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Commemorative Palimpsests in Post-Authoritarian Argentina:

The Case of ESMA

Historical Events and Context: General Videla's Military Regime (1976-1983)

During the second half of the twentieth century, military coups undermined the democracy of several Latin American countries. For a country that encountered more years of military rule than civilian, when the Argentine military ousted the leftist populist government in March 1976, much of the population was unsurprised. The subsequent military junta from 1976 to 1983, under General Jorge Rafael Videla, differed from earlier coups which typically possessed short-term goals. Videla's military government strived to create a new social order through *El Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (Process of National Reorganization) or *El Proceso* (Cummins). Numerous institutions, including the government, armed forces, police, and courts were utilized to implement key goals of the regime under *El Proceso*. Characterized by the introduction of neoliberal policies, the removal of social safety nets, and economic deregulation, *El Proceso* succeeded as all central structures of power were subject to the control and influence of the military regime and its state-sponsored terrorism.

In addition to goals concerning the restoration of order by means of political deactivation of the popular sector and the normalization of the economy, a distinguishing component of *El Proceso* was the "war on subversion," or the elimination of "subversive" facets of Argentine society (Cummins 5). General Videla's right-wing military alliance that obtained power in 1976 initially targeted workers, labor union members, and students, or those who they deemed "subversive," in their intent to abolish all leftist thought and activity. Individuals including the siblings of accused leftist guerillas, labor union participants, intellectuals, and students were among some of those classified as suspected of subversion. Through the exertion of varying

apparatuses of the military regime, the junta kidnapped, tortured, and disappeared thousands of “subversive” Argentine citizens. In this way, the verb *desaparecer* (to disappear) was transformed into a state of being in reference to those 30,000 victims, or *los desaparecidos* (the disappeared), taken by the regime and never seen again.

Even though kidnapping is a common tool used to suppress political opposition, General Videla’s autocratic military regime diverged from other instances of political seizure both due to its clandestine nature and the scale of its execution. Clandestine detention centers, like the Navy Mechanics School, or ESMA, were constructed in government buildings where “subversives” were detained for days, weeks, and even years. Consisting of 31 diverse buildings in an immense 17-hectare area, ESMA is like a mini city inside the bustling Buenos Aires and serves as the largest material testimony and evidence of human rights violations following state terrorism during the military dictatorship (Cummins 11). According to Pamela Colombo, approximately 5,000 of the 30,000 *desaparecidos* are estimated to have been tortured and murdered at the infamous ESMA alone. Because of the clandestine nature and efforts by the military to hide information, there remains much uncertainty regarding the true number of *desaparecidos*; however, this space represents a symbol of cultural significance regarding Argentine post-dictatorship history. Although this space is associated with terror, memories that military and political leaders have desired to destroy throughout history, more than three decades of political campaigns by activists and human rights organizations have brought human rights and memory issues to the forefront of Argentina’s political agenda. To commemorate an event is to find meaning in it by fostering a relationship between the past and present and, with policies in favor of truth, memory, and justice currently on the forefront of Argentina’s left-oriented political

agenda, it is crucial to acknowledge how annual celebrations at ESMA affect the nation's recollection and acceptance of the atrocities committed in its past.

President Carlos Menem (1989-1999) and “Closing the Past”

At the end of the dictatorship in 1983, ESMA returned to its original military purpose as an instructional institute; however, due to survivors' testimony and the inspection of the CONADEP in 1984, evidence about the space's use during the dictatorship came to light. Consequently, the debates surrounding what to do with ESMA as a space following the junta and consecutive development of the site have depended significantly on the objectives of political leaders beginning in 1989. Following the first post dictatorship democratic government of Raúl Alfonsín (1983-1989) amidst the worst economic crisis in Argentina's history, Carlos Menem served as president for almost a decade from 1989 to 1999. He promoted a policy of “closing the past” which was in direct reference to Alfonsín's work on organizing the Trials to the Junta (1985) and establishing the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, or CONADEP (1983), to investigate the fate of the *desaparecidos* (Feld). Menem's presidency, which was characterized by a clear neoliberal agenda geared towards privatization of public enterprises, free market, and securing IMF loans, faced substantial criticism for its references to the nation's dictatorial past in terms of reconciliation through amnesia (the amnesties/pardons he issued to known human rights violations thus inverting Alfonsín's efforts to bring the perpetrators to justice). Upon taking office, Menem moved immediately to gain the support of the military by pardoning hundreds of officers accused of sedition and human rights abuses (McSherry). In 1990, Menem, who included the “politics of memory” in his political platform, pardoned military personnel convicted during Alfonsín's tenure and Mario Firmenich, the leader of the Montoneros, in the name of national reconciliation (Wilson). Menem's continued

overtures toward the military fostered an environment in which functionaries and officers from the military dictatorship reentered public life and reappeared at official events. In December 1993, the executive approved the promotion of two navy officers accused of torture and murder at ESMA during the military regime and in 1994, Menem formed a supersecretariat for internal security, the Secretary of Security and Protection of the Community, and designated a retired air force officer to lead it (McSherry). Through these scandals, coupled with the linkage of criticism of government policies, strikes, human rights demonstrations, protests, and expressions of dissent with “subversion,” Menem explicitly illustrated his support for repressive policies distinctive of General Videla’s *El Proceso*.

Nonetheless, in January 1998, President Menem signed a decree ordering the demolition of ESMA and proposed the construction of a tribute to national unity in its place (“Demolerán La ESMA”). At the time still the property of the Argentine Navy, this action not only revealed the leader’s political agenda but also epitomized his commitment to erasing Argentina’s past. Luckily, public outcry prevented ESMA’s destruction as Menem’s decrees infuriated human rights groups and city officials who viewed the former ESMA as the most suitable location for a facility that would preserve and present documentary records, oral histories, sound, film, and photographs of the dictatorship. Following Menem’s plan which was opposed in court by human rights activists Graciela Lois and Laura Bonaparte, in 2000 a commission was initiated with the principal objective to consider how to convert ESMA into a space of memory (Wilson). Even though the commission failed to reach an agreement and was eventually disbanded in 2001, Governor Pedro Pou presented a proposal and in 2002, the Space of Memory Institute was established with the mandate to “safeguard and protect the transmission of memory and history of events” that occurred because of state terrorism during the dictatorship (Wilson 117).

Ultimately, it is evident that ESMA and its symbolic nature as a space of the transformative power of memory might have looked very different if Menem and other top military leaders during his presidency who opposed the memory space project had their way.

Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and the Beginning of Argentina's National Reconciliation

After the unprecedented rise and fall of four governments in December 2001 and Menem's withdrawal from a runoff election, Néstor Kirchner assumed the presidency in 2003 during the largest economic and social depression in Argentine history. He identified himself as a member of the "disappeared," and declared on March 24, 2004, that ESMA would be recognized as a national Museum for Memory (Schindel 258). As his administration implemented legislation aimed towards the restoration of historical memory, the National Congress passed a law on August 5, 2004, that placed the future of ESMA in the hands of the state rather than the Argentine Navy. On March 24, 2006, President Néstor Kirchner similarly passed a decree that March 24 would be celebrated as a public holiday and the Day of Remembrance for Truth and Justice and opened ESMA as a Museum for Memory. Although the structure of the museum was still being determined, portraits of General Jorge Rafael Videla and Admiral Emilio E. Massera, which once triumphantly adorned the walls of ESMA, were officially removed by President Néstor Kirchner during this inaugural ceremony (Levine 178). This initiative, although controversial for many Argentine citizens who believed that March 24 should be used for private reflection rather than festivities, allowed the first production of images from within the site (Colombo 510). In addition, Kirchner accompanied survivors into ESMA where for the first time, they entered the space without their blindfolds where they had been held as prisoners and tortured. These guided tours, which permitted relatives, activists, and the public to visit ESMA along with books related to the site being provided to visitors free of charge both

indicated that the government at this time was financing ESMA well and forwarding an idea that traumatic memory is not for sale.

The alliance of President Néstor Kirchner with monuments for human rights is identified as one of the first “official” performances of reconciliation supported by the state. According to Pasquini Durán in “Justicia,” President Néstor Kirchner selected “the legitimate and legal path, the only one compatible with the principles of democracy” to end Argentina’s impunity and instill final and due justice (Levine). March 24, 2006, and Kirchner’s commemoration at ESMA marked the first reconciliation between the force of the human rights movement and the actions of the Argentine state. By installing in the old center of ESMA, the bastion of clandestine detention camps, a museum devoted to the memory of the victims of state terrorism symbolized an act of reparation, raising the government’s democratic bar and allowing plurality to thrive. This initial act of emblematic commemoration by President Néstor Kirchner, coupled with his decrees to attend to justice and try criminals guilty of involvement in the military regime opened a revolutionary dialogue to achieve closure and equivalently exemplified an inevitable step towards Argentina’s national restoration.

President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2015): Commemoration and Preservation or Education and Transformation?

Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Argentina’s leader from December 2007 to 2015, continued the legacy of her late predecessor and husband by closely working with human rights organizations to allow open access to ESMA. During her term, artists and human rights advocates carried out daily public activities concerning education, human rights, and the arts at former clandestine detention centers including ESMA (Feld). President Cristina Kirchner also chose to officially inaugurate a new cultural center located in ESMA on March 24, 2010. Using

the commemorative power of this date, she delivered a speech at ESMA that not only highlighted the positive actions taken by human rights organizations, but also her personal desire for the reconstruction of memory for Argentina through the physical reoccupation of former clandestine torture centers (Wiley). However, the daily occupation and celebrations of the dictatorship on March 24 at sites of cultural significance like ESMA promoted by President Cristina Kirchner did raise controversy as many in Argentine society were still working to accept the legacy of the dictatorship and confront the horrors of the past.

Even though various celebratory events characterized President Cristina Kirchner's term, there were two commemorative occasions that were particularly controversial: an *asado* and the creation of a museum (Damico, Lybarger, and Brudney 143). In English, the Spanish word *asado* means roasted, as in the act of cooking something (not an event where the honored guest is 'roasted' or ridiculed by others in attendance). Damico, Lybarger, and Brudney state that President Cristina Kirchner and prior Minister of Justice hosted an *asado* at ESMA in December 2012 that approximately 1,000 individuals attended (143). However, this cookout style celebration was criticized by Argentine citizens who believed that hosting an *asado*, an act that implicitly implies brutality and suffering, was inappropriate at ESMA, a space that witnessed horrendous violations of human rights. In addition, Damico, Lybarger, and Brudney also explain that the term *asado* referred to "a euphemism for the cremation of bodies of those killed during torture of subsequently executed" during the dictatorship (143). Two years later, in 2014, the Museo de las Malvinas, was constructed. Damico, Lybarger, and Brudney analyze how President Cristina Kirchner revealed that this addition to ESMA served as an opportunity to "honor the Argentine soldiers who died in the 1982 war and to promote the country's claim to sovereignty" over the Malvinas islands (143). According to Damico, Lybarger, and Brudney, these two

objectives demonstrated how President Cristina Kirchner's administration wanted to illustrate how victims of the dictatorship and casualties of the Malvinas War were victimized by *El Proceso* (143). In this way, these two instances epitomize how Cristina Kirchner's presidency approached the concept of victims of state terror amidst the debate of whether ESMA as a space should be utilized for remembrance (preserving the past) or instruction (educating future generations).

President Mauricio Macri (2015-2019) and The Intent to “de-Kirchnerize”

In December 2015, President Mauricio Macri was inaugurated, and his center-right initiatives marked a shift away from the Kirchner left-leaning administrations' human rights policies and pledges to restore justice. He promised to put an end to “human rights deals,” demonstrating his lack of interest in Argentina's past and instead exemplifying his focus on neoliberal legislation that would generate different kinds of profits for the country (Kaiser). In a 2016 interview with *Buzzfeed*, when asked how many people died because of the dictatorship, President Mauricio Macri replied “I have no idea. That's a debate I'm not going to enter whether they were 9,000 or 30,000” (“Macri, Sobre Los Desaparecidos”). Even though the exact number of *desaparecidos* during the military regime remains unknown, President Mauricio Macri's response marked the first time that denialist rhetoric found its way into mainstream political discourse. President Macri's continued use of “dirty war”¹ also reinforced his denialist thinking as this implies that he believed that genocide did not occur, but that the regime only reflected an “internal battle between dictatorships and terrorists” (“Blaming the Victims”). Due to President Macri's statements placing blame on the victims rather than the military regime, sentiments of denialism arose in Argentina as he proceeded to dismantle and undermine state agencies

¹ To conceal the junta regime's one-sided terror, the right refers to Argentina's military dictatorship from 1976-1983 as a “dirty war” rather than state terrorism (Constanza)

dedicated to human rights investigations. Within his first four months as president, Macri dismissed over 41,000 public employees and eliminated a sub-department of Argentina's Central Bank devoted to "investigating the banking and financial system's complicity in the former dictatorship" (Dandan). Subsequently, Macri illustrated his motive to return military personnel to government, including those formerly involved in human rights abuses. Finally, his deactivation of two human rights-related sections of the Ministry of Security coupled with changes to programs concerning truth and justice processes in the Military of Justice epitomized his ambitions to reverse Argentina's democratic transition and politics of memory (Dandan).

In January 2016, President Macri announced his intent to "de-Kirchnerize" and reform the Museum for Memory at ESMA ("¿'Deskirchnerizar' Argentina"). In addition to his government displacing two "Kirchnerist" employees at ESMA, the director of the National Archive of Memory, Horacio Pietragalla, and Eduardo Jozami, the head of the Haroldo Conti Cultural Center for Memory, President Macri wanted ESMA to be a space solely emblematic of a state institution linked to human rights (Rebossio). According to Macri's Secretary of Rights, his administration believed that the Museum for Memory should not be affiliated with any ideology nor owned by a government. However, Macri's objectives to move the headquarters for UNESCO, UNICEF, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Human Rights Secretariat of the Buenos Aires City Council to ESMA support his administration's denialism of crimes committed during the dictatorship at clandestine detention centers ("Argentine Ministry of Justice").

Following a controversial visit by President Macri to ESMA on February 23, 2016, about a month before the anniversary of the coup d'état, several groups delivered a petition to the president expressing their deep concern regarding his negligence of human rights policies

(Dandan). Throughout his term, President Macri maintained a distant relationship with human rights organizations as he did not seek their support, nor confront them as ESMA was transformed more into a workplace for human rights organizations. However, President Macri's most notable denouncement of human rights priorities was his government's modification of the public holiday *Día de la Memoria por la Verdad y la Justicia* (Day of Remembrance and Truth) celebrated on March 24. Macri's administration, in January 2017, ruled that commemorations of the coup d'état could be pursued on a movable date ("Sigue La Polémica"). Undoubtedly, this decision was met with huge criticism, especially from the president of the Plaza de Mayo Grandmothers Association², Estela de Carlotto. Similarly, Macri's dismissal of human rights in his political agenda was manifested in the election of Argentina's new president of the Supreme Court. Installed with the government's political and legislative support, Carlos Fernando Rosenkrantz issued a ruling that would have permitted many people convicted for crimes during the dictatorship to be released from prison. This legal maneuver was met with *escraches* (rallies) across the country and in less than twenty-four hours, the ruling was overturned ("El Decreto De Macri"). Without the thousands of demonstrators who protested, former perpetrators of violence at ESMA would have obtained their freedom, demonstrating Macri's lack of consideration and respect for the millions of civilians who value March 24 celebrations and recollection of the desaparecidos as fundamental. Not only did Macri's decree and the conduct of the Supreme Court culminate in momentous economic consequences for ESMA due to reduced government funding, but also exacerbated struggles to safeguard human rights gains in the pursuit of justice for atrocities committed in Argentina's past.

Alberto Fernández (2019-Present): The Fight to Keep the Memory of the Past Alive

² In 1977, the non-governmental organization called Abuelas (Grandmothers) de Plaza de Mayo was established, dedicated specifically to fighting for the return of their missing grandchildren ("History of Abuelas")

In direct contrast to President Macri, left-oriented Alberto Fernández, elected in 2019 has promoted initiatives in favor of justice. His and Vice President Cristina Kirchner's participation in a December 10, 2020, ceremony on International Human Rights Day at ESMA recognizing human rights organizations illuminates this responsibility (Ginzberg and Bertoia). This ceremony not only marked the first anniversary of Fernández' government but delivered Azucena Villafor statuettes to six relatives of individuals who suffered from state terrorism. The awards were for the period 2015-2020 in the Museum for Memory, which had been suspended in recent years due to previous management under Macri's administration (Bordoni). Most recently, despite societal restrictions due to the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic, President Fernández participated in a tribute on March 24, 2021, to disappeared workers at ESMA in commemorations of the forty-fifth anniversary of the Argentine military coup. According to an article published in *La Nueva Mañana*, President Fernández remarked that the dictatorship "disappeared or sent tens of thousands of workers into exile, took the lives of students" and declared that as a result, Argentina must "never stop repudiating" ("El Presidente En La ESMA"). To achieve this objective, Fernández explained at this event that the country must work to build a more egalitarian society and that March 24 as a date should never be forgotten as it symbolizes "the beginning of Argentina's worst tragedy" ("El Presidente En La ESMA"). When Fernández arrived at ESMA on March 24, 2021, he possessed a jacaranda tree and a shovel in which he planned to plant as part of a campaign of a human rights organization, Sembramos Memory, to remember the anniversary of the military regime (Bertoia). Together, Taty Almeida, an activist and member of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo-Línea Fundadora, and President Fernández placed the jacaranda in a hole in front of the HIJOS house at ESMA, illustrating his commitment to the promotion of human rights, justice, and occupying ESMA as a site of memory.

Although this celebration at ESMA was attended by members of human rights organizations and union leaders, President Fernández undoubtedly used the commemorative power of March 24 to not only remember disappeared workers, but to remind present workers of their rights to seek better rights and living conditions. He repeatedly stated that he belongs to a “political movement that expands rights” including free universities, vacations, bonuses, the right to diversify, and women’s rights, and that by expanding these freedoms, Argentina will transform into a more equitable society (“El Presidente En La ESMA”). In addition to the celebration symbolizing the first time that an Argentine president remembered disappeared workers specifically, Fernández utilized this moment to draw a parallel to the present and COVID-19 pandemic. While planting a jacaranda tree alongside Taty Almedia, a human rights activist, President Fernández expressed that the national government aspires to “vaccinate everyone” against the coronavirus despite other political sectors communicating that individuals should be responsible for finding their own means to achieve a vaccination. This recognition, both to disappeared workers and the greater Argentine society alike, served as a call for young people to do everything in their power to keep the memory of the dictatorship alive in the present and that the greatest current achievement surrounds the ongoing condemnation of repressors (“El Presidente En La ESMA”). Ultimately, this celebration at ESMA offered attendees opportunities to connect with the past, and at the same time, encouraged citizens, especially Argentine youth, to think, mobilize, and fight to keep the memory of the dictatorship alive among other human rights provisions.

Conclusion

In the upcoming years, it is imperative that Argentinian society continues to address memory in everyday contexts, gender in memory, and the role of new technology in the creation and consumption of memory in relation to commemorations of the dictatorship and fighting for *los desaparecidos*. To accomplish this task, research into the commemorative power of March 24 should promote an expansion of memory by including new actors, subjects, and protagonists whose stories were previously silenced, most notably, women. Thousands of women who were tortured, raped, and victims of sexual abuse at ESMA during the military dictatorship stories are still left unheard, demonstrating that democracy has failed to heal the wounds of survivors. The challenge that we see in Argentina today is the need to separate sexual crimes from torture to make them visible and demonstrate that this abuse was utilized as a systematic practice designed to demean women. In addition to the difficulties in prosecuting sex crimes, there is a lack of names of not only women, but also children who were born in captivity at ESMA. It is imperative that ESMA and Argentinian society at large prioritize encouraging women survivors to share their testimonies and pursue justice for their torturers.

Today, ESMA not only represents a palimpsest on which four oppositional government interests have been inscribed in the past and then covered with another layer of meaning in the present, but also an educational tool to strengthen the current notion of democracy in the world and memorialization. The commemoration of the coup d'état every March 24th brings together many people throughout the country who have participated in demonstrations since Argentina's return to democracy in 1983. In 1998, a government executive order by President Menem mandated the demolition and transformation of ESMA into an area of public use where a "symbol of national union" would be placed instead ("Demolerán La ESMA"). Menem's decree was strongly condemned by civilians, particularly human rights associations, social movements,

and survivors and victims of detainees and the *desaparecidos* of ESMA, who advocated for the measure to be suspended. In October 1998, the court hearing the case ordered Menem and his government to preserve ESMA due to its cultural significance. On March 24, 2004, on the twenty-eighth anniversary of the military regime, the Argentine national government, under President Néstor Kirchner, and the Government of the City of Buenos Aires signed an agreement to remove the Argentine Navy from ESMA and in its place, construct a space for memory and the promotion of human rights. President Néstor Kirchner's actions facilitated the creation of the Museum for Memory at ESMA and in 2007, under the administration of President Cristina Kirchner, an interjurisdictional agency was introduced to administer the premises with the participation of human rights groups and state agencies. Despite President Macri's prioritization of neoliberal policies over human rights, nowadays, several public and nongovernmental institutions related to human rights operate at ESMA, carrying out different cultural activities and promoting human rights under Argentina's current leader, President Fernández. The Museum for Memory displays a permanent exhibition regarding how the former clandestine center of detention, torture, and extermination operated and it remains undeniable that the past oppression experienced at ESMA has triggered a movement that has changed Argentinian subjectivity and the human rights struggle worldwide. Although facets of nature on ESMA's horizon transmit sentiments of serenity amidst the bustling city of Buenos Aires, the faces of the *desaparecidos* located in the entrance of the officers' restaurant indicate how ESMA's surface is deceptive and that without the efforts of numerous presidential administrations, its value in perceiving and transmitting memory of the authoritarian military regime may have been lost. Therefore, ESMA, once synonymous with death and suffering, has been slowly transformed through both social and political will of leaders and organizations into a reminder of the

significance collective consciousness as not only does the site function as a physical testament to the thousands of *desaparecidos*, but it shows the pacific ways in which commemorations are allowing Argentina to continuously seek truth and justice.

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