarlo and subjective
memories of personal experiences, such as those captured in the interviews the book is
based on. However, La voluntad, indeed like any history, despite the authors’ efforts to
present it as an objective account, is not simply a presentation of “facts.” As Oberti and
Pittaluga state, “La ilusión de que el balance está al final y no en cada una de las
afirmaciones del texto es un efecto narrativo, pero en su imposibilidad, tiene
consecuencias políticas” (76). This surface objectivity in reality masks the book’s own
discursive construction.
Despite these tensions, the most powerful unifying force at work in this narrative is announced in the title: *la voluntad*, a combination of willingness, desire and determination. Beyond the simple chronology of events, this is the one thing that *all* the protagonists, members of diverse groups with differing political views and beliefs regarding tactics, strategies, objectives, have in common. It is also a clear indication of what the authors wished to capture from the period. This is emphasized in a note preceding the main text, when they describe the work as “la historia de una cantidad de personas, muy distintas entre sí, que decidieron arriesgar todo lo que tenían para construir una sociedad que consideraban más justa” (vol. 1, 17). Beyond specific political ideas and historical events, beyond the subtleties and differences between the protagonists, the intention is to recapture *voluntad*. This is also depicted in the representation of moments that reflect a collective spirit, mass rallies and demonstrations, for instance. These are moments which are historically remarkable or memorable for their sheer numbers and often associated with a sense of triumph or euphoria, a spirit of celebration. The participants are often portrayed as aware of the significance of the moment, enthusiastic to be participating in and even creating, “history.”

Volume 2, for instance, begins with the scene of Héctor Cámpora’s inauguration to the presidency in May of 1973:

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No hacía una hora que el nuevo presidente había recibido la banda de manos del general Alejandro Águstin Lanusse, y en la plaza el júbilo aumentaba. Las pancartas de los sindicatos quedaban chicas al lado de los enormes carteles de FAR, Montoneros y Juventud Peronista. Nadie sabía cuánta gente había, pero muchos hablaban de cientos de miles [...]. En todos los rincones gente se abrazaba, se felicitaba, se emocionaba, festejaba sin terminar de creer lo que estaba viviendo. Horacio González, Nicolás Casullo, Elvio Vitali, Graciela
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50 Similarly, there is a preoccupation with being left out of history. This is expressed repeatedly. For instance, Graciela Daleo “se quejaba de que se estaban quedando afuera de la historia” (vol. 1, 326) and “Luis Venecio tampoco sabía bien qué quería hacer: tenía, a veces, la sensación de que a su alrededor pasaban cosas importantes y no quería quedarse afuera” (vol. 1, 474).
Daleo, Luis Venecio, Mercedes Depino, Emiliano Costa, Miguel Bonasso estaban entre ellos. (vol. 2, 15)

All of those named in this last sentence are protagonists of *La voluntad*. These scenes emphasize public space over private and the role of the collective over the individual.

These are moments in which many of the various political currents and divergent groups tend to come together, with a great number of the protagonists in the book present, places where the various individual stories briefly coincide, forming a certain unity.

At the same time, within the individual stories, the process of transformation key to the integration of a militant organization, as described earlier in this chapter, is also present. For instance, in one case, protagonist Alejandro Ferreyra, a medical student in Córdoba, inspired by Guevara’s death, becomes more interested in politics and eventually contacts “el Gringo” Mena, a leader in the PRT, expressing his desire to form part of the organization. Anguita and Caparrós describe Ferreyra’s transition from “bourgeois” student to full-fledged militant as follows:

Para fines de octubre, Alejandro empezó a usar una campera de lona, a repartir *El Combatiente* en la puerta de ciertas fábricas y a poner unas cajas que al explotar lanzaban volantes firmados ‘Comando Che Guevara.’ Cuando llegó mayo de 1969, Ferreyra ya se había familiarizado con la lectura de Lenin, del Che y hasta de Trotsky. Sabía armar y desarmar una pistola 45 y, cuando salían a practicar tiro, muchos se impresionaban con su puntería. A esa altura ya era un miembro pleno del PRT, conocía de técnicas conspirativas y una de las reglas dentro de la organización era ocultar la identidad: entonces empezó a llamarse Lucas. (vol. 1, 285)

The protagonist’s transformation involves changes in his physical appearance (substituting a simple canvas jacket for his “campera de antílope entallada,” for instance), the completion of his first tasks as a “militant hopeful,” recommended readings, eventual training in the use of weapons and the adoption of a pseudonym. Due to the overwhelming number of details and historical facts, the sheer volume of materials
condensed into *La voluntad*, there is little room left to develop the protagonists in depth.

This means that instances of this transformation are depicted, but perhaps not to the same extent as in other narratives, such as *Las violetas del paraíso*, which we will presently turn to.

According to ex-militant Envar El Kadri, another of the participants in this project, Caparrós’ proposal as he understood it was “hacer un libro contando por qué lucharon, pero no desde el discurso heroico, sino desde la vida misma, chiquita, grande, no importa, la que vivieron” (vol. 3, 485). In the effort to avoid a “discurso heroico,” aspects of the daily lives of protagonists as well as their emotions are narrated, not just “major” historical events. Anguita and Caparrós express their desire to narrate “como era la vida cotidiana, los intereses, odios, convicciones, objetivos, miedos y satisfacciones de los que eligieron ese camino” (vol. 1, 17). This is echoed by Graciela Daleo in her own words included in the epilogue:

> Cada acto, aun el más doméstico, tenía que ver con la Revolución, con la construcción del hombre nuevo. Porque todo es político. Pusimos ideologías, comportamientos y sentimientos bajo la lupa del ámbito para discutirlos con y por el ‘nosotros’. El ‘nosotros’ predominando sobre el ‘yo’. Ni totalitarismos ni despersonalización, sino compromiso y ser parte de una identidad colectiva. (Así lo contamos desde fines de los 60 hasta gran parte de los 70. El ‘yo’ en los relatos reaparece cuando la dictadura había pulverizado parte de las organizaciones populares. El ‘nosotros’ se mantuvo en quienes resistieron escapando al cerco del miedo). (vol. 3, 472)

In her description, Daleo captures the sentiment expressed by Sergio Bufano in the epigraph to this chapter. Militancy, as reflected in many of these narratives, exceeded the political, touching every aspect of the protagonists’ personal lives as well. *La voluntad*, in its bid to recover this “nosotros” succeeds in capturing the daily life of militants and the period in almost excessive detail, including aspects of the process of transition from
individual to member of a collective and the tensions involved. On another level, and perhaps without deliberately doing so, it reflects the inherent tension described by Guevara, Badiou and others, in the authors’ choices of how to convert two dozen oral testimonial accounts into a single unified narrative.

Narrative transformation

Like La voluntad, Sergio Pollastri’s Las violetas del paraíso: Una historia montonera (2003) addresses the tension between individual identity and the demands of the collective. Although Pollastri uses similar techniques as those employed in La voluntad, alternating fragments of multiple story lines and novelizing the experience of militancy, Las violetas focuses mainly on Pollastri’s autobiographical story, tracing the metamorphosis of the protagonist as he exchanges his personal voice as an aspiring poet for the dream of guerrilla hero. This process closely reflects the transformation described by Badiou in El siglo. As Pollastri’s protagonist aspires to emulate the ideal “new man” and become a member of the Montoneros, his militancy slowly takes precedence over everything else in his life as he gradually renounces aspects of his individuality.

Las violetas is structured around the protagonist’s evolution as a militant, allowing the reader the possibility of following in this process. Overall, the book is divided into three parts, each containing a key moment in the transformation of identity for the protagonist. Multiple and alternating story lines are subtly differentiated from each other through specific traits such as the presence of particular characters or the consistent use of a given verb tense (past, present, future) or text type (bold, caps, italics). In alternating various story lines, the strands of past and present, personal and political
are woven together, creating a multi-layered text, similar in some ways to the technique used in *La voluntad*. In choosing to novelize his story, Pollastri privileges showing over telling, putting the protagonist’s experiences directly into play for the reader rather than explaining them. For example, shortly after Gustavo begins his militancy as an aspiring Montonero, he has a short love affair with Estela who turns out to be a militant of some rank within the ERP. Though short-lived, the relationship serves an important role in revealing the points of contention between the two groups through the couple’s discussions:

–¿En serio que vos creés que el gobierno peronista va a salvar al pueblo? ¿Con Lastiri a la cabeza? –ironiza Estela.
–No seas chicanera. Vos sabés que es provisorio y que Perón ganará las elecciones por muerte.
–Mirá che –suspira hastiada del tema–: para llevar adelante la revolución hay que crear conciencia de lucha, y eso no se logra con las cartas que te prestan oligarcas y burgueses. Firmenich está llevando a los montos a traicionar la sangre de sus muertos. Por algo las FAR no se les quieren unir.
–No digás zonceras, troska pelotuda. Primero, que las FAR ya están casi fusionadas con Montoneros, y, segundo, que por más que Perón lo exija, la Orga no larga los fierros. (78)

To some degree, therefore, the narration of Gustavo’s “education” as a militant, contextualizes the reasoning behind his decisions and demonstrates the influences of those around him. The use of the third-person narration serves to further emphasize the protagonist’s position as one character among many in a world he does not fully understand while the reader is privy to a more complete and more complex version of events.

One of the most obvious manifestations of *Las violetas* as a story of transformation is the protagonist’s changing name. His three names reflect his evolving subjectivity as his commitment to militancy increases. He begins as Gustavo, a student
who has moved from a northern province to the city of La Plata to attend university. It is
there he becomes more aware of the world around him, comes into contact with
revolutionary ideas and makes the decision to take up militancy. In Gustavo’s mind, he
faces the choice outlined by Vera Carnovale earlier in this chapter, the option of acting or
not acting, of potentially dying as a hero or revealing that he is, as he most fears, “a
coward at heart.” Gustavo contacts a group at his university. At the end of the first
section of the book, when he requests a transfer to a villa miseria or slum, thinking it will
perhaps offer him a more “genuine” revolutionary experience, he is advised for security
reasons to choose a nom de guerre.51 Inspired by Hermann Hesse’s novel Demian
(1919), he becomes Damián.52 Like his chosen name, based on a work of fiction that
explores the possibility of self realization and new beginnings, this new identity allows
the protagonist to entertain fantasies of becoming a model militant, an embodiment of the
“new man,” and strengthens his revolutionary resolve.53 As his militancy becomes
increasingly important, references to Gustavo grow less and less frequent and by the end
of the second part the completeness of this transition becomes clear: “él ya se sentía

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51 It was a common practice in many leftist organizations for members to have some degree of involvement
in local slums, often providing literacy classes as well as some degree of political activism. In Las violetas,
the Montoneros establish an “Unidad Básica” or base unit of their organization in the slum, hoping to
improve life for those living there and attract new members and supporters.

52 Demian: The Story of Emil Sinclair’s Youth (1919) by Hermann Hesse is a semi-autobiographical
Bildungsroman tracing the protagonist’s journey towards an understanding of self. It is set in the years
prior to World War I and ends during the war. The protagonist, Sinclair, is from a bourgeois family. His
friend, Max Demian, leads him on a journey of self realization and transformation. He introduces him,
among other things, to the play between two different worlds represented by the opposing forces of light
and dark, reality and illusion. Hesse also suggests that there is an important relationship between art and
individuality. In actual fact, there are many parallels between Pollastri’s book and that of Hesse.

53 Las Violetas like Demian is a “coming of age” story, narrating the protagonist’s loss of innocence.
Barely an adult, the protagonist is learning about arms and violence along with his first experiences of sex
and love. He has been trained to kill but has little experience with women. This irony is not lost on the
protagonist who wonders if it is even possible to reconcile the two, questioning if perhaps “quien elegía la
militancia revolucionaria debía resignarlo todo y convertirse en un espartano hasta la toma del poder”
(293).
Damián y casi había olvidado a Gustavo Ferrero” (263). This shift is followed by his official integration into the ranks of the Montoneros.

The protagonist’s second name change takes place in the book’s final section when he is wanted by the police and must go undercover. This time his new name is assigned to him by the organization along with a fictitious birth date. Unlike “Damián,” this name, “Juan Alberto” holds no special meaning or significance for him. In assuming this identity he transfers his photo to his new identity card and destroys the original, marking the moment with an informal ritual in which death and rebirth are alluded to: “se tomó tiempo para la ceremonia de suicidarse. Entre mate y mate, arrancó las hojas del DNI de Gustavo Ferrero y las dejó caer encendidas sobre el cenicero como pequeños paracaídas breves y naranjas” (296). This is the last identity he is to assume. Throughout this process, and the book itself, as his militancy demands more of him, he begins to renounce aspects of that which defined him as an individual. This successive change in names is merely the most direct reflection of the overall metamorphosis in his subjectivity.

The protagonist’s integration into the collective is accompanied by a struggle that represents one of the central tensions in Las violetas and exemplifies the incompatibility between Gustavo’s identity as an individual and the militant he wishes to become. His creativity or “inner poet” is seen as a fundamental part of his subjectivity. However, as his commitment to militancy grows, he is under increasing pressure to dedicate all his time to the collective good and the needs of the revolution. Individual activities such as writing poetry, songs or even reading non-relevant material are discouraged. In an attempt to reconcile his creative drive with his militancy, he reasons that they should not,
in fact, be incompatible: “extremar el esfuerzo en la lucha revolucionaria no debía
significar la despersonalización. El hombre nuevo no estaba en contradicción con su
poeta interior, sino con el individualista a quien el sistema había estimulado a
des comprometerse de la realidad” (301). But the differences between “poeta” and
“individualista” become increasingly difficult to distinguish and it is gradually made
clear that this conversion into the “new man” implies leaving behind his personal dreams,
replacing them with strictly disciplined behavior and a space barely big enough for
dreams of the revolution.

Faced with this conflict, Pollastri’s protagonist attempts to quash this aspect of
himself in order to become the “new man” he dreams of and in doing so, resorts to self-
censorship. This is most evident in one of the “narrative threads” that represents his
thoughts while on guard duty, distinguished through its use of italics. His mind wanders
as he reflects on his past, his compañeros, his imagined reactions to having to use his
gun. As the work progresses, self-censorship increases until he attempts to control even
his thoughts, avoiding anything that could be deemed counter-revolutionary. His voice as
an individual is gradually supplanted by language associated with militancy, by the
“official party line”: “Damián se preguntó si, en una de esas, el costo individual no
hubiese sido menor y el aporte a la causa más eficaz, militando como cantautor o desde
un título de abogado. En el acto se dio cuenta de que había sido un nuevo lapsus, y
maldijo su inmadurez e individualismo contrarrevolucionario” (286). Towards the end
of the book, these reflections disappear altogether, suggesting quite literally, the loss of
his voice as an individual, the triumph of the latter.
As in Guevara’s autobiographical writings, language and the interplay of texts play an important role both in Pollastri’s efforts to reflect the experiences of the protagonist and the period as well as in the narrative itself as the protagonist is directly influenced by contact with particular texts. One of these is a novel in verse by Uruguayan author Mario Benedetti called *El cumpleaños de Juan Ángel* (1971). While Damián is at a secret camp to receive arms training, a crucial step in his ascent as a militant and one that reflects increased militarization, he meets Tito, a fellow Montonero who lends him Benedetti’s book and strongly recommends he reads it. The book narrates “las reflexiones de un combatiente tupamaro el día de su cumpleaños” as he looks back on his life over various birthdays and reflects on his involvement in armed militancy. It echoes some of the tough dilemmas Damián faces and he comes to strongly identify with Benedetti’s protagonist. *El cumpleaños* becomes fundamentally associated with Damián’s struggle as he sees his situation reflected through literature. The book’s cover has been replaced with another less dangerous one with the title of *Las violetas del paraíso*, its significance reflected in the title of Pollastri’s book. Like Damián it is “undercover,” its appearance disguised, its name changed. His introduction to this work is reminiscent of an initiation in which Tito, who is more self-assured and more experienced than Damián, begins reading the poem aloud to him. Tito introduces Damián to a new world, a creative space permissible only because of its ties to militancy and a model for Damián’s future. Benedetti’s *El cumpleaños* fuses militancy and poetry,

54 Mario Benedetti was an author, prolific poet and leftist political activist. Following the 1973 coup in Uruguay, he spend years in exile in various countries.

55 The National Liberation Movement - Tupamaros, was a leftist armed militant group in Uruguay formed in the mid 1960s. It was quite active until severe government repression in the mid 1970s resulted in the imprisonment or exile of most members. The group was in many ways similar to the Montoneros.
echoing a long tradition of epic poetry, and suggests a possible compromise to the opposition between “arms” and “letters.”

If Damián’s name held echoes of Hesse’s coming of age novel, suggesting a gradual loss of innocence, Benedetti’s protagonist, whose nom de guerre is “Juan Angel,” hints at Damián’s future identity as “Juan Alberto.” The parallels between the two are numerous and this identification comes to be fundamental as Pollastri’s protagonist grapples with the more complex issues of his militancy: the value of an individual life versus the needs of the revolution, doubts he holds over the possibility of being able to pull the trigger if or when necessary, his fears of being discovered as a coward and fantasies of becoming a hero, and the possibility of accepting his own death. As his fantasies of militancy come into contact with a hard reality, Damián is forced to grapple with these questions. He wonders: “¿Y después, una vez a salvo, cómo respondería su sistema nervioso a la responsabilidad de haber dado muerte en nombre de la causa? ¿Con euforia revolucionaria? ¿Con sentimientos de culpa?” (200). This is echoed and highlighted in the few lines Pollastri chooses as an epigraph which are later repeated in the body of the text in the context of more extensive passages quoted from Benedetti’s poem:

...pero matar a un tipo [...] es una pruebita sin fantasía es todo lo contrario de una proeza... (202)

...cuando la muerte no es una cita / o un relato o una figura en blanco y negro [...] sólo entonces podés escrupulosamente desamar / y hasta franquear por primera vez cierta frontera / que parecía lejanísima... (203)

His fears are associated with the reality of killing, the harsh side of his revolutionary dreams. Nevertheless, it is actually Benedetti’s poetic fiction which echoes his fears and doubts, helping him to make sense of his experience and serving as a guide.
Having lost or severed ties with all around him outside his militancy, Benedetti’s poem comes to represent a last tie to creativity that quickly becomes taboo for Damián. As Damián’s commitment to militancy increases, he becomes distanced from who he was in the past, from Gustavo, the student and even Damián, the young revolutionary dreamer. He reflects: “El impulso de escribir poemas había sido devorado por la urgencia de los análisis ideológicos” (299). The desire to write poetry gives way to ideological analysis until finally the protagonist loses the poem, this last symbol of something tied to his subjectivity. This loss also, significantly, coincides with the final moment of transition in the protagonist’s identity, the moment that he first identifies himself as “Juan Alberto.” “Damián” is on a bus reading about Juan Angel’s thirty-fourth birthday by which time Juan Angel has become a “hardened” militant—“sus nervios tendones ligamentos y principios / funcionan con la misma precisión frente a un paisaje de niebla / que frente a una ráfaga de ametralladora” (376)—when the bus is stopped and passengers are subjected to a police check. The protagonist presents his new ID card and pronounces his new name. As he descends from the bus, reflecting that his “verso,” “verse/fiction,” has been successful with the police, he realizes he has, at the same moment, lost another “verse.” In his distracted descent, Las violetas was left lying on the floor where he had kicked it during the police check. This scene is definitive in suggesting the loss of his last tie to his creativity and selfhood.

If literature offers Damián solace through Benedetti’s poem, reflecting a familiar world back to him, the presence of yet another text has the inverse function. Pollastri’s careful use of language reflects the world he wishes to portray, as care is taken to reflect socio-economic as well as political differences through the use of different vocabulary
and registers. The inverse to Benedetti’s poem is a “narrative thread” that imitates the mainstream newspapers of the period. This “thread” is set off by the use of bold capital letters and almost invariably introduced in a formulaic way with “El diario dice…” Comparing the reports with news events of the period, they have an almost weekly regularity and as in La voluntad, they are a manner of making history “present,” recreating a sense of immediacy. These reports privilege an abstract, occasionally sensationalist and always brief, summary of that which is considered newsworthy such as protests, deaths, and episodes of violence. They generate a sensation of the immediacy of events, announced as they unfold, an insistent “present.” Like Benedetti’s poem, the newspapers reflect the protagonist’s world back to him. However in this case, it is not one that he recognizes as such. The language employed in the newspaper reports reveals a political position and interpretation of events in sharp contrast to Damián’s vision of militancy. Militants appear as “extremists,” “subversives,” and “terrorists,” for example:

DETUVIERON A EXTREMISTAS, dice el diario. Efectivos de la policía de la provincia de Buenos Aires efectuaron varios procedimientos antiextremistas. En La Plata dos terroristas fueron detenidos tras una espectacular persecución y tiroteo, y se efectuaron allanamientos donde se secuestró importante documentación y varios automóviles. (234)

There is also a sharp contrast between what the reader is presented through the narration of the lives of the militants, their work in the villa miseria, their hopes and ideals and their relationships and, on the other hand, their representation in text through mainstream media. These are further juxtaposed with the sporadic inclusion of quotes from leftist political publications such as El Descamisado (later El Peronista), internal Montonero bulletins and various fliers written or distributed by the militants. The discrepancy

56 Damián and his friends use language heavily weighted with 1970s slang and a vocabulary that reflects their leftist political allegiance, for instance, while the police and military use appropriately contrasting language.
between an event as Gustavo experiences it and a later official declaration he must print for the Montoneros describing that same event, demonstrates that the distance between representation and reality is at play throughout the political spectrum, right and left. All texts within the novel are constructs subject to political influence and particular interests and in their juxtaposition with reality as experienced by Gustavo, they reveal their constructed nature. It is through language and contrast that the relationship between representation and reality is put into question.

We find a similar tension between the protagonist’s idealization of “Che” Guevara as a hero and model, on the one hand, and his actual experiences, on the other. For Gustavo, as for many others, it is the dream of becoming the “hombre nuevo” of which Guevara spoke and of living in a future socialist utopia that motivates him. He truly believes that he is evolving and progressing. In fact, Gustavo is actually something of an anti-hero, constantly comparing himself to his ideal and always coming up short in his own mind. Guevara as a romantic figure and a martyr, stoic and courageous, is the subject of occasional indirect references, often in contrast with the protagonist who feels he is small and underdeveloped for his age, insecure about his capacity as a militant and awkward with women. Guevara is not, however, the only hero in the protagonist’s world. Perón, “the people,” and high-ranking Montoneros are all idealized in a similar manner. Gustavo’s vision of the Montonero leadership, for instance, depicts them as brave heroes, altruistic and superior human beings despite the fact that he questions many of the decisions that come down “from above.” This does not seem to interfere, however,

57 Tellingly, Guevara’s image appears as a subtle detail in several scenes, hinting at the contrast. In Gustavo’s youthful first encounters with a woman named Estela, “un enorme póster del Che” on the wall of her room provides a constant contrast between the protagonist’s perception of his own inadequacies and the image of valiant guerrilla hero (67). He is also present in the background of their first love-making scene (70).
with his admiration and his belief that they are somehow superior beings. At one point, after having been told of the possibility he may eventually be promoted to become a Montonero, he reflects, “¿Casi monto? ¿Tanto había progresado como ser humano para que ya estuvieses pensando en incorporarlo a los puestos más avanzados de la lucha?” (133). All of his heroes are figures he admires from a distance. As he comes into closer contact with them, fantasy invariably gives way to a more complex reality. Once he has officially become a Montonero himself, his vision of the leaders as heroes and superior beings comes into crisis:

Quizá, concluyó, debía aceptar que la orga no era una diosa inmaculada sino todo eso: los que fusilaron a Aramburu y los que tomaron la Calera; los que voltearon a Lanusse y también los que se desplomaban en discusiones cotidianas en las UB de El Progreso o La Unión; ese torbellino juvenil y generoso, tempranamente acostumbrado al gesto duro tras la promesa de un mundo más sano al alcance del fusil. (299)

However, by the time the protagonist reaches the point of seriously questioning his heroes, he also realizes that this heterogeneous collection of contradictions, his militancy and “la orga” are all that he has. His militancy has become his life.

As described by Sartre, the “pledge” into the group, is necessarily unidirectional. Having integrated the militant group, the only ways out are essentially betrayal or death. These are effectively the two options Pollastri’s protagonist faces at the end of the book. As Damián learns that his former best friend and fellow militant Adrián (Cabeza) is planning to abandon his militancy, Damián disobeys orders, perhaps for the first time, to meet with him. Cabeza, whose father has been tortured because of his son’s militancy, attempts to convince his friend that the struggle has been lost: “Nos estamos regalando, Gustavo—susurró, y Damián sintió que Cabeza acababa de dirigirse a otra persona. No tiene sentido perder la vida por los otros: yo quiero conservarla para poder dedicarme a
los otros, pero así vamos al muere totalmente al pedo” (411). Damián is jarred by the use of his former name which during their ensuing argument Cabeza reiterates, as if he were appealing to the logic of the protagonist’s former self. The views of the two are shown clearly. Cabeza can no longer justify his militancy while Damián sees his decision as cowardly. While Cabeza chooses one fate, another lies in wait for Damián. Shortly thereafter, the protagonist participates in a militant operation, the final account of which is only revealed through an “article” in the newspaper column. His death is announced in the last sentence of the novel, in a list of four “delincuentes subversivos,” using the last name he assumed: Juan Alberto Taggli.

The protagonist has lost his name, his identity, his youth and even his past. Stripped of all individuality, the only register of his death is “institutional” and brief at that, revealed solely through journalistic discourse in language typical of the dictatorship. In essence, his death is narrated by the regime and not the novel. Furthermore, the contrast between texts and genres is most apparent here. Between Benedetti’s poem, a source of solace and a symbol of individual creativity, and the newspaper, a very public and to some degree authoritative discourse, the latter literally has the last word. Although they are both revealed to be constructs, the two represent the tensions between fantasies of heroism and revolutionary aspirations, on the one hand, and the unsympathetic journalistic reflection of events, on the other. Contrasting in language, tone, content and political allegiances, neither completely represents the protagonist’s experiences. Rather they represent a tension that is constantly present throughout the work. And in the end, the novel, fiction, is left without a subject. The cadaver, under a false name, is the domain of the regime’s discourse. What begins as a triumphant story, the opening scene
of the novel depicting a euphoric multitude the day the popularly elected president Héctor Cámpora assumes the presidency, ends in a tragic and rather ambiguous manner. It is not the “cowardly” abandonment of the organization that Cabeza chooses, nor however is it the heroic revolutionary death envisioned in the protagonist’s fantasies. He dies a Montonero but has lost much in the process, including, among other things, his subjective identity.

In his blend of fiction and testimony, Pollastri attempts to engage the reader, putting into play the juxtaposition of different voices and texts and allowing the contrasts to become apparent. In this way, he echoes what Bonasso and Walsh, as well as Anguita and Caparrós attempt to do in different ways, showing rather than explaining their experiences. In this case, the aspect in question is the transition from individual to a member of the “group.” Through Pollastri’s use of characteristics associated with fiction and novelization, the transition, reflected in a variety of ways in the theoretical writings of Gramsci, Sartre and others mentioned earlier in this chapter, is depicted with an emphasis on the author’s personal and subjective experiences of the same process, ultimately highlighting another dimension of this complex process. In the next chapter, we will explore another of the tensions inherent to 1970s militancy, revolutionary violence, tracing an evolution in the ideas and arguments surrounding this contentious issue as well as an example of a “narrative of militancy” marked by memories of leftist violence.
Chapter 3: Memories of Revolutionary Violence

“Unless we think of revolutions merely as a series of dreams and epics, the time for analysis must succeed that of heroic memories.”

-Eric Hobsbawm

Al calor de ese sentimiento de repudio a la dictadura militar, muchos jóvenes y no jóvenes, mucha gente del pueblo, muchos compañeros querían incorporarse a la guerrilla. Era, cómo te diría, era como el escalón más alto. Como decía el Che, el escalón más alto era ser revolucionario, participar de la lucha armada. A un poeta, a un escritor, a un pintor, lo único que se le pedía era que dejara los pinceles para otro día y que empuñara un arma. (Cazadores)

This is how Envar El Kadri, former leader of the FAP (Peronist Armed Forces), describes the atmosphere of the late 1960s and early 1970s in an attempt to explain how he and others became involved in armed struggle. Kadri was one of more than a dozen participants in David Blaustein’s documentary film, Cazadores de utopías (1996), notable for being one of the first to challenge the image of leftist militants of the 1960s and 70s as depoliticized victims.\(^{58}\) The film was significant, in part, because it showed ex-militants reclaiming their political militancy and openly discussing their involvement in armed organizations.\(^ {59}\) Ex-militants were just beginning to speak out as such, and portrayals of the period tended to highlight youth, initiative, and passion. The topic of revolutionary violence is one of the most complex elements of “narratives of militancy” and one which is notably difficult to address in the present for the participants who were involved in armed struggle. Political violence, the training in and use of arms, undoubtedly had a profound effect on those involved, especially since militants of armed leftist organizations were often trained and prepared to kill or to die themselves. In

\(^{58}\) _Cazadores_ appeared one year before the first volume of Eduardo Anguita and Martín Caparrós’ _La Voluntad_ (1997) discussed in Chapter 2. Incidentally, Martín Caparrós was one of the participants in Blaustein’s film.

\(^{59}\) For a detailed analysis of the evolution in the image of ex-militants in the decades following the 1976-83 dictatorship, see the Introduction of the present work.
Cazadores, as well as many of the “narratives of militancy,” acts of revolutionary violence are discussed mostly in terms of adventure and the largely abstract defense of ideals. While actions, ranging from the theft of arms or money to the extreme of planting a bomb or carrying out an assassination, were performed by individuals who functioned as a part of a collective, responding to a carefully structured hierarchy, once this framework dissolved, they were left to reconcile their past actions to their own individual subjective identity, undergoing a major shift from a social justice framework to one of individual ethics. Given the complexity of the issues involved and the extreme nature of acts concerning life or death, it is interesting to look at how they surface in texts written by ex-militants. What position do they adopt with respect to the topic of violence, an aspect of armed militancy that they once embraced or at least, accepted? How do they incorporate past actions into a narrative about their lives? What do they choose to tell and how?

The vast majority of narratives, especially the earlier ones, reveal a difficulty in addressing the topic more concretely than Envar El Kadri does in Cazadores. This is likely, in part, because the political context of the 1980s and much of the 90s, as outlined in the Introduction, meant that many on the left felt compelled to defend past actions or simply remain silent, rather than speak openly of them. However, much has changed since the release of Blaustein’s film and more complex analyses have emerged. Of particular interest, in this respect, is the controversial debate initiated by the publication of a letter by philosopher and ex-militant Oscar del Barco (2004) in which he questioned, in retrospect, the actions of the armed left. While this epistolary debate is unlike the other texts explored in the present work, it triggered one of the most recent and most
extensive discussions regarding the topic of revolutionary violence and initiated a
dialogue on the topic among many ex-militants as well as members of the following
generation. In this chapter, we will therefore take a closer look at del Barco’s original
letter and the responses it elicited. Following this, we will explore José Amorín’s
*Montoneros: La buena historia* (2005), a personal narrative of his experiences as a
militant. Amorín’s account is significant in that he is one of the only ex-militants who to
date has written about having killed.\(^{60}\) *Montoneros* is a chaotic and complex account
marked by violence and one of the most telling instances of the effects of revolutionary
violence upon those involved.

In general terms, narratives of leftist armed conflict differ from other types of
writing about violence and conflict. According to Kate McLoughlin in *The Cambridge
Companion to War Writing* (2009), “each conflict has its own poesis (and, potentially,
genre: in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, think of the First World War and the
lyric poem, the Second World War and the epic novel, Vietnam and the movie, the ‘war
on terror’ and the blog)” (1-2). If this is the case, it would be fair to say that the leftist
militant movements of the 1960s and 70s in Latin America can be most closely
associated with the blend of genres previously discussed in Chapter 1 and which
characterize “narratives of militancy,” personal accounts of experiences in leftist armed
organizations written by ex-militants, combining elements of autobiography, testimony,
adventure stories and historical accounts, among others. Although they deal with many
of the same topics as war narratives—conflict, adventure and/or trauma, stories of either

\(^{60}\) One of the few examples is Ernesto Guevara who, in a passage in his diaries, very briefly and rather
coldly talks about executing Cuban rebel Eutimio Guerra for treason. This passage was originally omitted
from *Pasajes de la guerra revolucionaria* (1963) but later reproduced in *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary
heroes or victims—the underlying ideology and type of conflict described are essentially quite different. Unlike traditional war literature, there are no clear battle zones or enemy lines. In cases where non-state violence is used, national or international military interventions are often framed as “justified” or simply made invisible, while any opposition is quickly identified as a threat, labeled “terrorist” or “insurgency,” often ignoring or dismissing the political content and demands of non-state groups. As the authors of *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration* (2000) argue, “the willingness or refusal of the state to recognize and name particular kinds of violence as ‘a war’ in the first place, together with its bestowal of names upon particular wars, are fundamental to the construction (and contestation) of the national narrative and official memory” (53).

The “framing” of narratives of armed conflict is essential. Additionally, while the bulk of war writing is focused on victims, survivors and commemoration, unlike survivors of the Holocaust and other civilian victims of war, leftist militants made a conscious choice to join the armed struggle, backed by their convictions and following a logic stemming from their ideals and worldview at the time. Therefore the authors’ identification of themselves as ex-militants and the political aspect of their narratives is

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61 The representation of the use of violence by militants also has much to do with where the narrative of historical contextualization is begun. For instance, beginning in 1930 with the country’s first coup, as Pilar Calveiro in *Política y/o violencia* (2005) does, frames it within a long history of the State use of military force to implement the political will of the government in power. Beginning in 1955 with the bombing of the Plaza de Mayo and the corresponding coup ousting Perón from the presidency, as Miguel Bonasso does in *Recuerdo de la muerte* (1984), inserts it into the context of a Peronist struggle. In contrast, in *Sobre la violencia revolucionaria* (2009), Hugo Vezzetti begins his historical narrative with the Cuban Revolution in 1959 to connect leftist armed conflict in Argentina to part of a worldwide movement towards Communist revolution whereas beginning the narrative more recently with Onganía’s coup in 1966, as Eduardo Anguita and Martín Caparrós do in *La voluntad* (1997; 1998), frames opposition as leftist resistance to oppression and dictatorship. This type of “framing” tends to set up a reading of either offensive or defensive violence within a particular historical context.
significant. As Pilar Calveiro states in *Política y/o violencia* (2005), the acts of ex-militants:

resultan incomprensibles o incluso de menciales—aun para ellos mismos—si se pretenden analizar desde los referentes de sentido actualmente predominantes. Es necesario tender un puente entre nuestra mirada actual y la de entonces; no hay una verdadera y otra falsa sino que se trata de construcciones diferentes que corresponden a momentos distintos del poder y de las resistencias. (16)

Context—political, historical and social—is absolutely essential to coming closer to a critical understanding of this past, especially with respect to such a contentious issue. Therefore, in order to understand what is at stake in the texts we will presently explore, it may be useful to begin by looking at some of the main ideas about revolutionary violence that were in circulation in Argentina during the 1960s and 70s. These include works by Karl Marx, Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre and Ernesto “Che” Guevara, among others.

A genealogy of revolutionary violence

The influence of Karl Marx and his writings on thinking about revolution and political violence can hardly be underestimated, particularly the emphasis he placed on

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63 In addition to major works by Marx and Lenin, Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci, discussed in Chapter 2, were also available in translation and widely read. For more on the ideas in circulation at the time, see *Nuestros años sesentas: La formación de la nueva izquierda intelectual en la Argentina, 1956-1966* (1991) by Oscar Terán. Though he does not cover the 1970s, Terán discusses the ideas in circulation in the period just prior to the 1966 coup, fundamental in the subsequent formation of many of the leftist militant organizations. He notes that in the years following the Cuban Revolution “sobre el intelectual comenzó a operar un nuevo tipo de exigencia medida por una culpabilización hacia quienes no apoyaban al menos la nueva estrategia revolucionaria fundada en la lucha armada, dado que esa transformación debía ser tan radical como violenta” (137).
the relation between questions of social class and revolutionary violence. In the
Communist Manifesto (1848), Marx describes how in his view, capitalist society is
predicated on a clear dualism between the bourgeoisie and proletariat, between
oppressors and the oppressed. For Marx, violence is an inherent part of this relationship.
Product of the initial violence of “primitive expropriation and accumulation,” in his view,
it then became an institutionalized and endemic part of this system. Although Marx sees
revolution as inevitable, the predicted outcome of latent contradictions in the class
system, he also believed that violence had a role to play in this, as a tool to be used by the
proletariat. The use of violence, in Marx’s view, constituted a necessary means to an
inevitable ends. He famously closes the Manifesto by declaring that the objectives of the
proletariat “sólo pueden ser alcanzados derrocando por la violencia todo el orden social
existente. Las clases dominantes pueden temblar ante una revolución comunista. Los
proletarios no tienen nada que perder en ella, más que sus cadenas. Tienen, en cambio,
un mundo que ganar” (70). For Marx, revolutionary violence was an essential aspect in
ensuring the success of the proletariat in their struggle against the violence inherent in the
class system. As Christopher Finlay in his article “Violence and Revolutionary
Subjectivity” states, “In Marxism, permissive space is defined first of all by the
justification of revolutionary violence as a means according to a conception of just
political and social ends” (376). The goal of an egalitarian society is framed as worth the
violence potentially necessary. Add to this, says Finlay, “the idea of history as an agent
of change” which is a much greater force than any individual, and revolution becomes an
inevitable and natural part of the evolution of history. “As a natural process, the
occurrence of revolutionary violence is beyond moral censures and, therefore, the
revolutionaries are (at least partly) exonerated by the greater cause in which they participate but of which they may not be fully aware” (377). In the end, “this aspect of Marxist theory provides a doctrine of ‘necessity’ by which the actions of revolutionaries may be said to have been excused (rather than justified per se) by the historical circumstances which impelled them” (378). Therefore, in a somewhat contradictory sense, although revolution is considered historically inevitable, it potentially requires the use of violence to fully realize the struggle against the capitalist system and economic exploitation.

Using Marx’s theories as a base, Frantz Fanon, translated this model of a society divided along class lines into a “Third World” context, reading it in terms of the struggle towards decolonization, in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Fanon, read in translation in Argentina at that time, was considered an integral figure within the emerging New Left. Fanon sees capitalism as dependent not only on a simple class division, but in a broader sense, on worldwide colonial or neocolonial forms of exploitation. For Fanon, the world, not unlike Marx’s society, is divided into two distinct groups, the colonizer and the colonized. Through neocolonialism, economic exploitation is not limited to a class division within a single society but takes place beyond First World borders. If revolutionary outbreaks can be prevented by ensuring the existence of an expanded middle class, this same pressure is also alleviated by “exporting” exploitation to the Third World (Avelar Letter 6).

Fanon took Marx one step further. In *The Wretched*, he outlines how violence is essential to the process of decolonization. Without it, the latter cannot be successful (3). Therefore, in Fanon’s view violence takes on another dimension. Rather than a necessary
means for just ends, it acquires an emancipatory quality and becomes a creative force.

For Fanon, it is clear that “Decolonization is truly the creation of new men” (2). The emergence of the “new man” takes place through the use of force to respond to the violence inflicted in the course of colonization since, as Fanon explains, “The exploited realize that their liberation implies using every means available, and force is the first” (23). Fanon believes that colonial oppression can even have a positive effect in terms of creating and strengthening the need for a liberating, revolutionary violence; the worse the colonial oppression, the “better” it is in motivating the struggle towards decolonization. Fanon therefore attributes a positive quality to violence, endowing it with, among other things, the power to transform the enslaved colonized man and facilitate the formation of a new subjectivity. “Violence alone” explains Fanon, “perpetrated by the people, violence organized and guided by the leadership, provides the key for the massed to decipher social reality” (96). Through the revolutionary struggle itself, the colonized man is seen as able to gain consciousness of his situation and of his existence and worth as a subject, to begin to heal the damage inflicted by colonization. Fanon outlines how during the struggle for liberation, the colonized will inevitably realize the falsity of “white” values, values that include the privileging of individual interests over collective ones. Violence is also capable of cleansing and purifying, of facilitating the emergence of the “new man,” an idea also present in Ernesto Guevara and Regis Debray’s writings.

64 Finlay goes on to point out that political or revolutionary violence in Fanon’s view, “may be justified by its contribution to the formation and dissemination of revolutionary subjectivity; and, second, that it is legitimate to the extent that it originates in this emergent form of consciousness. To the extent that the consciousness of the revolutionary class is understood to give rise to new values for a new order, this opens up the further possibility that whatever kinds of violence result from it are self-validating and not subject to the norms of existing conceptions of justice” (380).
Though Sartre was perhaps most known, at the time, for his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), his preface to Fanon’s book, discussed above, is particularly interesting. Sartre presents Fanon’s book to a European audience, even though, in his words, “this book had certainly no need for a preface” (lvii). When, as a white European, he calls for respect for the demands of the colonized, warns of violence, and of the justifiable nature of the “boomerang effect” in his preface to “Dr. Fanon’s” book, he is purportedly preparing European audiences for Fanon’s invective, explaining the words of the “colonized” and inciting the French, and Europeans in general, to consider their own complicity. In this preface, Sartre explains the process that takes place as the colonized become aware of their situation: “at first the only violence they [the colonized] understand is the colonist’s, and then their own, reflecting back at us like our reflection bouncing back at us from a mirror” (li). According to Sartre, the process which began with colonization and domination by the colonist was converted into an internalized and unconscious violence on the part of the colonized. This violence, with time, will inevitably be unleashed back towards the colonists since, in Sartre’s view, “we were the subjects of history, and now we are the objects. The power struggle has been reversed, decolonization is in progress” (lx). Sartre leaves no comfortable position for his reader. Addressing his audience directly, personally, he anticipates their inclination towards a non-violent response: “if violence were only a thing of the future, if exploitation and oppression never existed on earth, perhaps displays of nonviolence might relieve the conflict. But if the entire regime, even your nonviolent thoughts, is governed by a thousand-year-old oppression, your passiveness serves no other purpose but to put you on the side of the oppressors” (lviii). Sartre, summing up some of Fanon’s main points,
states that violence in the hands of the colonized, takes on the form of a freeing and healing power, a natural response by the colonized to years of oppression, to years of being victimized. He states, “no indulgence can erase the marks of violence; violence alone can eliminate them” (lv). In a kind of reversal of the popular “an eye for an eye...,” the reaction of the oppressed is naturalized and given positive qualities. It is only through responding to the violence from above, with their own struggle that the colonized can begin to heal. After all, “a fighter’s weapon is his humanity. For in the first phase of the revolt killing is a necessity: killing a European is killing two birds with one stone, eliminating in one go oppressor and oppressed: leaving one man dead and the other man free” (lv). Sartre’s preface has an apocalyptic tone, a warning of what is to come. And a faith that “Violence, like Achilles’ spear, can heal the wounds it has inflicted” (lxii).

Around the time that Fanon was dictating The Wretched of the Earth, Ernesto Guevara was compiling his experiences of armed insurrection in the Cuban Revolution into a kind of mini-manual for future guerrillas, La guerra de guerrillas (1960). Guevara was already a hero for his role in the Cuban Revolution, but his continued militancy and spectacular death in 1967 were to turn him into a cult figure. As Pablo Pozzi states in A vencer o morir (1998), “Aunque evidentemente no fue el único factor, para muchos, la muerte del Che en Bolivia implicó una primera toma de conciencia en el sentido de definir y sintetizar un compromiso y un comportamiento” (7). Part of the attraction was that Guevara lived what he theorized. In discussing revolutionary violence, Guevara was well aware of international events and cited, among others, the situation in Algeria as an example in his work. He had met Fanon on an earlier trip to Africa and was photographed in a meeting with Sartre in 1960. Both had an influence on his thinking.
Guevara frames the struggle as being between “the people” and the “oppressors,” the latter ranging from a colonialist power to an illegitimate government though the main enemy, for him, is always “the long arm of imperialism.” In “Crear dos, tres Vietnams” (1967), Guevara outlines how he sees imperialism as the last stage of capitalism. The objective is to therefore help destroy imperialism and free the peoples through armed struggle and, especially in Latin America, socialist revolution.

In *La guerra de guerrillas* Guevara considers armed struggle within the very specific context of an illegitimate, oppressive government, one that leaves no legitimate alternatives. The viability and success of the struggle always relies on the support of the general population. According to Guevara, “en los momentos de guerra civil y en determinadas poblaciones, ya la represión del poder gobernante es tan grande que, de hecho, está suprimida toda clase de acción legal y es imposible una acción de masas que no sea apoyada por las armas” (24). The idea of the “foco” is central to his work. As Guevara explains, “No siempre hay que esperar a que se den todas las condiciones para la revolución; el foco insurreccional puede crearlas” (13); there is a fine balance between simply waiting for the revolution to produce itself and intervening in order to accelerate and give impulse to conditions that already exist. A “foco” alone without the people cannot create a revolution. On the other hand, without certain basic conditions, it would be impossible to get mass support. Guevara writes: “Donde un gobierno haya subido al poder por alguna forma de consulta popular, fraudulenta o no, y se mantenga al menos una apariencia de legalidad constitucional, el brote guerrillero es imposible de producir por no haberse agotado las posibilidades de la lucha cívica” (14). However, in other cases, a small “foco” can act as the vanguard of the people. In Guevara’s terms, the
guerrilla creates consciousness, the “subjective conditions” that lead to victory. The “foco” is a “motor impulsor de la movilización, generador de conciencia revolucionaria y de entusiasmo combativo” (“El socialismo” 34). It has the potential to activate the struggle, eventually producing momentum and garnering support from the people, “masa todavía dormida a quien había que movilizar” (“El socialismo” 34). Guevara, considering the struggle on a continental level, felt that in the case of the Americas, “No hay más cambios que hacer; o revolución socialista o caricatura de revolución” (“Crear” 56).

Guevara’s vision is infused with religious concepts and imagery which found resonance in a culture strongly influenced by Christianity. As Pozzi explains, “El énfasis en el sacrificio, el compromiso, la humildad, la humanidad, el amor, y la capacidad de morir por los pobres recuerda a valores tradicionalmente vinculados con la figura del Cristo” (10). Guevara, at times apocalyptic, also describes death in romanticized terms. Revolutionary militants are expected to sacrifice everything, to the point of martyrdom if necessary, for the promise of a utopian future. The individual’s life is but one of many, one in a continuum formed by those who came before and those who will continue after. Guevara states:

En cualquier lugar que nos sorprenda la muerte, bienvenida sea, siempre que ése, nuestro grito de guerra, haya llegado hasta un oído receptivo y otra mano se tienda para empuñar nuestras armas, y otros hombres se apresten a entonar los cantos luctuosos con tableteo de ametralladoras y nuevos gritos de guerra y de victoria. (“Crear” 65)

It is this experience that will provoke the emergence of the socialist “new man,” an individual aware of his subjectivity, yet fully committed to the socialist ideals of the new system. In “El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba” (1965), Guevara outlines how this new
self-sacrificing and brave subject emerges out of the revolutionary struggle and alongside the construction of the new socialism. At the same time, these noble values and the utopian future he projected, contrasted with the, arguably contradictory, necessities of the armed struggle. Paradoxically, in order to be good and effective soldiers, in Guevara’s view, militants had to be cold and calculating: “El odio como factor de lucha: el odio intransigente al enemigo, que impulsa más allá de las limitaciones naturales del ser humano y lo convierte en una efectiva, violenta, selectiva y fría máquina de matar. Nuestros soldados tienen que ser así; un pueblo sin odio no puede triunfar sobre un enemigo brutal” (“Crear” 62). This apparent contradiction in Guevara’s writings is never resolved. The new man, the socialist ideal of a man, is to emerge from the revolutionary struggle, yet the struggle, at the same time, requires “soldiers” that are anything but the idealistic new man.

Jules Régis Debray, most notably in Revolución en la revolución (1967), further extended and developed Guevara’s ideas. Debray, a French intellectual who studied under Louis Althusser, is especially known for developing the “foquista” theory. He spent time in Cuba in the early 1960s to see the Revolution first hand and later on joined Guevara in Bolivia where, according to some accounts, he may have played a role in identifying Guevara to the authorities. Debray conceives of the revolution in class terms as “el resultado de una lucha armada contra el poder armado del estado burgués” (123) and begins Revolución by attempting to discredit the “exceptionalists,” those that argue that the Cuban Revolution is not repeatable. Proposing a return to the facts, Debray aims to demystify the historic event and demonstrate that with “tenacity” and determination, that revolution is possible. Armed struggle, for Debray, is the only option. In fact, he
opposes revolutionaries and reformists, equating the latter with future traitors (124). Like Guevara, Debray emphasizes the importance of considering the particular conditions and needs of each country or continent. However, “Toda línea presuntamente revolucionaria debe poder dar una respuesta concreta a esta pregunta: ¿cómo derribar el poder del Estado capitalista?” (124). The answer is inevitably “guerra de guerrillas.” In “El castrismo en América Latina” published in the 1964/65 issue of Pasado y presente, Debray citing Guevara, argues in favor of the “foco.” In his view, the masses need an armed and professional vanguard. Only then will they have a chance of success against the organized violence of governments and armies. He begins the article by presenting an impressive list of failed attempts to organize “focos,” including the Argentine case of the Ejército Guerrillero del Pueblo, the incident at the heart of the debate involving Oscar del Barco, which we will explore later in this chapter. Debray makes an effort to determine why these attempts failed. Interestingly enough, rather than considering that perhaps their failure is an indication that the concept of the “foco” is flawed in itself, he works instead on fine-tuning the structure and blames their failure on an absence of political “preparation” of those involved, a lack of experience and knowledge of the terrain where they were operating and the “falta de un aparato político de ligazón con las masas urbanas” (11).

While the concept of “foquismo” was significant, especially to groups like the PRT-ERP, the Montoneros and other Peronist groups largely rejected this approach. Among Peronist supporters, John William Cooke functioned as a bridge between Guevarism and Cuban socialism, on the one hand, and Peronism. Shortly after Perón was ousted in the 1955 coup, while in exile, he designated Cooke his representative. Several
years later, Cooke traveled to Cuba, following the Revolution, where he spent time with Guevara and Castro. There, according to Eduardo Galasso, his ideas shifted from revolutionary nationalism to Latin American socialism (156), all the while loyal to the exiled leader. Cooke despite this loyalty however, eventually had serious differences with Perón. Although he spent several years, well documented in their correspondence, attempting to convince Perón to align Peronism more with Cuba and Castro’s socialism, to leave exile in Franco’s Spain for Fidel’s Cuba, he was never successful in doing so.

Rather like a Peronist translation of Fanon, Cooke believed firmly that imperialism was the enemy and that capitalism was nearing its end. Although he admired the Cuban Revolution, his vision of the struggle in Argentina was conceived of in national terms, as a resistance to imperialism and the national elite. In Cooke’s view, violence had a role in this struggle. In a conference given in 1959, “La lucha por la liberación nacional,” Cooke explains: “La oligarquía terrateniente es el enemigo jurado del pueblo y de la Nación. [...] Destruir a la oligarquía es, en realidad, defender a la Nación. [...] El régimen liberal debe ser desalojado por la violencia porque se mantiene por la violencia” (cited in Galasso 141). Several years later, in Apuntes para la militancia (1964), Cooke warns Peronists that the revolution is not so inevitable that they can sit back and simply wait for it. If they aspire to power, they will need to prepare themselves to fight. He is explicit in his distaste for what he considers to be the excessively bureaucratic side of the Peronist movement, which he sees as reformist rather than revolutionary. The bureaucrat, warns Cooke, sees himself as a representative of the masses rather than an integral part of them.
In *Peronismo y revolución* (published posthumously in 1971), Cooke again writes of violence, attributing a positive quality to it. In terms reminiscent of Fanon, he writes of “la afirmación de la humanidad del hombre,” placing it in opposition to “la violencia reaccionaria, que es su negación” (166). Cooke explains that the reason that countries such as Argentina are “underdeveloped” is a result of the “progress” made in richer North American and European countries. For him, this progress, based on trade between unequal economies and economic colonization, comes with a cost for the less developed countries. Echoing Sartre, but with a distinctly Peronist reading, Cooke states:

> Esa muchedumbre [del 17 de octubre] estaba compuesta en su mayor parte por hombres que, aunque no lo formulasen como noción expresa, reasumían su personalidad, *hasta entonces seccionada por la dicotomía que hacia de ellos un ciudadano libre y un obrero esclavizado al capital*. Sólo así, por la acción directa y colectiva, podían obtener reivindicaciones que ya no se pedían, se reclamaban, que ya no se confiaban a un utópico progresismo basado en la buena voluntad de las clases dominantes sino a la propia fuerza de los obreros. (*Peronismo* 104-105, italics are mine)

Although it is not known to what extent Cooke was associated with the Uturuncos, one of the first organized guerrilla groups in Argentina (Galasso 142-43), he was an important figure in shaping notions regarding violence on the Peronist left.

> These ideas, in circulation at the time, provide an idea of the context of the 1960s and 70s in terms of the notion of revolutionary violence and its uses. The “del Barco debate,” a discussion which emerged in late 2004 and which we will now turn to, provides an interesting contrast in the differences it marks with the ideas described above. Most notably, it reflects a general shift from politics, as a main point of reference, to ethics, approaching the question of the uses of violence from a radically different standpoint.
The del Barco debate

¿Existe espacio para la inocencia ‘frente a una sociedad [...] que asesina a millones de seres humanos mediante guerras, genocidios, hambrunas, enfermedades?’ (66).

¿El correr de los años facilitará la aceptación de que el asesinato como tal es repudiable e incomprensible para quienes aspiran a un mundo en el que la vida humana sea irremplazable? (81).

¿Éramos nosotros o nosotros éramos otros? (89).

These are just some of the questions that emerged in the debate sparked by a polemical letter Argentine philosopher Oscar del Barco sent to the journal La Intemperie. The debate was remarkable both in its duration and for the silences it transgressed. It is especially significant in that it brought the discussion of the use of political violence on the left, in theory and in practice, as well as the issues of legitimacy and responsibility to the fore in a very public way. Del Barco’s letter was written in response to a two-part interview with ex-militant Héctor Jouvé regarding his experiences forty years prior with a fledgling guerrilla group called the EGP (Ejército Guerrillero del Pueblo), published in the October and November 2004 issues of La Intemperie. In his interview, Jouvé describes one of the darkest moments of the group’s history, referring to practically the

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65 All page numbers in this section refer to the collection of letters and articles published in No matar: Sobre la responsabilidad (2007), edited by Pablo René Belzagui except where otherwise indicated.

66 La Intemperie is a monthly journal on culture and politics published in Córdoba, Argentina. The debate extended over approximately four years and prompted dozens of responses in numerous publications including Conflines, Conjetural, Lucha armada, El ojo mocho, Acontecimiento, Políticas de la memoria, and Rosario newspaper, Diario El Capital. An introduction and a selection of letters, including del Barco’s original missive, were translated into English and published in the Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies (2007; 2008) and a vast number were also compiled and published in book form under the title No matar (2007).

67 According to Gabriel Burgos, editor of the journal Acontecimiento and one of the contributors to the debate, “La polémica ganó un estado público que excede a los circulos políticos e intelectuales. Sectores comprometidos en la historia reciente de la Argentina y con las distintas narrativas de esa historia, han sabido intervenir” (407).

68 The group, which had close ties with Ernesto Guevara, was one of the earliest armed revolutionary groups in the country, anticipating what was to come. Its short-lived existence (1963-64) ended when the group was infiltrated and members were arrested in the Argentine province of Salta.
only armed actions they carried out. Jouvé describes two of the group’s members, Adolfo Rotblat and Bernardo Groswald, as having psychological breakdowns. In their compromised state, Jorge Masetti, the leader of the EGP, considered them a potential threat to the group’s survival and decided that the only option was to execute them. Jouvé recalls how he confronted Masetti who responded by threatening to make him carry out the executions himself. In the interview, Jouvé, reflecting on Groswald’s execution, states: “Yo creo que fue un crimen, porque estaba destruido, era como un paciente psiquiátrico. Creo que de algún modo somos todos responsables, porque todos estábamos en eso, en hacer la revolución” (17). The interview captures the particularly intense, ethically complex nature of this situation and the profound effect it had on Jouvé.

The interview compelled Oscar del Barco to write a response published in La Intemperie in December of the same year. In his letter, del Barco explains that the interview with Jouvé had moved him and caused him to become aware of the “gravedad trágica” of the events that had taken place. Del Barco speaks of what he sees as his responsibility, as a former supporter of the EGP, in the death of the militants. Echoing a statement by Jouvé, del Barco reveals, “me di cuenta clara de que yo, por haber apoyado las actividades de ese grupo, era tan responsable como los que lo habían asesinado” (31). Logically extending this realization outwards, he declares not only his own responsibility but that of all participants and sympathizers of the left, calling on them to acknowledge and assume their responsibility: “todos los que de alguna manera simpatizamos o participamos, directa o indirectamente, en el movimiento Montoneros, en el ERP, en la FAR o en cualquier otra organización armada, somos responsables de sus acciones” (32). Furthermore, according to del Barco, there are no causes or ideals that can lessen this
guilt or justify their actions. Stated quite simply, “no existe ningún ‘ideal’ que justifique la muerte de un hombre, ya sea del general Aramburu, de un militante o de un policía” (32). According to the philosopher, despite its historical impossibility, the basis for all community is and must be the imperious “no matarás,” thou shalt not kill: “Un mandato que no puede fundarse o explicarse, y que sin embargo está aquí, en mí y en todos, como presencia sin presencia, como fuerza sin fuerza, como ser sin ser. No un mandato que viene de afuera, desde otra parte, sino que constituye nuestra inconcebible e inaudita inmanencia” (32). In del Barco’s view, “sostener ese principio imposible es lo único posible” (33). It is what enables society to exist.

The debate marks an important step in the critical reevaluation of the use of political violence by the left during this period. According to Horacio Tarcus, one of the contributors to the discussion, it is “el debate ético-político más dilatado, profundo y productivo de los últimos treinta años acerca de la violencia revolucionaria” (Tarcus 14). In his view, “del Barco logró provocar con su texto un debate [...] que hace muchos años amenazaba con emerger, pero que finalmente lograba ser acallado por aquellas fuerzas político-intelectuales que, pasiva o activamente, la resistieron como una problemática inapropiada, ‘mal formulada’ o incluso ‘peligrosa’” (Tarcus 14). He reminds us that prior to del Barco’s letter, there were other attempts to initiate dialogue or debate on the left, to break through the resistance to addressing certain issues and that, not surprisingly, many of them were written by Argentines living outside the country.69 It is also interesting that the debate was triggered by a discussion of violence used against “inept”

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69 Among those named by Tarcus: Héctor Schmucler and Rubén Sergio Caletti who published articles in 1979 and ’80; books by Carlos Alberto Brocato published in the mid ’80s criticizing the “foquismo” of the armed left; a provocative article by Helios Prieto published as recently as 2000 and the valuable reflections of Pilar Calveiro (Tarcus 15-16).
revolutionary militants, violence within a militant organization itself, rather than acts carried out in opposition to the military or the oligarchy. Perhaps this is due to the more ambiguous nature of the executions described, given that here what is at stake is not merely whether the use of non-state violence is justified, but also questions of how the leftist armed organizations functioned internally.

One of the most significant aspects of the debate is related to the dynamic of private/public, hidden/visible. Several letters express surprise at del Barco’s very public “outing” of a debate that had apparently begun prior to the publication of his letter, a discussion among friends through personal letters circulating “safely” among those who shared a certain companionship. The publication of his letter provoked a variety of reactions. Among other things, Del Barco was accused of being “mediático,” of seeking attention by presenting deliberately controversial ideas. The public nature of his letter sent to *La Intemperie* generated a sense of betrayal, for some. Ricardo Forster, for example, reveals that:

Desde el momento que la lei, aunque ya conocía tu posición después de años de intensas conversaciones, no dejó de afectarme de distintos modos porque ya no se trataba de aquello que se guarda en la intimidad de la charla entre amigos, de aquello que se comparte sin que el complejo, muchas veces caprichoso y laberíntico efecto de lo público se interponga abriendo puertas inesperadas y suscitando fuertes y encontradas pasiones. [...] Confieso, Oscar, que me impactó ese pasaje a lo visible, su tremenda exposición pública y hasta mediática, de aquello susurrado en un diálogo entre amigos que se quieren y que [...] se pueden decir cosas fuertes, duras, sabiendo [...] que las palabras y las ideas se deslizan, muchas veces, hacia fronteras equívocas, hacia mundos que requieren, de nosotros, una apertura, y sobre todo, el arte de caminar por la sutil línea de los acuerdos y las discrepancias. (281-282)

Multiple letters reveal a parallel or previous private debate among friends, contrasting the intimacy of their private conversations to the exposure of the public debate. Héctor Schmucler, for instance, sends what was originally a private letter (addressed to “Queridos Oscar, Nicolás, Alejandro”), for publication and makes clear that “en ella aludo a la carta de Oscar del Barco publicada en el número 17 y a otras dos que, por su carácter privado, no me permito citar extensamente” (77). See also Luis Rodeiro’s letter which begins “Querido Toto” (91-95), addressed to Schmucler.
Del Barco moved the debate from the intimate reflection of letters between friends, the shelter and privacy of homes into the more exposed public realm, the (suitably titled) *Intemperie*. As León Rozitchner put it, until del Barco’s “scream,” “La verdad callada hacia el afuera circulaba sólo entre los amigos muy queridos” (381). This shift from private to public is to some extent echoed in all of the “narratives of militancy,” given that all to some degree reveal aspects of collective experience that were previously shared only among participants. The act of publishing these narratives, similar to del Barco’s publication of a “previously hushed conversation,” represents an extreme in the shift from private and intimate to public.

It is fitting that these tensions be played out in large part in epistolary form, a form which shares some similarities with the autobiographical element of many “narratives of militancy.” This tension has always been inscribed in the letter, private and intimate yet nevertheless, a truly social act, bound up in public discourse. Gilroy and Verhoeven in *Epistolary Histories* (2000) emphasize “the essential imbrication of the epistolary with both public and private discourses, for each is a personal and partial response that nevertheless enters, and is informed by, an ongoing cultural correspondence” (15). The letter opens up the possibility of a less formal, more intimate tone. Indeed, several of the letters in the debate are addressed to close friends (“Querido Toto,” “Amigo Sergio”) and many opt to use the first person singular, speaking of personal histories and convictions. In this case, it is the public letter or the publication of

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71 León Rozitchner adds, “...esa exclusión en lo público sólo permitía [...] la complicidad acrítica, es decir la que ocultaba la ‘cuestión crucial’ [...] que entre ellos se planteaba. Pero también la coherencia de sí mismos, al excluir de lo que debía ser pensado como núcleo fundamental que estaba en juego en nuestras historias: la permanencia en lo clandestino, restringido a lo privado, del pensamiento que se desplegaba hacia fuera excluyendo el asiento personal fundamental, originario, desde el cual se piensa el pensamiento” (381).
the letter that converts an intimate debate among friends into something “visible,” revealing its prior invisibility. What is hinted at is an underlying fear that in taking an open and critical look at their own actions and ideas of the period from within the left, they would be giving fodder to long-held attacks from the political right. The variety of reactions and a certain reluctance at making the private public, also suggests that there is more at play here than simply a discussion regarding political violence. As Victoria Basualdo points out, “Para muchos de los sobrevivientes resulta extremadamente difícil reconsiderar lo actuado no sólo porque implica poner en jaque su pasado, sus decisiones y opciones de vida, sino también porque involucra un cuestionamiento a compañeros que hoy no pueden participar de este replanteo, y cuya mente se encuentra signada por esta historia” (Basualdo 11). Many reactions to del Barco’s letter were not simply interventions in a debate but went far beyond this, defending the respondents’ need for coherency with respect to their individual understanding of their own pasts. The majority of those who responded had personal investments in the discussion which had the potential to affect how they viewed themselves, their past actions and those of friends who had died or “disappeared.”

One of the most striking aspects of this debate was its extensive nature and the amount of responses written over a period of several years. This alone is evidence of the controversial tone of the topic and the fact that it obviously resonated with many. Yet although the letters capture the dialogic quality that characterized political discussion within many militant groups, the claim that del Barco revealed something private is read by some as a kind of betrayal in an extension of the friend/enemy or us/them binary that formed a fundamental part of the militant logic of the 1970s (and the logic of armed
conflict in general). As Daniel Mundo points out in an article published in *Lucha armada*, there is a sense that emerges of defensiveness, echoes of a tendency towards a binary divide: internal/external, friend/enemy, us/them, as well as an inclination for the clandestine, a hint of suspicion or a fear of opening up to those considered on the latter side of those terms (Mundo 41). Luis Rodeiro mentions the circulation of del Barco’s letter prior to publication in *La Intemperie* and describes the reaction it received:

“algunos compañeros y amigos [...] exigían censura real y hablaban de tratamientos psiquiátricos, como las de aquellos hospitales—digo yo—de triste memoria en la historia del socialismo. Actitud que en algunos incluía la amenaza—luego concretada—de quita de apoyo publicitario y de distribución” (46). Rodeiro’s comment reveals that for some, any questioning of the left is (still) akin to treason. With this in mind, it is not surprising that Del Barco was labeled a “demonizador de la izquierda” (Tarcus 14).

Beyond the play of private and public in the epistolary form, there is some debate as to whether or not del Barco’s original letter represents a confession. Again, this echoes the formal ambiguity of his reflection and its tone. Was it purely personal reflection or a bid for media attention? Did del Barco’s letter reflect a heartfelt realization (“haciéndome tomar conciencia”) forty years after the events it described or a calculated provocation? Del Barco himself calls his letter a “contrición” – as opposed to a “razonamiento” or reasoned argument—and later emphasized that his letter, citing Bataille, represented “un grito y no un saber” (154). Though he affirms that “la carta plantea un problema ético-religioso extremadamente grave,” he complains that it has been treated by some as if it were “una carta teórica.” In other words, for del Barco, his act of contrition, his emotional “scream” is not something that can be reasoned with, not
something that responds to arguments, merely something that is. He explains, “la hice pública porque siento que una contrición de crimen no puede quedar en la propia conciencia, aunque quede como desgracia. Mi carta fue un acto que me pertenece solamente a mí y del que sólo yo me hago responsable, no un proyecto político” (193).

For Héctor Schmucler it is just this. In his view:

La de Oscar era una carta en *La Intemperie*, sin protección, sin reaseguro, en un acto similar al que había realizado enfrentándose cara a cara con el general Menéndez para increparlo por sus crímenes, para mostrarle su repudio a compartir con él un mismo espacio. Un relámpago desamparado en la intemperie: desnudez repetida, apertura multiplicada. (78)

Nevertheless, there are those who were skeptical of the supposed innocence of this gesture. If del Barco’s polemical letter is an act of contrition, a “scream” that situates itself beyond “reasoning,” it stands that responding to his statements, arguing with his letter, is impossible. The whole question of responsibility for his own words can be shifted onto the fact that these are apparently not arguments but rather a simple outpouring of emotion. Moreover, as Rodeiro points out:

no hay posibilidades de diálogo, cuando lo que expresa no es un razonamiento, como él mismo lo reconoce, sino un acto de contrición, que es una experiencia personal e intransferible de un particular estado espiritual, respetable como acto humano, pero que además se lo exige con desbordada violencia verbal a todos los protagonistas. (46)

Therefore, for Rodeiro, rather than a “relámpago capaz de iluminar las rugosidades de la noche,” as Schmucler suggested, “sin negar su sinceridad, [...] me pareció un rayo, un acto taumatúrgico, expresado en ese ataque furibundo a Gelman, en la agresividad de sus palabras, aun asumiendo los ‘crímenes’ en forma personal, pero reservando la calificación de ‘asesinos seriales’ para otros” (92). Beyond whether del Barco’s letter is

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72 Del Barco, in his original letter, individually singles out the Argentine poet Juan Gelman, and calls on him to “abandonar su postura de poeta-mártir y asumir su responsabilidad como uno de los principales
more like a “relámpago desamparado” or “un rayo que lastima y que fulmina la posibilidad del raciocinio” (95), it presents arguments to defend his conclusions and goes beyond the mere declaration of personal guilt or responsibility, to that of others. This fact coupled with the previously mentioned choice of vocabulary ensured del Barco numerous and, in many cases, emotional responses to his letter.

Among the most polemical aspects of his letter, however, is a question which sounds provocatively like a revival of the “theory of the two demons.” Del Barco poses the question: “Si no existen ‘buenos’ que sí pueden asesinar y ‘malos’ que no pueden asesinar, ¿en qué se funda el presunto ‘derecho’ a matar? ¿Qué diferencia hay entre Santucho, Firmenich, Quieto y Galimberti, por una parte, y Menéndez, Videla o Massera, por la otra? Si uno mata el otro también mata” (32). Taking an apparently ethical standpoint, according to which there is no “right” to kill, no valid justification or legitimization under any circumstances, and according to which all killing is therefore equally subject to condemnation, del Barco eliminates the differences between assassination or political deaths carried out by the right and left of the political spectrum. Killing is killing, he argues, and no political or ideological causes can justify it. He questions the legitimization of killing in the name of any politics and goes on to label Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Mao, Fidel Castro and Ernesto Guevara, “asesinos seriales.” And adds, “Hay que denunciar con todas nuestras fuerzas el terrorismo del Estado, pero sin callar nuestro propio terrorismo” (34). His choice of wording (“terrorismo,” “asesinos seriales”) and reference to the “theory of the two demons” resembles, by his own

dirigentes de la dirección del movimiento armado Montoneros” (33). He calls on Gelman in particular, whose two children were “disappeared” by the dictatorship, challenging him to “confess his crimes” and ask for forgiveness. Del Barco later clarified that he was responding to an interview of Gelman published in the journal Babelia (October, 2004) in which the poet insisted on the fundamental importance of revealing the truth of what took place (153).
admission, typical arguments of the political right. Anticipating the reaction of potential readers of his letter, del Barco adds, “Habrá quienes digan que mi razonamiento — pero este no es un razonamiento sino una contricción — es el mismo que el de la derecha, que el de los Neustadt y los Grondona” (34). Del Barco concludes by stating simply, “No creo que ese sea un argumento” (34).

At the center of the debate is a tension between ethics and politics. Del Barco through his “No matarás” argues that sustaining this principle, though impossible, is the only possibility. In his view, “Quienes pretenden explicar estos hechos recurriendo a la ‘situación’ propia de esos tiempos no advierten que la ‘situación’ nos abarca a todos, incluidos los Videla, los Menéndez. ¿O ellos no son también fruto de situaciones determinadas? ¿O acaso la ‘situación’ funciona para unos y no para los otros?” (Del Barco 93). If the historical and political “situations” have no bearing on the ethical principle, then logically, any killing of another human being is going to be called “murder” (“asesinato”) and equal to any other murder, as Del Barco maintains. It is this logic that permits the philosopher to ask “por qué Videla es malo y usted y yo somos buenos?” (193) because it is the ethical position that sustains an absolute in the face of historical and political particularities.74

73 Bernardo Neustadt and Mariano Grondona are Argentine television personalities well known for their controversial right-wing political commentaries. Grondona participated in the military coup in 1966 and openly supported the dictatorship of 1976-83.

74 Del Barco also clarifies that he does not believe in the “traditional” definition of politics, preferring what he terms “in-política”: “...no creo en esa ‘política’, porque la considero un espacio cerrado que despotencia prácticas esencialmente autónomas que al ser subsumidas en una unidad pueden así ser dominadas-asimiladas por el Sistema. Más bien definiría la política (o la in-política) como una multitud de acciones sin centro, erráticas o perversas, o como una polifonía que ninguna unidad teórica y ninguna práctica ‘política’ de partidos pueden suprimir” (155).
On the other hand, there were those who felt that del Barco’s ethical position in apparent opposition to violence was simply not historically tenable. León Rozitchner in one of the most extensive contributions to the debate, questions what he sees as del Barco’s use of the EGP episode as exemplary or representative. In his view, “Al ampliarse y ser tomada como símbolo de toda violencia política, al abarcar todo el escenario histórico, del Barco nos quiere dar una visión completa de la concepción de la violencia en los enfrentamientos sociales” (372). He warns against the “homogenization” of violence, the lack of discernment, of perception of different kinds of violence and discusses the distinction between violence and counter-violence, offensive and defensive violence, defining the latter as rebellion against submission in the face of oppression. For Rozitchner, it is a response to a greater, systemic violence, akin to self defense and resistance and is carried out in the name of the “valor de la vida y de la población mayoritaria” (372). In his view, the two are radically different in quality. Del Barco responds, by first clarifying that he does not oppose all violence, “yo hablo de muerte, de asesinato, de violencia asesina, y no de violencia en general” (Del Barco 88). He goes on to question the sustainability of Rozitchner’s binary division: “¡De esta manera las dictaduras mal llamadas ‘socialistas’ pudieron y pueden justificarse con sólo cambiar los nombres y en lugar de ‘dictadura’ decir ‘contraviolencia’! ¡Un pase mágico que justifica el asesinato llamándolo contraviolencia!” (Del Barco 90). Del Barco insists, “He planteado una contraviolencia, si se quiere usar esta expresión, no asesina. Esto es algo totalmente distinto de la pasividad absurda que me atribuye Rozitchner” (Del Barco 91). For del Barco, it is essential to remember “Las víctimas eran víctimas pero eran responsables de sus actos, y sus actos eran potencial y realmente de muerte” (171).
Horacio Tarcus, in defense of del Barco’s position, warns that those who see ethics as historically changeable risk ethical relativism, denying the existence or validity of ethical values that transcend history. Nevertheless, it is also important to consider that perhaps the risk of ethical relativism does not in itself constitute an argument for the defense of a purely ethical position, one that is sustained regardless of political and historical context, but rather indicates the necessity and responsibility of carefully considering each “exception” to any ethical principle. Indeed, Alberto Parisí suggests:

Levinas [cited extensively by del Barco] carece de mediaciones para comprender el mundo de lo político, al situarse sólo en la sustancia de un mandato ético originario. […] Sólo condena el crimen, porque imagina una historia ejemplar, donde los conflictos y la muerte no pueden tener lugar (y por lo tanto, no deben tenerlo); pero es incapaz de adentrarnos en las lógicas concretas de la historia humana, donde la vida y la muerte están dramáticamente anudadas. (43)

In the conflict between ethics and politics, it is the ethical principle which posits itself as an absolute. While in the name of history and politics there is a definite risk of ethical relativism, the risk in and of itself does not invalidate the possibility and validity of exceptions.

Horacio Tarcus essentially breaks down the debate to a dialectics between humanism and violence, citing Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In his view, humanism that is non-violent to an extreme, in defending its own principles, is going to end up passively observing violence. In actual fact, absolute humanism needs violence. “En otros términos, el humanismo no puede desconocer la violencia de los opresores, o la violencia sistémica, a riesgo de negarse, convirtiéndose en cómplice de dichas formas de violencia” (Tarcus 19). Tarcus concludes, “El jacobismo, el marxismo, el anarquismo, el leninismo, entonces no inventan la violencia, la encuentran establecida. A la violencia establecida, le oponen la violencia revolucionaria” and he goes on to quote Merleau-Ponty who says
that the issue “‘no es saber si se acepta o se rechaza la violencia sino si la violencia con la cual se pacta es ‘progresista’ y tiende a suprimirse o si tiende a perpetuarse.’ No se trata, pues, de juzgar y condenar en abstracto el crimen, sino de situarlo ‘en la lógica de una situación, en la dinámica de un régimen, en la totalidad histórica a la cual pertenece.

(Tarcus 20).

However, what Tarcus suggests goes beyond identifying violence, or as del Barco puts it, the “crimes” of both the left and the right. While both Videla and leftist militants killed, there is a need to look at why, given that both will claim their acts as “exceptions” to the ethical principle. Therefore, while from a purely ethical standpoint, each assassination is equal, when read in a historical/political context, political and social reasons must be taken into consideration. In this context, it becomes evident that Videla’s “exception” was a detriment to many and benefitted a select few. Having recognized this difference, according to Rozitchner:

[Del Barco] deja de lado el origen de la violencia, y por lo tanto la diferencia entre la violencia y la contra-violencia, pero sobre todo la disimetría de las fuerzas enfrentadas en una situación extrema: quién aplica la violencia con vistas a someter al otro a su voluntad para explotarlo y tenerlo a su servicio, y hasta decretar su muerte, y los equipara con aquéllos que se defienden para que no los aniquilen. La violencia sería sólo una. (384)

Del Barco however clarifies his position stating, “yo no digo que los crímenes de la dictadura sean ‘recíprocos’ con los ‘nuestros’, entiéndase, con los de los ‘revolucionarios’ o guerrilleros, sino que digo que los ‘nuestros’ también son crímenes, lo cual es distinto” (176).

As del Barco explains, in speaking of the two demons he does not ignore the asymmetry between them. Quite simply, in his view, “el fin no justifica los medios” (171). Tarcus, considering the division, questions where to draw the line between
violence and counter-violence or offensive and defensive violence or systematic and social violence. He interprets del Barco as questioning the assimilation of methods of the repressors by the oppressed in their struggle (this would justify the use of the EGP assassinations as an example). As Tarcus sees it, in order to be an effective soldier, the humanist is going to have to deny certain things. The popular army has to take on certain traits of the violence it opposes. In doing so, they compromise their subjectivity. This is where the differences between Santucho, Quieto, Videla and Massera begin to dissolve.

He also questions the results of this violence and the fact that instead of withdrawing, the Montoneros, for instance, embarked on the “Counter Offensive” and, in doing so, entered into the criminal logic of violence allowing the dictatorship to then use them as an excuse to justify their own criminal violence. As Pilar Calveiro points out, by 1976 “La guerrilla había comenzado a reproducir en su seno las formas y las técnicas del poder establecido, antes que generar su cuestionamiento y desarrollar variantes alternativas de práctica y participación política” and reminds us, “Las armas son potencialmente ‘enloquecedoras’: permiten matar y, por lo tanto, crean la ilusión de control sobre la vida y la muerte” (Política 135).

Eugenio Castillo however, questions whether it is actually possible to use entirely different means, disposing entirely of political violence. According to Castillo, “Desear que ‘para hacer una sociedad nueva, no se deben usar las mismas armas que usan los que defienden la vieja’, es desear un imposible, porque defensores y modificadores estamos constituidos por la misma matriz histórica y cultural” (114). At the same time, Castillo warns against the overly simplistic association of means with ends pointing out that while the majority of revolutions have failed, that this is not necessarily simply because they
killed. “No sólo las revoluciones matan, a eso voy; a los tehuelches no los asesinaron en nombre de ninguna revolución, a los armenios tampoco, a los miles que mueren de hambre por las leyes del mercado... es decir, parece que para imponerse, las ideas siempre matan” (113). If means must (historically) involve some degree of violence, perhaps the key is in minimizing this violence to the greatest extent possible, taking pains to avoid all injuries and death except when absolutely necessary. If this is so, the slippery slope of ethical relativism becomes the only alternative. Therefore perhaps it is a question not of outright condemnation but rather of “wise” ethical relativism subject to reconsideration, discussion and criticism at every turn. The answer is not the impossible condemnation of armed struggle but the recognition of its gravity and the assumption of the responsibility entailed, entrusting it to extreme circumstances.

Beyond the ever present tension between means and ends, ethics and politics, there’s another, hidden tension in this debate and one that is also implicit in the narratives discussed in this dissertation. This is the tension between the two distinct moments being considered: the present from which del Barco writes his letter, in which he shares his contrition and, on the other hand, the past of which he writes, the assassinations of two members of the EGP in 1964 and, by extension, the topic of revolutionary violence in the 1960s and 70s. Del Barco begins his letter confessing that the interview with Jouvé moved him, “como si no hubiera transcurrido el tiempo” (31). The problem lies in the impossible conditionality of this “como si.” Del Barco begins his letter by referring to the interview with Jouvé and the assassinations Jouvé describes and in the following paragraph concludes, “Se trata, por lo tanto, de asumir ese acto esencialmente irredimible, la responsabilidad inaudita de haber causado intencionalmente la muerte de
un ser humano” (31). With respect to his contrition, del Barco refers to a very specific moment, stating that he is responsible, guilty of two specific deaths that occurred forty years ago and for supporting the activities of militant groups. Although he concedes that his contrition comes “muy tarde, es cierto,” he defends the importance of the imperative “thou shalt not kill” and the necessity of its transcendence of historical “situations.” In other words, thou shalt not kill, we (directly or indirectly) killed and this amounts to an error for which I (personally and the left in general by extension) must take responsibility. The discussion is not oriented to how one should act but rather how “we,” the left, should have acted. The majority of the letters of those who participated in the debate are not disputing the ethical principle of “no matarás,” at least in the sense that del Barco proposes it as “sostener ese principio imposible es lo único posible” (33). What they argue against is the explanation of the past that del Barco appears to offer through his reiteration of this principle, in his statement that “más allá de todo y de todos, incluso hasta de un posible dios, hay el no matarás” (31). If the debate is situated historically, however, one must consider that the events of the EGP took place a mere five years after the Cuban Revolution and in a world that seemed inevitably divided into two, one where the socialism many would end up fighting for, was absolutely possible and would, it was strongly believed by many of those involved, lead to a better world. The contradiction inherent in del Barco’s letter is that of referring to a specific historical moment while from a distance of several decades lamenting the exception made to an (ahistorical) ethical principle.

This conflict between ethics and politics is ultimately an important one, a tension that will necessarily continue to exist. For Abraham Kozak, one of the contributors to the
debate, this struggle between ethics and politics, means and ends, power and violence depends on a given moment in history and the presence or absence of situations of extreme injustice. Kozak believes:

En cada época la lucha por el poder y la violencia se funda en ‘ideas’ que las sustentan. Pienso que no es tan grave estar ‘atrapado’ por el espíritu de época. Al fin no podemos considerarnos soberbios para ser tan libres e independientes. Lo grave es seguir pensando lo mismo, defender lo mismo y hacerse el distraído cuando logramos salir de la enajenación. Lo grave es no oír el trueno. No ver la luz. (89)

The perpetual tension between ethics and politics serves a useful purpose. The key is to constantly reevaluate the historical and political circumstances as they change and evolve. In part, Oscar del Barco’s letter and the polemic it generated, are an important step in reexamining the debate regarding political violence and revolution, not only with respect to what took place decades ago, but also in terms of present ideas about political violence and how to read this past. In this way, the del Barco debate has played and continues to play an important role in laying the foundation for future thought on the subject.

A text marked by violence

While the del Barco debate reveals the shift that can take place over time in views regarding a contentious issue like revolutionary violence, from practical and political to ethical and abstract, José Amorín’s narrative can be read as a depiction of the effects of the reality of this violence. While in Robles’ narrative Perejiles, described in Chapter 1, violence only appears at the margins, Montoneros: La buena historia (2005) represents the opposite end of the spectrum. The themes of violence and loss are inscribed into Amorín’s text from the very beginning. It is also one of the most conflicted of all the
works included in this dissertation, while at the same time, one of the most revealing.

The intensity of the experiences he narrates is reflected in the book’s chaotic structure and strange mix of registers. Given that the author was a fairly high-ranking member of the Montoneros, the past he chooses to narrate is not an easy one.

Amorín begins his story by revealing, “De nosotros siete, el primero en morir fue el Negro Sabino Navarro [...]. Treinta y tres años después de su muerte, de nosotros siete, solamente sobrevivo yo” (11). According to Amorín, he is the sole survivor of the group and therefore the only one fully able to recount their story. He describes himself as follows:

Y yo, el Petiso, José Amorín: me torturaron, estuve preso, tengo la piel marcada por las cicatrices de cuatro balazos y al alma la tengo signada por la muerte de mis compañeros. No los recuerdo con tanta intensidad como los sueño. Y a veces los sueños se me confunden con los recuerdos. (12)

The scars mark not only his skin, but the text as well, stitched together from what appears to be an assorted series of texts, forming a strange and heterogeneous combination of registers, tones and even genres. Amorín shifts from using irony and sarcasm to a dismissive or light and irreverent tone and at certain points in the text even seems overcome by anger. It is through this “scarred” text that Amorín chooses to represent his conflictive past, showing a concern for his readers’ perceptions and for legitimizing his version of events, “la buena historia.” He demonstrates a particular concern for not only remembering his past, but how he constructs this memory, blurring the lines between fiction and reality and taking advantage of literary devices to express some of the most emotionally and ethically complex aspects of his history.
The book consists of five parts and presents Amorín’s experiences in the “grupo Sabino” and later in the leadership of Montoneros, which the group helped to create. The first part, “Acerca de nosotros,” includes three short stories, descriptions of militant actions the groups carried out and numerous reflections on the origins and beginnings of both organizations. The remaining four sections are mostly essay-like in nature and revisit several long-held debates within the organization. The entire work is strongly autobiographical though it changes registers and even genres multiple times. The book’s four epigraphs emphasize Amorín’s concern for how and what to tell. The first, attributed to historian Eric Hoschbaum [sic], is made reference to in the title of the book: “La buena historia la escriben los vencidos.” Inverting the more classic saying that history is written by the victors, Amorín contrasts history with “la buena historia” and proposes a history at odds with other versions of the past. If this is a “buena historia” there are conceivably other histories that are not so. This is a version that must place emphasis on its own legitimacy and to a much greater degree than officially sanctioned histories or those written by the “victors,” in this case supporters of the neoliberal project opposed by the left. Identifying himself with the vencidos, Amorín implicitly recognizes at least military (if not political) defeat of the revolutionary project. To explain why it is necessary to write this text, to present the good history of the Montoneros, he states: “una de las pretensiones de este libro es reivindicar una lucha y explicar su fracaso” (243).

Amorín later adds: “Para que ustedes sepan quiénes fueron y porque yo también quiero saber quiénes éramos. Para que se nos conozca y se nos comprenda. Para que se nos

75 The seven original members of the “grupo Sabino,” including Amorín, were José Sabino Navarro, Hilda Rosenberg, Carlos Hobert, Graciela Maliandi, Gustavo Lafleur and “Julia” (Amorín never knew her real name). According to the author’s account, the group is formed around January of 1969 and merges with other groups just over a year later to form the well-known Montoneros. Amorín eventually became the head of the Montonero’s northern zone of Greater Buenos Aires division (191).
puede despojar de estigmas satánicos o representaciones heroicas: simplemente para que puedan vernos en nuestra condición humana” (326). Amorín clearly seeks a sympathetic and understanding reader. He is conscious of portraying a certain image of himself and his fellow ex-militants and of choosing what he reveals from his past and how he presents it. This sentiment is echoed in two of the other epigraphs at the beginning of the work. One is attributed to Gabriel García Márquez, “La vida no es la que uno vivió, sino la que uno recuerda y cómo la recuerda para contarla,” and the other to Walter Benjamin, “El articular históricamente lo pasado no significa conocerlo ‘tal como verdaderamente ha sido’ sino adueñarse de un recuerdo tal y como relumbra en el instante de un peligro” (9). Both hint at the very subtle rupture between the past and its recollection, introducing the theme of memory that runs through the book, the idea that the past is not only what took place but also how one remembers it.

Amorín is one of the only ex-militants to speak of having killed. However, he does so through the incorporation of short stories. The framing of events through “fiction” allows him some degree of distancing. Amorín presents a fictionalized version of the Montonero attack on the Quinta Presidencial in the summer of 1971 as a short story entitled “Cosas increíbles que pasan en Montreal” in which he depicts the autobiographical protagonist killing “a guy.” Amorín insists that the story “está basada en hechos reales [...] apenas distorsionados por algún bache de la memoria de los obligados sesgos del ‘estilo’ con el cual están narrados” (20). He explains that the character dubbed “Boga” is militant Carlos Falaschi and “Pepe” is Mario Firmenich, while the protagonist, strikingly similar to Amorín, is merely referred to anonymously as

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76 As noted above, Guevara is one of the exceptions to this.
“el tipo.” The autobiographical “el tipo” watches himself on television and becomes, somewhat schizophrenically, two characters at once. He watches himself, his past, on the television screen: “el tipo—bebió mucho, fumó porro y está solo, viejo y solo—se ve en la pantalla” (21), and precedes to narrate what he sees: a militant action he was involved in that took place in 1971. “El tipo,” looking back, narrates the events from more than 33 years after the fact. In all, the story consists of a complex and interesting layering of five chronologically different moments narrated simultaneously, though all relate to the 1971 event in which “el tipo mató a otro tipo” (20). For obvious reasons, this is a very difficult and controversial aspect of armed militancy to recount and others faced with these memories have apparently preferred silence. By setting this episode apart from the main text as a short story and taking special pains to present it, Amorín draws attention to this episode and its dramatic elements. And while it is one of several stories he inserts into his text, it is the first and is presented barely twenty pages into the book, giving it particular emphasis.

The style Amorín uses in this story is repetitive, almost obsessively so, and descriptive, returning time and time again to details like the eyes of the man, the dead police officer. Amorín’s protagonist “cierra sus ojos para no ver los del otro tipo, los del cana, los del cana muerto que él mató. Que lo vio—cierra los ojos con fuerza el tipo—, que lo vio, sí, lo vio morir mientras lo mataba” (24). He also repeatedly returns to the blood stains “el tipo” sees on his clothes:

Manchas imaginarias—ya se había duchado y cambiado y hasta había quemado la ropa ensangrentada en la parilla del patio de la casa—. Manchas imaginarias, pero indelebles. Quería decir, decir a los compañeros ‘no me las puedo sacar, las manchas, no me las puedo sacar’. Pero se mordió la lengua porque sabía que era su imaginación. (24)
This repetition and almost obsessive attention to details like eyes and blood stains clearly add dramatic effect to the story. They also suggest a possible difficulty in narrating emotionally charged material, as does the end of the story in which the narrator throws a bottle at the television screen and shatters it into a myriad of pieces. His process of remembering is interrupted and fragmented, truncating the thread of his narration. With this act, in what can be read as an attempt to free himself from his past, “manda al otro tipo a cagar. Manda la muerte a cagar” (28). This attempt at self-destruction, at shattering his own reflection in the television screen, suggests an effort to break with his past or at least painful elements of his past, a response to the images that haunt him.

Amorín’s “stories” are also characterized by a recurrent shift between first- and third-person narration, especially notable in moments of intense violence. He introduces his third story, “La noche del alunizaje” with the following:

Como en el caso de ‘Murió por Perón’, recurro a un texto literario para dar un ejemplo—y hacer sentir al lector nuestras vivencias, si ello es posible—de las primeras acciones armadas de un grupo guerrillero. El episodio que narro en ‘La noche del alunizaje’ sucedió cuándo y cómo lo cuento. La imaginación sirvió para reemplazar la desmemoria. (107)

Narrated in third person with the autobiographical el Petiso as the protagonist, the story details a militant action carried out the night of the American moon landing (July 20, 1969). The plan is to assault an arms store to provide their fledging group with arms. Petiso struggles with fear, questioning whether it is his cowardice or the mad plans that “el Negro,” the leader of the group, makes for them to carry out. Pressured by the group, el Petiso plans this militant operation. Meanwhile, this is mixed with memories of another, recent, militant operation in which they attempted to assault the Hospital Aeronáutico and Julia, one of two women in the group, almost gets raped. In the
narration of this memory, when Julia is in danger and he suddenly needs to act, his
character doubles and he can see himself acting:

En ese instante, el Petiso vio al Negro: se incorporó con un rugido inaudible. Y a
él mismo se vio, desde afuera, como en una película: dio un paso a la derecha,
apuntó al soldado de la metralleta, jaló del disparador. Pensó que no podía ser,
pero el soldado se derrumbó, desarticulado como un títere [...] ‘Uno menos’,
musitó el Petiso, despojado de emociones, lúcido como nunca, veía todo. (123-24)

He continues, “los estampidos de cuarenta y cinco provenientes de abajo de la
ambulancia le sonaron como cañonazos, lo hicieron volver a la realidad, cortaron la
película. Y el Petiso tornó a ser él mismo: un pobre diablo con una pistolita veintidós en
la mano” (124). This appears to be the first militant operation in which he fires on
someone. As in many other moments, there is a doubling of the protagonist during
particular moments of tension, heightened violence or intense nervousness.

During yet another militant action, this one presented as anecdote rather than set
apart as a short story, the group of militants involved finds themselves cornered and “el
Petiso” is forced to shoot in order to save his life. He narrates, in first person, the
moment of shooting, of seeing the body of the policeman falling and interrupts his
narration of the event, confessing: “A partir de ese momento, ya no pude ver las cosas
como yo mismo. No pude ni puedo: las veo como imágenes más o menos cortadas de
una película, como si yo no fuera yo sino otro tipo, parecido, igualito a mí en realidad, al
que todos llaman Petiso y...” (43). Here he again interrupts himself and when he resumes
his story it is in the third person. He refers to himself using his militant nickname: “el
Petiso piensa...” The policeman is injured but still alive and shoots in the protagonist’s
direction. “Entonces el Petiso centra la mira en la frente del policía, oprime la cola del
disparador, y la cabeza del policía cae sobre la vereda, su cuerpo se relaja, se aplasta, de
su mano abierta se desliza la pistola” (44). Amorín finishes recounting the officer’s death in a straight-forward and direct way, though in the third person.

Amorín repeatedly couches the most violent and conflicted moments in techniques that allow a certain degree of removal from what he narrates. From an autobiographical, essay-like text, he shifts into short stories and anecdotes and then, at times into movie-like images (“como si fuera una película”) accompanied by a seamless combination of first and third person narration, all allowing a degree of removal and protection through the ambiguity of the borders between fiction and reality. It is not only dreams of his fellow militants that he confuses with reality (12), but reality at times, especially at moments of extreme violence, also comes to resemble a movie with its images and shots where he sees himself from the outside. The narrator comments at one point on this doubling: “siempre le pasa lo mismo al comenzar un operativo: es como si de repente existieran dos Petisos, uno que hace, sin pensar, y otro que observa. Y el que observa a veces se borra y después al Petiso le faltan los recuerdos” (138). There are two Petisos, one that acts without thinking and another that observes and upon whom memories are dependent. The division of the protagonist represents a more profound division of tensions that are present throughout the work, the tension between action and reflection, act and memory. In some ways, this represents the exaggeration of a tendency that appears in all the “narratives of militancy” included in this dissertation.

Amorín’s text vacillates constantly between these two extremes, especially with respect to the manner in which he represents his views on armed militancy and his decision to become a militant. At times he demonstrates a kind of bravado, a light and dismissive or ironic tone. At one point he reflects: “Tal vez porque viví estos hechos y
padecí la extinción del peronismo como motor de cambio, herramienta para la igualdad social, movimiento revolucionario, cuando los rememoro, a pesar de que han transcurrido treinta años, me gana la bronca y me domina el sarcasmo. Pero el sarcasmo sólo me sirve a mí, y lo que yo quiero es explicar” (239). Amorín’s position with respect to violence surfaces at several different points and is characterized by this same ambiguity. At one point, in an attempt to explain his militancy, he describes the revolution as offering the promise of adventure, quite attractive to him as an adolescent: “Para este muchacho rebelde que era yo, no fue difícil llegar a la conclusión de que la única forma de lograr justicia era a través de la violencia: a diferencia de muchos otros, a mi no me resultó difícil la decisión de tomar las armas” (55). At another point, he explains the following, ironically citing the national anthem: “Si algo me había cuestionado, por unas horas me había cuestionado, era el hecho de vernos obligados a matar. Pero así era la Revolución. El camino que habíamos elegido para cambiar la vida. Así era la vida. O con gloria morir” (15, italics are mine). Regarding the “grupo Sabino,” Amorín writes, “No hubo discusiones, la teoría política brilló por su ausencia. [...] Nada de pensar mucho, y aún menos de discutir. Lo que importa, lo que nos une, lo que nos trasciende, aunque caigamos en el intento, es operar” (104). He emphasizes action and adventure, excitement and playing a role in the making of history.

However, there are other moments at which evidence of doubts or at least internal debate enter the text. These are minor comments Amorín makes, perhaps at less guarded moments. At one point he admits, with reference to himself in the third person, “detrás

77 Amorín also describes himself as: “un liberal en sus costumbres, ajeno a cualquier tipo de convicción cristiana o marxista, crítico respecto de Perón y el peronismo, indisciplinado, amante de las mujeres y el vino... ese era yo. Entonces, ¿qué hacía ahí? [...] ¿Porqué [sic] era guerrillero? Porque amaba el riesgo y la aventura, y si ellos tenían un sentido, una justificación social, muchísimo mejor. Nunca había reflexionado al respecto, era algo natural, el devenir obligado de mi propia historia” (14-15).
de la ironía hay otras cosas tan reales como las que atan a su ego” (126) and “así somos los petisos: agrandados pero inseguros” (111). These offhand comments hint at possible contradictions in his apparently assured and excessively bold statements. In the story “Cosas increíbles” for instance, during a moment of reflection, there is a hint of conflict, of recognition of some degree of contradiction when he describes killing the police officer and killing “el otro, el miserable, el sujeto de la miseria” (26). In fact, later in the book he lists the contradictions he feels were inherent to the Montoneros as an organization and includes the following: “Una respuesta violenta a la violencia del poder con las contradicciones que significaba el ejercicio de la violencia en relación a nuestras convicciones humanistas: a modo de ejemplo, ¿acaso los policías con quienes nos enfrentábamos no eran también pobres?” (187). Doubts and reflections like this make brief appearances throughout the text but are dominated and outnumbered by the loud voice of the adolescent thirsty for adventure.

The tension between action and memory is emphasized through the process of writing. Amorín explains: “Escribir esta historia, significa revivirla. Y ello tiene sus costos. Entre los cuales, no es uno menor el miedo a equivocarse. A encubrir las desmemorias con macaneos. Tentación siempre presente cuando quien escribe no es un ensayista ajeno a los hechos sino apenas un narrador que los protagonizó y tiene su cuota de responsabilidad al respecto” (266). Memory is depicted as fallible and the temptation for forgetting, for “desmemoria” is strong, especially given that the author and narrator is the protagonist of his own story and therefore carries a certain degree of responsibility. As Michel Foucault in “Lives of Infamous Men” remarks, “More than any other form of language, [...] [literature] has the duty of saying what is most resistant to being said—the
worst, the most secret, the most insufferable, the shameless” (293). Amorín in narrating his own experiences through his use of “stories” and other techniques that serve to create degrees of distance or ambiguity with respect to reality, appears to move closer to telling the untellable, the most violent aspects of his experiences. After all, as he reminds us in the epigraphs he chooses, even more important than the events of the past is how they are narrated.
Appendix

The following list of Argentine “narratives of militancy” may serve as a guide for future readings or research on the topic. It should be stated that the characteristic ambiguities of these works, especially in terms of genre, makes a definitive selection quite difficult.


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