

## The End(s) of Memory? Negotiating Ambivalence and Resisting *Museumification* Over the Museum of Memory in Argentina

Ari Edward Gandsman

When tourists approach Auschwitz, a common sentiment is bewilderment at how such an immense atrocity could have taken place in the nondescript outskirts of a quaint town. Horrific events demand ghastly landscapes. In a similar vein, I am struck by my own naïve expectations the first time I glimpse *La Escuela de Suboficiales de Mecánica de la Armada*, the Navy Petty-Officer School of Mechanics, aka the ESMA. Traversing the ample boulevard of Libertador through the upper-middle class neighborhood of Nuñez in the northern tip of Buenos Aires, I recognize its neoclassical facade instantly. The ESMA is the key visual symbol of the atrocities committed by the Argentine military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983. Human rights groups believe over 5,000 of the estimated 30,000 people who disappeared during this period vanished through its gates never to reappear. Kidnapped from their homes, place of work, or the streets by the armed forces, they were detained there to be tortured, and, in the vast majority of cases, murdered (under 200 survived). Surrounded by an imposing iron gate and impeccably maintained grounds, the ESMA is a stately building with imposing columns. I naïvely wonder: “How could such atrocities take place in such an elegant building located on the main boulevard of an affluent neighborhood? How could residents have been unaware of what was occurring inside?”

March 24, 2004 is a historic moment marking the transfer of the ESMA from control of the Armed Forces to the city of Buenos Aires. The formal announcement takes place on the 28<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the military coup. President Néstor Kirchner is signing the decree authorizing the transfer. The building is to be transformed into a Museum of Memory. In his speech, Kirchner takes responsibility in his role as President for the previous democratic governments’ failure to fully address the dictatorship’s crimes. “I come to ask forgiveness in the name of the state,” while denouncing the “shame of having been silent during 20 years of democracy for such great atrocities.” This last remark provokes the ire of Raúl Alfonsín who, as first president after the dictatorship, appointed the National Commission of the Disappeared that investigated the disappearance and put the leaders of the dictatorship on trial. Commentators believe the oversight is intentional. By marking a sharp break with the past, his words announce a new era of accountability and an end to the impunity of the past.

More than any other act, the transfer of the ESMA consolidates Kirchner's support among human rights organization.

### **Mapping Ambivalence over the Museum**

The act in the ESMA was one of the most important victories for the Argentine human rights movement, the achievement of one of their key demands. Once the decree was made to transform the site into a Museum of Memory, the question of what to do with the vast complex arises. During that year, I attended several workshops and panels sponsored by human rights organizations to discuss "the museum we want." During subsequent interviews I had with human rights activists, I was surprised to hear a number of activists voice ambivalent feelings about the museum. For example, Adriana who had been kidnapped but survived and was one of the founders of an organization of former Disappeared told me, "The biggest monuments are good for nothing. They are only useful when you debate building them and when you debate destroying them. Once they are there, nobody looks at them. Nobody even knows what they are." I heard variations of this statement from several other informants. "Nobody goes to museums," another activist told me. Others voiced skepticism over the museum becoming a tourist attraction directed primarily at foreigners, pointing to the weekly marches of the *Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*, in which the vast majority present at their weekly marches are foreign visitors who read about it in their guidebooks as one of Buenos Aires' "must see tourist attractions." These comments initially puzzled me. After one of the most important triumphs of the human rights movement, the fruition of more than two decades of activism, there were mixed feelings, not only around the specifics of what to do with the museum but about the very idea of a museum itself. Why were they conflicted over the idea of a museum? How could a key triumph in the human rights struggle in pursuit of justice lead to conflicted and ambivalent feelings? As I will argue, the concretization of a Museum of Memory posed a fundamental dilemma for the future of the human rights movement in Argentina. First, memory was a discourse of resistance that emerged in conscious opposition against the government's version of the past. With the transfer of the ESMA, Kirchner's government was in the process of institutionalizing the human rights movement's version of the past as the official government version. This institutionalization by the government was part of a larger process in which the human rights movement was being incorporated into positions of institutional power. Second, the discourse of memory as used by human rights organizations was always one that was based on process rather than end products. Although activists worked towards concrete goals, its value was seen more in the work done in the temporal moment over potential future accomplishments. A Museum as fixed form posed a fundamental problem to this conception. For this reason, when the ESMA finally re-opened after extensive debate, it was not even called a Museum of Memory but a "space": El Espacio Memoria y Derechos Humanos (Memory and Human Rights Space).

Over the course of the previous decade, human rights activities were organized around what is termed a "politics of memory." As Roniger and Sznajder argued in 1998, this politics of memory emerged as a result of "the inability of the local political systems to confront the legacy of authoritarianism through institutional channels" (134). This lack of institutional channels resulted in ongoing conflict over the past. As Antonius Robben argued, "there is no uniform or even hegemonic Argentine memory about the dirty war, a

designation that is by itself a subject of memory politics” (153). However, at the time Robben was writing this statement, a dramatic political transformation was underway. This was unexpected. In a work published the year before the transfer of the ESMA, Andreas Huyssen in his influential work *Present Pasts: urban palimpsests and the politics of memory* incorrectly predicted that the transformation of the ESMA into a museum would take decades to accomplish while acknowledging that “the emergent national debate about monuments, museums, and memorial sites is fast becoming the terrain on which Argentina grapples with its past” (99). A year later, the ESMA was in the process of becoming a museum. At the same moment, “institutional channels” for addressing the past were in fact reopening through “local political systems” as the Kirchner government was in the process of overturning amnesty laws and pardons that marked a period of impunity. The transformation of the ESMA thus represented a convergence of the human rights movements’ “politics of memory” with state policy, as evidenced by the official ceremony announcing its transformation. The politics of memory originating out of the human rights movement was becoming the hegemonic Argentine memory deployed by the state and its institutions. The ambivalences that I heard voiced by Argentine human rights activists over the museum reflected tensions resulting from the institutionalization of a discourse of collective memory that human rights organizations used in the absence of institutional mechanisms for seeking justice for the dictatorship’s crimes.

### **The Transformation of the ESMA in three brief parts**

To document the ambivalence surrounding the transformation of the ESMA as a “space of collective memory,” I use three ethnographic vignettes charting the initial excitement over the transfer of the ESMA through the uncertainty over what to do with the space and ending in 2008 with a visit to the Museum. The spontaneity of the event announcing the transfer of the ESMA stands in sharp contrast to the formal institutionalization of the space into a museum with its specific codes and mores. The chaos and excitement celebrating the transfer of the space stands in contrast with the subdued institutionalization of the space itself as we moved from an historical event to the challenges in presenting the recent violent past.

*March 24, 2004.* After the formal ceremony of speeches and musical performance, I wander through the sprawling complex. For the first time in its history, the ESMA is open to the public. At the request of human rights groups, police are absent. The atmosphere is festive and triumphant. I follow the flow of the crowd towards the main building. People gather in the closed courtyard that served as a meeting area and dining room. They are singing, waving flags, cheering. The scene conjures images of a victorious army charging into the abandoned fortress of the vanquished or maybe just the aftermath of a home team winning a sports championship. The crowd soon dissipates as people head up the staircase leading into the offices. I follow. In each non-descript office room, people are exploring every desk drawer and file cabinet, tossing papers around, rummaging through what the Navy left behind. They are trying to make sense of what they see. It is an effort to find material traces of the horror that took place almost three decades earlier. The premises have been hastily abandoned. Traces of ordinary office life are still present. A man tears down a photocopied piece of paper taped on the wall that bears the name of the ESMA. People are writing with chalk on the walls, others with magic marker. I am astounded at the

freedom people have. Some dump the papers found in filing cabinets over the balcony. They flutter like confetti onto the closed courtyard. I pick one up. A mundane bureaucratic form reveals nothing of interest.

As I wander through another room, a young man climbs over a locked storage area. He hands to his friend a box that he has uncovered. "We've got souvenirs," his friend shouts, as he tears open the box to reveal ceramic plates. He hands the pile to the surrounding crowd. People are generous. They take one plate from the stack and pass the rest on to the next person. The pile is handed to me. I examine a non-descript plain white plate without design, logo, or insignia. Why would anyone want to keep one? I pass the stack on to the others. Not everyone is celebrating though. In the *Casino de Oficiales*, the Officers' House where the disappeared were detained and tortured, small groups cry as they wander through the premises where their family members may have been detained. Several people yell in vain at those pilfering items. "We have to preserve all of this. What are you doing? Stop taking things." Nobody pays them any heed. The artifacts they are taking appear inconsequential.

The next day, newspapers will use these events to cast a shadow over the event. They will report of vast "looting" and "vandalism" that took place there. The "looting" appears mundane to me, more symbolic than actual. Any proof that had remained in the complex at the time of eviction would have been transferred or eliminated. Everything left behind appears incidental. I am wandering through another office as a man unearths a pile of books. The crowd begins to distribute them. The banality of one title catches my eye, *Business Management with a Human Face*. I see someone walking off with a map depicting two Germanys and the Soviet Union. As I exit the building, a teenager runs past me smiling gleefully displaying to his friend a broken office telephone he has taken. What is left behind is no different from what former tenants of an apartment leave behind after a hasty eviction, items not worth the effort of moving. The black magic markers on the walls will be painted over when the space eventually is transformed into a Museum. The ESMA existed as the central manifestation of the dictatorship's power. That the complex had been closed to the public heightened its aura of mystique and terror. The untrammelled access serves to demystify it. It also gives a tangible sense of victory. As I exit through the main gates, I head down the main avenue. I trample upon a small and rumpled flyer. I pick it up. "*No a La Entrega de La ESMA*" ("No handing over of the ESMA"), it declares. The group who printed the flyer is unidentified. It is the sole visible manifestation of opposition to the event I witness that day.

*Six months pass.* A group of twenty-something *estadounidenses* descend from a tourist bus in Buenos Aires. A few snap photographs. We could be in the Recoleta Cemetery where the dead rest in opulence or in San Telmo roaming through the flea market or tango clubs or perhaps taking in the "picturesque poverty" of La Boca. However, this was not the typical tourist excursion. Having traveled through various sites, we are stopping outside of the ESMA. The guide describes what took place inside. One of the human rights organizations has organized a "Memory Trip," one for Argentines and one for foreigners. This was the trial run that took us from the Plaza de Mayo, *Club Atlético* (another clandestine military detention center that had been demolished but had been excavated in recent years), and Parque de la Memoria. I was not invited because of my ostensible expertise but

rather because of my foreign citizenship. The others were a fairly unrepresentative group of fellow *gringos* comprised almost entirely of Fulbright scholars.

What was clear to me from the start was that the tour's script offered an extremely narrow view of what happened during the dictatorship, one that stood in sharp contrast to the narrative of the dictatorship provided by academics and human rights groups. In terms of economic context, there was no mention of the complex net of civilian relationships that supported the dictatorship, nor the dictatorship's economic plan, nor mention of the external debt that was a result of the dictatorship's policies and that had bankrupted the country in 2001. In terms of larger sociopolitical context, there was no word about counterinsurgency doctrine, nor the Cold War, nor the School of Americas, nor the coordinated efforts of South American dictatorships to eliminate dissidents known as Operation Condor. Neither was there much of a discussion of who the disappeared actually were. In the tour, they primarily existed as victims of the dictatorship; kidnapped, detained, tortured and killed. What they thought and believed was absent beyond a few scattered and generic references – “young people who wanted to make the world a better place.” Absent the larger political and socioeconomic context, the tour seemed superficial. Directed at foreigners, the tour appeared to easily confirm stereotypical notions about Latin America; evil military torturers and irrational, moustached men in uniforms who committed unspeakably brutal acts that could now be safely viewed from the comfortable distance of time and space. In the tour, past was firmly in the past. My initial impression was that the tour needed to be more disquieting. It should raise a mirror to its audience rather than confirm their own sense of moral superiority.

I was surprised that the tour had been developed by a human rights organization since to me it imparted the wrong lessons. Later I spoke with one of the organizers and realized that the problems were not merely the consequence of an oversimplified script. The complexities that were absent in the tour were abstractions that were not contained in the physical manifestations of state terror that were being presented as “memory sites.” Physical spaces bear witness to the events that occurred within them. Material artifacts can only speak to how they were used. The problem was conceptual. “Spaces of memory” organized around clandestine detention centers contain the torture and murder that took place within them. They have greater difficulty addressing the invisible relations and networks of power that created and sustained such grisly sites. A few weeks later I speak to someone who works to the organization. Due to internal debates, they decided to not pursue the tours. Several individuals had raised objections to “dark tourism” or likened it to controversial “*favela* tours” in Brazil that critics accuse of being voyeuristic and exploitative. Bilbija and Payne have recently addressed criticisms of the potential “commodification” of post-violence memories in Latin America in an edited volume (Bilbija & Payne). What is notable here is how “memory workers” themselves have voiced similar ambivalent feelings about the commercialization of memory.

*Summer 2008.* Over four years have passed when I next revisit the ESMA. The ESMA is now presented in guides as a tourist destination although the site has only recently been open to the public in pre-arranged guided tours after extensive debate and discussion. In the expensive space, the tour is limited to one of the complexes' buildings: El Casino de Oficiales. Because it is still the site of investigations, we are told that photographs are not permitted.

In the end, they have decided to “let the space speak for itself.” There are no reconstructions and only a minimal number of informative panels. A self-conscious desire to avoid the trappings of “terror tourism” and not turn the site into a “House of Horrors” shaped the decision. In the end, the space was left largely empty with no effort to “recreate” the space as it was during the military period with some maps, explanations and excerpts from survivor testimonies. Several years earlier, when I was interviewing human rights activists about the museum, many favored this minimalist approach. The space should just describe what happened, nothing less, nothing more, they believed. As such the austere space does not resemble a standard museum or historical sites. Traveling through the same spaces where I had witnessed the raucous celebration four years earlier, I am struck by the jarring juxtaposition. From the excitement of that initial moment, I am now on a quiet tour that treats the place as a sacred space with the religious reverence of hushed whispers and funereal solemnity. Perhaps this was what an official space of collective memory meant, a space whose silent austerity would provoke collective reflection or even genuflection. If collective memory is metaphorical, spaces like the ESMA provide “storage,” synapses of memory that can inculcate particular representations of the past in its visitors. On the other hand, my experience may not have been a representative one as the ESMA has resisted a standardized narrative of the past that one would associate with museums. With minimal information, the tour relies on tour guides (some survivors of the site themselves) who do not stick to an official script. Others who have visited the site have reported to me their tour guides giving radical political speeches, making it a far less solemn experience.

### **Navigating Ambivalence: Memory as Process over Product**

In discussions with several Argentine human rights activists while the debate over the ESMA was still ongoing, many viewed the Museum itself – the final physical manifestation – as anti-climactic. Although acknowledging its historical importance, they were uncertain of its pedagogical value and suspicious of it as a future tourist destination. These were many of the same people who argued not to rush to create the museum when it was first announced. Open and public debate was more important than an open and public museum, they believed. For example, Adriana, a survivor who had been disappeared by the dictatorship and was active in an organization comprised of the Ex-Disappeared, saw the importance of the museum not in its final material outcome but as ongoing process. Adriana continued, The important thing for society is the debate... If you told us now that Kirchner would sign a decree to do exactly what we (her organization, the *Ex-Disappeared*) want with the ESMA right now, we would say no. That would be useless. The national debate is important. We asked for the Ministry of Education to push the debate in schools and universities and use state media services to push the debate on television and on the radio. This is useful. Right now, there’s been nothing. We want six or seven debates in public spaces. It’s been too international thus far and not enough of the *pueblo*. We prefer to have the discussion in neighborhood centers, social clubs, cultural centers where people go. Not just exports. This isn’t a matter for museologists and experts. They can speak if they want. We won’t stop that. But the people – what they think, what they want - are more important. This is the debate that interests us. (Interview, June 4, 2004, my translation)

To what degree human rights organizations were successful in having this public debate is open to question. They held workshops and public consultations to solicit debate

and suggestions from the public, several of which I attended. There were visits from prominent international museologists and countless editorial pages devoted to the struggle. I will not analyze the specific debate as it has already been covered extensively in terms of what the different competing visions for the museum meant (see Brodsky). What this article attempts to understand is why human rights activists like Adriana considered the debate more important than the actual space, the end result of the debate. To understand this, we have to trace the particular usage that human rights activists have made of the concept of memory in post-dictatorship Argentina and why a museum posed a threat to this conception.

### **Memory and Human Rights**

While there was extensive debate about what the “Museum” would look like, there was never any debate that it would prominently feature memory in its name. While one could ask why “memory” instead of “history” or “genocide” would be used, memory was an obvious choice for the name since it was one of the key demands of human rights. In the vocabulary of human rights, memory long comprised, along with truth and justice, a troika of interrelated demands. Invocations of memory have been omnipresent in the Argentine human rights movement. Besides the ESMA as a space of memory, there exists an Archives of Memory, a Commission of Memory, a Memory Park, a Center for the Study of Memory, organizations called Open Memory, Active Memory, and so on.

This proliferation of memory is obviously not unique to Argentina but part of a larger global discourse that Klein termed the “memory industry” (127) that is related historically to the advent of modernity (Cole). Memory is a dominant trope of art, literature and the social sciences. In the first half of the twentieth century, modernist art, literature and film explored memory’s intricacies and indeterminacies. Half a decade later, the social sciences and the humanities followed suit. The past two decades have witnessed an explosion of academic work focusing on memory. More than an area of interest, memory has emerged as a viable interdisciplinary field of study in the form of Memory Studies. In Argentina, an interest in memory is specifically a product of the human rights movement who employ it as a self-directed goal and an objective. In this way, I will not discuss memory here as a product of mental faculties involved in the retention and recollection of past experiences (an individual phenomenon) but as a discourse involved in the institutional production of knowledge about the past (a collective phenomenon).

In Argentina, a fluid relationship exists between the production of academic knowledge on memory and the work of human rights organizations. Popular references to memory by human rights are thus inseparable from the production of academic work on memory about the dictatorship as a major area of Argentine social sciences (see Guber). For example, between 1998 and 2002, the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) of the US funded a project called “Collective Memories of Repression: Comparative Perspectives on Democratization Processes in Latin America’s Southern Cone” with the support of the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations. The SSRC fund had three interrelated objectives all organized around the concept of collective memory. The first was to generate theoretical and empirical knowledge about memory. The second was to promote the development of researchers trained in such issues and the third was to subsequently create a network of public intellectuals in the region who worked on issues of social memory. Among other activities,

they eventually published a twelve-volume series devoted to numerous issues around memory: commemorations (Jelin, *Las conmemoraciones*), monuments and places (Jelin and Langland), archives (da Silva Catela and Jelin) role of the media (Feld), local struggles (del Pino & Jelin), etc.

The academic director of the project was a sociologist, Elizabeth Jelin, who, as a result of this project, published *State Repression and the Labors of Memory* in 2003. Jelin frames her work around a “politics of memory,” the space of contestation that invocations of memory invariably open. The question is: Who remembers what and why? To speak of social or collective memory is to speak of a shared set of representations about the past, a collective set of thoughts or beliefs about a certain historical event or period. Within a politics of memory, what is at stake in this is that others remember the period in the overlapping ways that “our side” does.

In this sense, analyses of “collective memory” or “sites of memory” are often less analytic examinations of a social phenomena but a programmatic project that involves a projection of the researcher’s own political goals or worldview onto a collective. To cite one fairly representative example, Silvia Tandeciarz in an article entitled “Citizens of Memory” writes of an “eruption of memory we witness today in the Buenos Aires cityscape” (152) that she hypothesizes will lead to new forms of civic engagement of citizens that “will lead them to repeat a new mantra – one grounded in the inalienable human rights of each of its people” (167).

In such analyses, collective memory is often a nebulous concept invoked uncritically rather than critically examined. In *The Ethics of Memory*, philosopher Avishai Margalit calls collective memory “a doubtful extended metaphor” (16) because of how it extends an individual biological phenomenon into a collective one. In a way, it is a throwback to an older view of society as organic entity that possesses the properties of a living, breathing organism. This is evident in one of the foundational texts in this literature, Paul Connerton’s *How Societies Remember*. Instead of memory being stored in the synapses of the brain’s hippocampus, the literature examines memory as stored in museums, monuments, and other place sites. Margalit’s primary concern is whether groups have an ethical obligation to remember. In this sense, he embraces the notion of collective memory as both an idealized and prescriptive concept. The way he speaks of an ethical obligation to remember is relevant here since the same notion is implicit in Argentine human rights groups and academic discussions of memory which often conflate collective memory in a descriptive sense with collective memory in a prescriptive sense.

As others have also argued (Antze & Lambek, La Capra), memory is deeply involved in issues of ethical responsibility and accountability for the past. In invoking collective memory, Argentine human rights groups and academics argue an obligation exists to remember the military dictatorship’s actions. It is not just the responsibility of family members of the disappeared or for survivors but taken to be the collective ethical responsibility of all Argentines. Margalit’s ethics of memory is based on what he calls “thick relations” mobilized around “caring” (31). These relations start with close personal relationships but can be subsequently extended into wider networks based on religion, ethnicity, nationality, or other collective belongings. This provides the basis for Margalit’s discussion of what constitutes a



“community of memory.” A “natural candidate” Margalit cites for such a community of memory is the state since states are believed to share a common origin or history. But how are the relations within that community conceptualized? For Margalit, family relations provide the “formative metaphor for thick ethical relations” (103).

The “community of memory” in Argentina is similarly organized around kin relations. Kinship organized around family members of the disappeared structures the most prominent and public human rights organizations in Argentina: the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, H.I.J.O.S. and the more general *Familiares* (Family Members of the Disappeared). In this sense, kinship is biological (the direct relation with the disappeared) and metaphorical (the way in which, for example, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo become “mothers of everyone” or “universal mothers”). In this case, the work of human rights organizations is to extend the “thick relations” of kinship to a larger community – to all of Argentine society in an extension of the familial metaphor. However, the perpetrators are not external. They were perpetrated at the hands of the security forces. In a “divided society” like Argentina, two competing visions of the past wage war in a struggle for public recognition. Creating a community of memory organized around the disappeared necessitates sharing of the narrative that human rights advance and rejecting the “official” representation of the past. Although often linked to the concept of a dueling “politics of memory,” memory had been the exclusive provenance of human rights along a dichotomy constructed between memory and history. In this literature, memory has been self-consciously positioned as history’s antithesis. This is a common representation of memory that as Klein observed, “where history is concerned, memory increasingly functions as antonym rather than synonym; contrary rather than complement and replacement rather than supplement” (4).

An early and important example of how this history/memory dichotomy functions is found in the 1985 film *La historia oficial* (The Official Story). The film was one of the first to address the dictatorship and became an international success, the first Argentine film to win an Academy Award for Foreign-Language Film and still commonly taught in university courses today as one of the most enduring representations of the military dictatorship. The film’s title implicitly juxtaposes the dictatorship’s “official history” (since *historia* translates into Spanish as both history and story) with memory. As if to hammer in the message, the film opens and closes over an image of a little girl singing a song “In the land of I-don’t-remember.”. The official history is based on lies and forgetting. The film’s protagonist who is forced to face the horrors taking place during the dictatorship is a history professor who is continually challenged by her students over the truth-value of the written record. Since the official history is lies, memory becomes the locus of truth.

Memory emerges in human rights discourse to represent History’s counter figure, a means of resisting the “official histories” told by positions of power, an opposing way of representing the past. Within this dichotomy, History belongs to those in positions of power. Memory belongs to the people. Memory, as opposed to History, is seen as open, collective, and shared. Memory is a counter-discourse to official history, one that is found in the testimonies of survivors and family members.

“We are people with memory,” is a sentence I heard numerous times spoken by human rights activists during the course of my fieldwork. “To speak about memory is to

speak about human rights,” a novelist said at a talk marking the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary republication of *Nunca Más*. The link between memory and human rights has its origins after the dictatorship. However, the movements towards what can be called a “culture of memory” were linked to the emergence of memory as a form of resistance against impunity. In the late 1980s, when amnesty laws exempted prosecutions and then President Carlos Menem, promulgating a narrative of “national reconciliation,” pardoned those who were convicted, human rights activists saw a long struggle in front of them. During this time, Klaus Barbie was arrested in France for his role in the deaths of 4,000 people during World War II. Human rights activists in Argentina drew a powerful lesson. His trial began months after the amnesty laws were passed. If Barbie could be arrested, stand trial and eventually be convicted for war crimes he committed four decades earlier, Argentine human rights activists had hope. As long as memory of the events of the dictatorship remained “active,” justice, curtailed in the present, could be pursued in the future. In such a way, demands for memory were inextricably linked to demands for justice. At the beginning of the 1980s, references to memory are more literal. They are to the testimonies of the survivors and the ex-disappeared, testifying to events that occurred years earlier and the reliance on their memory of what occurred. By the late 1980s, a “culture of memory” emerged, organized primarily around family member-human rights activists.

### **Contested Narratives and the Struggle over the ESMA**

The historical struggle over what to do with the physical structure of the ESMA was a struggle between two dueling narratives: the “official history” of what happened between 1976 and 1983 propagated by the state before Kirchner took power, and the “memory” of what happened during those years propagated by the human rights movement. For years, the fact that the ESMA, the emblematic site of the military dictatorship’s atrocities, remained in the hands of the armed forces was an affront to human rights organizations. Recovering the building was a key objective. In January 1998, President Carlos Menem proposed demolishing the ESMA and erecting in its place a monument that would serve as “a symbol of national unity.” The proposal came at a key moment in the human rights struggle. An enormous turnout for the commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the coup in 1996 and the public confessions of a military perpetrator who had participated in one of the “death flights” in 1995 had revitalized the human rights movement in Argentina that had been stalled by pardons that Menem had given in 1990 along with earlier amnesties. Of particular importance was the addition of H.I.J.O.S, an organization founded by children of the disappeared, to the constellation of human rights groups, marking a new generation’s emergence. The activities of H.I.J.O.S. helped revitalize an ageing movement. In interviews with human rights activists, they pointed to the period between 1995 and 1998 as a landmark period.

The activities of new human rights groups like H.I.J.O.S. and older groups like the *Mothers* and *Grandmothers* were instrumental in reopening legal investigations. Human rights lawyers and sympathetic judges were beginning to find the juridical means to pursue justice against military perpetrators that circumvented the amnesties and pardons. For example, at the time, a judicial inquiry into the systematic abduction of minors would lead to the arrests of Videla and Massera later in the year. At the same time, Judge Baltasar Garzón in Spain was beginning to pursue international justice against Chilean and Argentine military

leaders (Garzón would issue an arrest warrant for Pinochet in late 1998, followed by subsequent warrants for Argentine military perpetrators) (Bermudez and Gasparini; Anguita). Meanwhile, a center-left political coalition was attempting to annul the amnesty laws.

Menem's proposal was viewed as a concerted effort to curtail this newfound momentum by reasserting a narrative of national reconciliation. Menem offered the proposal as a compromise. The space would be taken away from the armed forces and family members would be able to pay tribute to the disappeared there and the area would be destined for public use. Human rights organizations, however, reacted with outrage, rejecting the proposal outright. Menem had previously made use of the idea of reconciliation. When he issued pardons of military officers convicted of human rights abuses, he simultaneously offered pardons to leaders of the revolutionary organizations like the Montoneros, what human rights activists view as an attempt to create false equivalence. With the ESMA, Menem's intent was explicit. The "symbolic value" of the proposed monument was "based on the effort to leave antinomies behind and to take in the lessons of recent history" (Clarín). In the words of Menem's general secretary, the government believed national reconciliation was "the goal of Argentines" (Calvo). In framing his proposal in terms of reconciliation, Menem divided Argentines into two camps – the majority who wanted to leave the past behind and "move on" and others – human rights activists – who remained trapped in the past wanting to "reopen old wounds." Menem's historical narrative in which Argentina emerged out of an armed conflict in which the military committed "excesses" presupposed this notion of reconciliation. His vision for the monument was one where the two sides would come together and put aside their old grievances. This was the "theory of the two demons" – the official history that postulated two opposing sides in a civil war. This narrative represented what happened in Argentina as a struggle between the Armed Forces and communist insurgents in which some innocent civilians ended up trapped in between.

Reconciliation was thus predicated on pacification based on amnesties and pardons. Human rights organizations refused to accept the pardons and rejected the equivalence they tried to create that was used to mitigate or justify the military's actions. The history of human rights in Argentina is a history of obstinacy, a refusal to give in or to concede on their key demands or to make any accords. This intransigence precludes any notion of reconciliation. They also reject the possibility of forgiveness and argue for a retributive model of justice in which their goals are non-negotiable and no single issue conceded. Human rights groups mobilized to block Menem. Eventually, Federal Judge Adolfo Bagnasco suspended the plans. Bagnasco was investigating the systematic theft of babies and based his order to suspend the demolition on the ongoing investigation arguing that demolishing the building would eliminate key evidence in an ongoing investigation. Meanwhile, the political opposition proposed a "Museum of *Nunca Más*" modeled on the Holocaust museum in Auschwitz. By 2000, after Menem was out of power, the Buenos Aires city legislators approved a bill demanding the national government to return the ESMA to the city. The municipality had ceded the land to the Navy in 1924 so they felt that they were justified in asking for it back. They announced their intention to transform the ESMA into a Museum of Memory to "protect and cultivate collective memory" about state terrorism

arguing for the necessity “to preserve the places that constitute the paradigmatic testimony of criminal repressive action like the ESMA building” (Clarín).

In the midst of the controversy resulting from Menem’s proposal, an editorial written by historian Luis Alberto Romero epitomized the position of human rights groups and their supporters. He counters Menem’s effort to revive the “Two Demons” with reference to the human rights movement who were in the process of “constructing memory” (Romero). One of the key objectives of the human rights movement had been to undermine the view that what took place in Argentina during the military dictatorship was a civil war. Rather than a civil war, they struggled to make what happened understood as genocide. He described this memory construction as “a highly specialized work of intellectuals, politicians and citizens, this is to say those who want to imprint on the spontaneous memory of society a certain orientation tied to values that they have chosen” (Romero).

### **When Memory becomes History**

While acknowledging that memory had competing versions, Romero’s focus on memory as “constructed” and a “highly specialized work” is significant. Memory as a goal directed work answers a basic question as to why human rights groups would mobilize around a discourse that acknowledges not only indeterminacy but also falsifiability. Memory’s indeterminacy also allows for its transformative power. That it is not fixed but “active” and process-oriented allows human rights groups to seize upon it as part of the “work” of human rights that can yield end products (such as a Museum).

Part of the ambivalence over the Museum of Memory lies in the idea of museums as fixed, as a victory of finished forms for a discourse that is oriented towards ongoing process. In this dynamic sense, memory was not merely embedded in material sites and cultural artifacts but mobilized through social networks and engaged in a set of material practices. If memory was active, conscious and subjective, a museum represented just the opposite. The “official history” during most of the post-dictatorship period was that what took place in Argentina was a justifiable war in which the military made some mistakes and committed certain excesses. The memory during this time was that of genocide. On the other hand what does it mean now that the “official history” in Argentina has become one of genocide? Human rights groups had first used the term in the 1980s but most scholars did not begin using it until the late 1980s and early 1990s. The term was important to describe what happened during the military dictatorship as being systematic state policy that was directed at eliminating an entire group.

After Kirchner was elected president, he began using the term. When he overturned the pardons and amnesty laws and trials restart, Miguel Etchecolatz was put on trial. He was originally convicted in 1986 and sentenced to 23 years in prison but, like the others, he was subsequently pardoned. Twenty years later, in 2006, he was placed on trial again. This time, he was sentenced to life imprisonment for murder, illegal privation of liberty, and torture. In announcing the verdict, the judge described Etchecolatz’s actions as “crimes against humanity in the context of genocide that took place in Argentina between 1976 and 1983.” This was the first time that the judiciary used the term “genocide.” As an editorial in the progressive newspaper *Página/12* noted, “the most relevant aspect of this ruling is that it

has introduced the notion of genocide twenty years after the end of the dictatorship. It was a key step in the historical interpretation of state terrorism of the 70s. The word came with the arrival of a new generation of judges” (Russo).

### **The Politics of Memory in the Museum**

As Tvetan Todorov writes,

Memory is never the integral reconstruction of the past, but always no more than a choice, a construct; and that such mental operations are not predetermined by the subject matter recurring to memory, but very much by agents who remember, with a particular goal in view...Everyone has a right to remember as he or she sees fit, or course, but a community will place a high value on some uses of memory even as it condemns others; it cannot practice an undifferentiated cult of remembrance (177).

The armed forces and its defenders object to how their memories are being “shut out” for recognition. The construction of a space of memory on the primary site of military terror provides the framework for how future generations will understand the dictatorship’s actions. Doing this required enshrining one view of the past over another. This was the self-conscious task that Argentine intellectuals and human rights activists took upon themselves when they created organizations devoted to the construction and preservation of memory. As Pierre Nora influentially argues the success of what he terms the *lieux de memoire* “originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally” (12).

If the act in the ESMA opened a debate about what memories should be included in the future “Museum of Memory,” it was a limited debate. The “Museum of Memory” was always planned as the institutionalization of the human rights narrative of the dictatorship. The struggle was over the competing narratives within the human rights movement itself. These successes of the human rights movement were tied to shifts in political power. These successes are not irreversible. However, if memory emerged as a counter-discourse out of a particular historical matrix – a discourse of resistance in response to a context of impunity – a whole set of questions are raised when that discourse becomes *la historia oficial* (the official history) and the possibility of justice reemerges.

In this sense, when human rights organizations appealed to debate, they were not asking for a public debate between these two contesting visions of what took place during the dictatorship. Debate was an appeal to keep memory work alive as a process and skepticism over the processes involved in fixing memory in a museum. Their goal was to make their memory of what happened become the historical memory of all Argentines. As Mario Toer writes in an article entitled “The Memory of Argentines,” “In Argentina we have won an important battle in the ongoing struggle to elevate the human condition. The dark chapter that those who exercised domination would have liked to remember as the *Heroic war against subversion* is today remembered as the most terrible time in our history”(qtd. in Iglesias, Winer, Tiron, and Gonzalez 11).

In other words, the debate about what to do with an ESMA was not about which version of the past would be institutionalized. It would mark the institutionalization of the human rights version (so hence it would be *a space of memory and human rights*). Arguments still existed within and between different human rights organizations and activists but the debate was largely one of subtle nuances rather than fundamental differences or opposing representations of the past. Human rights activists struggled with a dual conception that memory needed to be broad and inclusive yet not too broad or inclusive. The accounts of military perpetrators and their defenders justifying what happened would not be permitted. The military's version of the past would not be allowed in the ESMA. The debate about the space was not over what would be remembered but *how* it should be remembered.

### **The End of Memory?**

In the end, committed to a discourse of memory as process rather than finished form, the space could not even be called a "Museum." The victory of the Argentine human rights movement posed a problem for a movement predicated on opposition to official government policy when its objectives became official government policy. Demands for memory among human rights organizations in Argentina were demands for accountability in the absence of legal means of justice. Collective memory in the way that both human rights activists and academics employ the concept in Argentina is less descriptive as it is prescriptive and normative. It is also processual rather than fixed, deliberate rather than spontaneous, and describes a process not a product. The end process is to take moral responsibility on a collective scale for what happened. In the context of impunity, with no viable means of forging accountability and justice in the present, activists forged a discourse of "collective memory" in order to keep advancing their claims. The announcement of the transformation of the ESMA came at the same time that the Kirchner government was overturning the amnesty laws and pardons and resuming human rights trials. Once the Supreme Court affirmed this decision, citing the imprescriptibility of crimes against humanity, in addition to the other trials already mentioned, the ESMA itself became the largest site of legal justice: "*la megacausa ESMA*" (the "ESMA mega-trial"). The first case began in 2007. In November 2012, as part of this ongoing series, the largest human rights trial opened with sixty-eight defendants charged in the kidnapping, torture and forced disappearance of over 700 victims. Even thirty-five years after the crimes, human rights groups argue that they will continue pursuing these cases into the indefinite future until all remaining perpetrators are brought to justice. Rather than a museum with its implications as a fixed historical site, the ESMA is the crime scene for ongoing trials.

Historian Yosef Yerushalmi famously asked if it was possible that the opposite of forgetting is not remembering, but justice. Yerushalmi's work represents one of the foundational texts in the production of academic works on memory (Klein 127). This quote is omnipresent in Argentina both in scholarly articles on memory and in human rights organizations. For example, it is a quote that appears on the cover of a report on Memory and the Dictatorship sponsored by the organization Permanent Assembly of Human Rights. If memory is a demand for collective responsibility, justice is the institutional means by which responsibility can be legally attributed. In this case, they are used synonymously and so hence Yerushalmi's question. On the other hand, they also might lead to redundancies.

Equating justice with memory makes sense when legal justice is not possible. Once juridical accountability exists, where does this leave memory? In the triumph of memory, the first casualty might be the discourse of memory itself. Is it possible that the opposite of memory is not forgetting, but justice?

### Works Cited

- Anguita, Eduardo. *Sano juicio: Baltasar Garzon, algunos sobrevivientes y la lucha contra la impunidad en Latinoamerica*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana. 2001. Print.
- Antze, Paul, and Michael Lambek. "Introduction: Forecasting Memory." *Tense Past*, Eds. Paul Antze, and Michael Lambek. New York: Routledge, 1996. xi-xxxviii. Print.
- Bermudez, Norberto, and Juan Gasparini. *El Testigo Secreto*. Buenos Aires: Javier Vergara. 1999. Print.
- Bilbija, Ksenlja, and Leigh Payne, eds. *Accounting for Violence: Marketing Memory in Latin America*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2011. Print.
- Brodsky, Marcelo. *Memoria en Construcción: El Debate Sobre la Esma*. Buenos Aires: Coleccion Lavistagorda. 2005. Print.
- Calvo, Javier. "Demolerán la ESMA y colocarán un monumento por la unión nacional." *Clarín* 8 January 1998. Web. 13 November 2013.
- Catela, Ludmila da Silva, and Elizabeth Jelin, eds. *Los archivos de la repression: Documentos, memoria y verdad*. Madrid: siglo veintiuno. 2002. Print.
- Clarín. "ESMA: el Gobierno salió a rechazar las críticas." *Clarín* 9 January 1998. Web. 13 November 2013.
- Clarín. "Pedido por el predio de la ESMA" *Clarín* 21 May 2000. Web. 13 November 2013.
- Cole, Jennifer. "Memory and Modernity: Overcoming the Social/Individual Divide in Memory Studies." *The Companion to Psychological Anthropology*. Eds. Conerly Casey, and Robert Edgerton. London: Blackwells. 2004. 103-120. Print.
- Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 1989. Print.
- del Pino, Ponciano, and Elizabeth Jelin, eds. *Luchas locales, comunidades, e identidades*. Madrid: siglo veintiuno. 2003. Print.
- Feld, Claudia. *Del estrado a la pantalla: Las imágenes del juicio a los ex comandantes en Argentina*. Madrid: siglo veintiuno. 2002. Print.

- Guber, Rosana. "Antropología social: An Argentine diaspora between revolution and nostalgia." *Anthropology Today* 18.4 (2002): 8-13. Print.
- La Historia Oficial*. Dir. Luis Puenzo. Historias Cinematograficas Cinemania, 1985. Film.
- Huyssen, Andreas. *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2003. Print.
- Jelin, Elizabeth, ed. *Las conmemoraciones: las disputas en las fechas "in-felices."* Madrid: siglo veintiuno. 2002. Print.
- . *State Repression and the Labors of Memory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2003. Print.
- Jelin, Elizabeth, and Victoria Langland, eds. *Monumentos, memorializes y marcas territoriales*. Madrid: siglo veintiuno. 2003. Print.
- Klein, Kerwin Lee. "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse." *Representations*. 69. (2000): 127-150. Print.
- La Capra, Dominick. *History and Memory After Auschwitz*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1998. Print.
- Margalit, Avishai. *The Ethics of Memory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2002. Print.
- Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24. Print.
- Robben, Antonius. "How Traumatized Societies Remember." *Cultural Critique* 59 (2005): 120-164. Print.
- Romero, Luis Alberto. "ESMA: se está buscando construir otro pasado." *Clarín* 13 January 1998. Web. 13 November 2013.
- Roniger, Luis, and Mario Sznajder. "The Politics of Memory and Oblivion in Redemocratized Argentina and Uruguay." *History and Memory* 10.1 (1998): 133-169. Print.
- Russo, Sandra. "Apuntes sobre una palabra," *Página/12*, 4 June 2011. Web. 13 November 2013.
- Tandeciarz, Silvia R. "Citizens of Memory: Refiguring the Past in Postdictatorship Argentina," *PMLA* 122 (2007): 151-169. Print.
- Todorov, Tvetan. "The Touvier Trial." *Memory, The Holocaust and French Justice: the Bousquet and Touvier Affairs*. Eds. Richard Golsan, and Lucy Golsan. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996. 169-178. Print.



Yerushalmi, Yosef Hayim. *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1982. Print.

### **Suggested Citation**

Gandsman, Ari. "The End(s) of Memory? Negotiating Ambivalence and Resisting *Museumification* Over the Museum of Memory in Argentina". *Trespassing Journal: an online journal of trespassing art, science, and philosophy* 3 (Winter 2014). Web. ISSN: 2147-2734

**Ari Edward Gandsman** is a cultural anthropologist and is currently Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Ottawa (Ontario, Canada). He received his Ph.D. in 2008 from McGill University and has also been a Visiting Assistant Professor at Union College in Schenectady, NY. His research examines questions of human rights, memory, transitional justice, and medical technologies.