Narrative, Human Rights and the Ethnographic Reproduction of Conventional Knowledge

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Abstract: For anthropologists working on the topic of human rights, fieldwork often consists of collecting narratives documenting experiences of violence and loss. Drawing on research with human organizations in Argentina, this article questions this methodological focus that is often related to human rights activism. While these narratives are often treated as organic accounts, they are also products of the human rights movement. Analyses that fail to address this larger institutional context may end up reproducing conventionally held knowledge. By exploring the larger interconnections between narrative, human rights and trauma, I conclude by questioning the prevalent normative assumptions about narrative.[1]

Keywords: narrative, human rights, trauma, Latin America, fieldwork, normative

Résumé : Pour l'anthropologue travaillant sur le sujet des droits humains, le travail de terrain consiste souvent à recueillir des récits documentant des expériences de violence et de perte. À partir de recherches menées auprès d'organismes de défense des droits humains en Argentine, cet article interroge ce parti-pris méthodologique qu'on associe souvent au militantisme pour les droits humains. Alors que ces récits sont souvent traités comme des comptes-rendus organiques, ils sont aussi des produits du mouvement pour les droits humains. Les analyses qui omettent de tenir compte de ce contexte institutionnel plus étendu peuvent finir par reproduire des connaissances conventionnellement admises. En explorant les interconnexions plus étendues entre les récits, les droits humains et les traumatismes, je conclus en remettant en question les a priori normatifs courants relatifs aux récits.

Mots-clés : récits, droits humains, traumatismes, Amérique latine, recherche de terrain, normes

> It's painful for me to talk about," Ester softly intoned as she handed me a black and white photograph of her daughter, Ana. [Ester, interview with author, March 30, 2004]

Ester is an 83-year-old widow living alone in a spacious apartment in Buenos Aires. Her daughter was one of an estimated 30,000 Argentines who was disappeared during the 1976-83 military dictatorship. As she attempted to speak about her daughter's disappearance, she faltered over names, stumbled over places, and scrambled chronology. As painful as it was for her to talk about her daughter's disappearance, Ester's realization that she was incapable of formulating a coherent account of her daughter's life was even more distressful. As she became increasingly flustered, her confusion provoked parallel linguistic difficulties as her sentences fragmented and stuttered. I felt awful for provoking this discomfort. I had not even requested the interview. Ester is a distant relative, if my grandmother's brother's wife's sister is a relative at all. When she found out I was in Argentina working on a project on human rights, she asked my cousin, her nephew, to meet with me.[2] However, speaking about her daughter's disappearance appeared overwhelming. "I can't do it," she concluded, visibly exasperated. "It's just not coming out." Apologetic, I tried to calm her distress, but her frustration made her intent on meeting again.

She asked to meet the following week. I subsequently discovered that Ester was unaccustomed to speaking about her daughter's disappearance. Many of my Argentine cousins did not find out about it until years later. Because I was a "scientist" and because she had fond memories of my grandfather, she wanted to talk with me. Not wanting to distress her further, I was apprehensive returning the following week. I was uncertain what purpose the interview held for my research, which focused on the work of a human rights organization, the *Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo*, had the goal of locating and reuniting the estimated 500 children of the disappeared

who had been kidnapped during the dictatorship and were being raised by members of the Armed Forces. Upon my arrival, I discovered she had prepared in advance. Placing a stack of photographs on the coffee table in her living room along side a pad filled with scribbled notes and dates, Ester embarked on a narrative account of Ana's life. Told in chronological order, the account was largely structured around Ana's political activities that began early in her youth and ended with her disappearance in 1979.

Narrative, Human Rights and Anthropology

This interview was only possible because of kinship ties. In Argentina, organizations formed by kin members to initially search and eventually demand justice for their relatives who disappeared during the military dictatorship (1976-83), represent an important historic development in Latin America, a breakthrough moment in the emergence of the human rights movement throughout the region. Human rights groups like the internationally renowned Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo or the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo were compelled to go public with the stories of what happened to their families in order to publicize and advance their cause. Family members active within human rights organizations comprise the main focus of social science research. People like Ester remain largely unavailable and unreachable.

In the end, my interview with Ester had a narrative structure similar to my other interviews with family members active in human rights. I wondered why my interview took this conventional narrative form; perhaps I inadvertently coaxed a narrative account. For social scientists working on human rights, collecting narratives of the experience of human rights violations represents a dominant component of fieldwork. Although narratives are fundamental to human rights work, the role of narration in ethnographic accounts of human rights remains under-analyzed. This article aims to question the self-evident basis of this narrative focus. First, I analyze how narratives provide dominant raw material for anthropological analyses of human rights. Second, I explore the link between this kind of anthropological research and human rights activism. Finally, I examine how social science knowledge itself becomes deeply embedded into the context of human rights narrative productions. While narratives of terror presented in human rights account are often treated as if they are individual and organic accounts, they are also products of the human rights movement itself. By documenting this, I aim to show how social science knowledge is not only derived from the experience of individuals connected to the human rights movement but also actively shapes how they interpret their experience. By shifting focus from individual narratives to the institutional context that shapes these narratives, I will show how anthropological analyses that fail to address this context end up reproducing conventionally held knowledge. I conclude with a wider reflection on the relationship between narrative and human rights, traumatic experience and social science. I suggest that Ester challenges the prevalent social science view of narrative and offers a counter-example to the dominant human rights narrative.

On Ethnographic Redundancy: Fieldwork in a Crowded Pool

My presence compelled Ester to create a narrative that was previously inexistent or inaccessible. This sharply contrasted with other interviews I conducted with human rights activists. While her narrative was the unambiguous product of my presence, my other interviews (over 40) were not. This was the only narrative I conducted with someone who was unable to draw upon a pre-existing account. Human rights activists whom I interviewed saw themselves as public figures. In recounting their stories on numerous other occasions throughout the years, they had a narrative template available that allowed them to recount traumatic personal experiences with strangers.

I was often taken aback by how dryly informants recounted horrifying events. For example, a member of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo named Argentina, described to me how, shortly before her son's disappearance, unidentified armed men turned up at her home searching for him. Unable to find him, they tore apart her house, beat her husband and put a gun to her head demanding she disclose her son's whereabouts. When she refused, they pulled an unloaded trigger, simulating execution. Argentina recounted all of this in a matter-of-fact and unaffected tone that surprised me. The post-violence psychological literature would possibly consider it a symptom of the emotional numbing that characterizes traumatic experience. Several months later, I discovered a human rights organization called *Memoria Abierta* (Open Memory) devoted to the production, preservation and dissemination of information about the dictatorship. Part of this work involved amassing an Oral Archive, an audiovisual collection comprised of 700 video interviews conducted with family members and human rights activists. Memoria Abierta's archive is specifically intended for public consultation by researchers like myself. For the next six months, I went to their offices to watch and transcribe interviews, over 50 interviews in total. According to the archive coordinator, I had consulted the archive more than any other researcher at the time.

The Oral Archive was a largely untapped resource because many researchers preferred conducting original interviews. After transcribing several interviews with individuals I had yet to reach, I began watching interviews with people I had already interviewed, including Argentina. As I watched Argentina's interview, I was abruptly disabused of any notion of ethnographic novelty. She recounted the same events of our interview using the same words, the same tone, and even the same gestures. I subsequently watched several other interviews at Memoria Abierta conducted with individuals I already interviewed. I was struck by further similarities. They often used the same exact words to describe their experience, even when the video interview occurred several years earlier. Later, when I scheduled interviews with activists who had also been interviewed by the Oral Archive, I made certain to watch them first so I could generate novel ethnographic data. However, I invariably found it difficult to deviate from their pre-existing narrative accounts. Beyond any doubts this raised about my interviewing skills, I began to question how interviews naturalized themselves as the basic unit of my ethnographic data. Looking back at the methodology section of my research proposal, interviews—the more, the merrier—appeared the basic formula for judging fieldwork success. I began wondering why.

From the Anthropological Production of Narratives to an Anthropology of Narrative Production

Why was I led to produce more narratives when numerous institutional activities of human rights organizations were already devoted to the same task? Foremost, my anthropological training predisposed me towards the collection of narratives, as much a consequence of the literary turn in anthropology as the changing realities of ethnographic fieldwork, in which conducting research in institutional settings leads anthropologists to rely more on interviews than traditional participant observation research methods. Moreover, ethnographic research on political violence is largely based on testimonial accounts. While some works focus on perpetrators (see Robben 1996, 2005; Schirmer 1999), the majority focuses on victims of violence. For example, Sanford (2003), and Manz (2004) both take a victim-centred testimonial approach to mass human rights violations in Guatemala. In part, this methodological orientation is a product of necessity. Most anthropologists writing about state violence were not present during the time the violations took place. Thus, their access to these events is mediated through informant narratives. As Robben writes, anthropological research on violence is mainly derived from "interviews with victims traumatized by violence, not from the direct observation of violence itself" (1996:71).

In Latin America, a more specific reason also exists for this victim-centered narrative focus. A large literature exists of *testimonio*, personal stories of violence, poverty and suffering told by marginalized and oppressed peoples accompanied by political messages. As a literary genre, it emerged during the Cold War era (Beverley 2004). Testimonio is considered a prominent narrative genre in Latin American literature (Agosin 1996; Craft 1997; Maier and Dulfano 2004; Sternbach 1991). *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (Menchú and Burgos-Debray 1984) is the paradigmatic example (see also Benjamin 1989; Tula 1994). These testimonial works are valued because they are considered a "tool for advocacy" (Logan 1997). The testimonio genre is a subaltern medium of resistance to hegemonic structures of power and domination that challenges gendered dichotomies between the public and private (Franco 1999).[3]

Testimonio has shaped anthropological research on Latin America, particularly research on victims of state violence. This is because many anthropologists position themselves as human rights activists. For this reason, ethnographies on the Guatemalan genocide, written by anthropologists like Sanford (2003) and Manz (2004), do not differ substantively from accounts written by activists such as Human Rights Watch lawyer Daniel Wilkinson (2002). In these works, gathering and presenting testimonies is considered a political act of anthropological engagement. By making suffering and injustice visible, the anthropologists advocate for the people they study. The anthropologists' politics are thus pre-inscribed into their accounts of suffering; political allegiances almost invariably lie with the people whose stories they tell.

The Reproduction of Conventional Knowledge[4]

A potential problem with victim-centred narrative approaches to human rights is that it can lead to the reproduction of conventional knowledge. Academic accounts of human rights groups that focus too exclusively on individual testimonies may arrive at conclusions that could be taken as starting points, given a broader ethnographic perspective. For example, the "Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo" is a paradigmatic human rights group. An extensive literature on them exists in anthropology, political science, Latin American and women's studies. One of the earliest published works on the Mothers written in English is Jo Fisher's work *Mothers of the Disappeared* (1989). In Fisher's words, "the sole aim of

this book is to give a voice to the Madres de Plaza de Mayo" (xi). Under the rubric of "giving voice," the book is comprised mainly of interview transcripts with Mothers. Since then, numerous academic analyses have been written on the group and most follow from the same set of representational concerns that prioritize "giving voice." This includes perspectives from performance theorists (Taylor 1998), critical geographers (Bosco 2001), discourse analysts (Fabj 1993; Foss and Domenici 2001), and others. They argue how the Mothers have empowered women (Navarro 1989) and seized public space, or how they have revolutionized (Bouvard 1994), reshaped (Abreu Hernandez 2002) or transformed (Bejarano 2002) concepts of motherhood. I have no arguments with such works. However, I have witnessed the Mothers make similar arguments in their public speeches. One does not need to read academic works analyzing how the Mothers resist neoliberalism (Burchianti 2004), transform grief into political activism (Thornton 2000), confront ageism (Borland 2006), or claim public spaces (Torre 1996) when one can hear the Mothers make all of these claims in their publications and public discourse.

Like many academics whose focus is on human rights, many scholars are informed by an earnest desire to participate in the Mothers' political struggles. In such a way, writing about suffering and resistance is seen as both a politically and ethically engaged act. In fact, the mere act of listening to the Mothers tell their stories is argued to be a form of social activism and part of the healing process for victims of state violence (Leseho and Block 2005). Researchers cast themselves in a therapeutic role by the mere act of listening to informants! Several problems exist with such approaches. First, many works cannibalize the organization's discourse as their own analysis. Second, by claiming their informants' political struggles as their own, they cultivate a false sense of identification between themselves and their research subjects. They sublimate the cause of their informants and assume writing about political struggle in academic journals is equivalent to political struggle. In doing so, their works are often uncritical hagiographies of resistance.

In many of these approaches, presenting and analyzing the inner lives and private experiences of victims is a primary concern. I do not discount this approach; rather, I question how it has become the dominant approach for social scientists addressing the aftermath of violence. By privileging a testimonial interview, anthropologists cleave a formalized encounter from its larger context. To use a depth metaphor that is common to these approaches, the aim is to use the interview surface in order to plunge deep into the individual psyches of informants in order to mine their experience and excavate suffering. In the end, however, they reproduce what already exists on the surface, conforming to a preexisting narrative model of how private experiences of grief and suffering are transformed into public messages of resistance and empowerment.

In the context of Argentina where human rights narratives are prolific in public discourse, an anthropological approach to human rights should address the institutional production of narratives before producing more narratives. Examining this institutional context reveals how narrative production is part of a larger political economy of human rights. In Argentina and elsewhere, entire organizations (like Memoria Abierta) exist devoted to producing narrative accounts. Human rights organizations like the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo understand that these narrative representations are necessary to both diffuse information and to garner economic and political support. I will return to this point later but an essential part of their human rights activism is to tell their life stories. For example, in 1999, the Grandmothers had a private audience with then First Lady Hillary Clinton. According to one newspaper report, they brought her to tears by telling their stories. This meeting helped lead to a 2002 U.S. declassification of documents on Argentina that included documents concerning the Grandmothers. While I was conducting fieldwork, one of the Grandmothers' dominant sources of funding was the European Union. The reason they receive money from the European Union is that they have been able to make their cause visible over the years by disseminating their stories. They make films, television and radio programs, publish books and a monthly newsletter, have a frequently updated website, sponsor numerous public events and festivals, and meet with public figures ranging from musicians to politicians. They even have their own biographical archive in collaboration with social scientists from the University of Buenos Aires that collects testimonies from family members and friends of the disappeared.

Producing testimonial narratives is a major part of human rights work in Argentina. The earliest works on the dictatorship were comprised predominantly of victim testimonies (CONADEP 1984; Gabetta 1983; Fisher 1989; Herrera 1987). Disappeared who survived have written accounts of their experiences in memoirs (Partnoy 1986; Tamburrini 2002; Timerman 1981) or fictionalized hybrid accounts (Kozameh 1987). In recent years, testimonies have been collected and published on many aspects of the dictatorship from the experience of ex-political prisoners (*Obra Colectiva Testimonial 2003*) to students at the University of Buenos Aires (FUBA 2000). Several edited volumes have also been published compiling testimonies of

children of the disappeared (Gelman and La Madrid 1997; Jaroslavsky 2004). Children of the disappeared have also made documentary films about their parents' and their own lives: Albertina Carri's *Los Rubios* (2003), María Inés Roqué's *Papá Iván* (2004), Andrés Habegger's *(h) Historias cotidianas* (2001) and Laura Bondarevsky's *Che vo cachai* (2003), to name just a few.

Human Rights Narratives

One of the earlier and most influential accounts of an individual writing about their experience of being disappeared during the dictatorship was Jacobo Timerman's *Prisoner Without A Name, Cell Without A Number* (1981). An important journalist and editor who had been disappeared for two years before being expelled from the country after an international campaign to secure his release, Timerman's memoir, published during the military dictatorship, called global attention to the human rights abuses taking place in Argentina. It was translated into numerous languages, adapted into a television movie, reprinted and even selected by the *New York Times* as one of the "Books of the Century."

In his recent history of the memoir, Ben Yagoda writes that, "memoir has become the central form of the culture, not only the way stories are told, but the way arguments are put forth, products and properties marketed, ideas floating, acts justified, reputations constructed or salvaged"(2009:28). He traces the earliest versions of the genre to spiritual autobiographies that involve conversion and redemption. In the 1960s, a new variation—the traumatic autobiography—emerged with civil rights autobiographies documenting the experience of racism and segregation and testimonies from concentration camp survivors. Yagoda places this in a larger context of the emergence of victimhood and therapeutic culture, in which individuals use traumatic personal histories to advance a cause, expose sufferings and denounce wrongdoings. In this literature, self-knowledge is of paramount importance. Just as many people in the world were sensitized to what was occurring in Argentina's dictatorship because of Jacobo Timerman's memoir, narrative accounts provide the window through which knowledge about human rights abuses are disseminated. Personal narratives become the primary mechanism for human rights appeals. Identification with the protagonist's suffering is considered a necessary starting point for compelling individuals into taking action and supporting their cause.

Producing emotional affect is integral to human rights work. This is why human rights activists must go public with their claims of suffering (of torture, of the effects of the disappearance on their family, of their own search for justice). As philosopher Richard Rorty (1993) influentially argued, human rights appeals work less through appeals to reason than to emotion. "Sad and sentimental stories" become the primary mechanisms of human rights mobilizations and appeals. Martha Nussbaum (2008) similarly argues for the central role of the "narrative imagination" in moral and political development. For this reason, constructing and transmitting narratives comprise the dominant activity of human rights activism. As James Dawes (2007)writes, "one of the most important premises of contemporary human rights work is that effective dissemination of information can change the world" (1) and is why, he continues, that "storytelling" is the "very nature of the work" of human rights activists (1). This involves giving accounts of their experience to everyone from journalists to social scientists to students. In such a way, the interviews that I conducted in my research (with the exception of Ester) were not spontaneous interactions but formalized encounters with specialized workers who fulfill their role as human rights activists by telling their stories. This is why the default position of the anthropologist working in the context of human rights abuses is the collection of narratives.

Schaffer and Smith (2004) explore the links between human rights appeals and the strategic deployment of personal narratives. More recent theoretical accounts argue that the relationship between narrative technologies and human rights is not coincidental but causal. Although human rights arguments are predicated on inherent attributes of being human that are justified on the grounds of being ahistorical and self-evident, they emerge out of a specific historical moment that is also tied to the rise of the novel. In *Human Rights, Inc.*, Joseph Slaughter examines the

> sociocultural, formal, historical, and ideological conjunctions between human rights and the novel, particularly the coming-of-age genre, the *Bildungsroman*, whose plot we could provisionally gloss as the didactic story of an individual who is socialized in the process of learning for oneself what everyone else (including the reader) presumably already knows. [2007:3]

In other words, human rights both co-evolved with and are structurally dependant upon novelistic devices. In a larger sense, Slaughter shows how both novels and human rights are grounded in a humanistic worldview that posits an individualistic ethos as centre of their ethical visions. In a similar vein, Lynn Hunt argues that human rights originated out of narrative storytelling, specifically the rise of the epistolary novel: "New kinds of reading (and viewing and listening) created new individual experiences (empathy), which in turn made possible new social and

political concepts (human rights)" (2007:33-34). Novelistic forms developed empathetic capacities that were required for the emergence of human rights. In both Hunt's and Slaughter's accounts, human rights have been incorporated into the modern human subjectivity via the literary imagination that accompanies the rise of the novel and the spread of world literature.

These understandings help explain an event during my fieldwork that I initially found puzzling. I was attending an event celebrating the publication of a new edition of *Nunca más* (1986), the testimonial-based book of the government-appointed commission that investigated the disappearances after the restoration of democracy in 1983 Family member human rights organizations introduced the event by highlighting the book's intrinsic moral appeal: "People must read it and listen to the survivors and family members." The featured speaker was a novelist exiled during the dictatorship. During his presentation, he called literature an "ethical practice" akin to human rights. The dictatorship, on the other hand, he alleged, "had no literature." Although acknowledging "exceptions" in Argentine literature, he concluded that human rights were integral to Argentine literature and, even more, Nunca más had entered Argentina's literary canon. Calling a collection of transcribed testimonies of kidnapping, torture, and murder an integral part of a country's literary heritage was an odd claim. An understanding of how narrative forms and human rights are interdependent explains why he would make this argument.

Trauma Narratives

In such a way, although narratives of trauma, suffering and grief presented in social science accounts are frequently treated as if they are individual and organic accounts, they are not. They are products of the human rights movement. This context shapes the narratives that are elicited by social scientists. Looking at the consequence of state terror through the lens of individual experience avoids an analysis of the relationship between individuals and institutions. Yet, human rights are institutional forms. Rather than analyze narratives that I produced, an ethnographic account should address processes by which narratives are produced and made visible.

Social science work on family member human rights organizations is not only derived from the experiences of human rights members but it also shapes their experience by providing a conceptual framework that helps them to make meaning of their experience. What Ian Hacking (1995) has termed a "looping effect of human kinds" exists in Argentina between the production of knowledge about the consequences of state terror on family members of the disappeared and how people who are the objects of this knowledge subsequently understand their own experience (21). In Argentina, home to one of the largest psychoanalytic communities in the world, mental health knowledge has great influence. During the military dictatorship, mental health teams formed to work with family members and all the major human rights organizations work with mental health practitioners. As a result, family member narratives are infused with mental health language. However, in describing their traumatic experience, family members do not frequently use the language of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Rather than using an idiom of PTSD, the dominant narrative that emerges is one of traumatic resilience in which family members emerge, not as traumatized victims, but as courageous protagonists of the human rights movement.

A close relationship exists between trauma, human rights and narratives. Just as the production of narratives is considered key to human rights, the production of narratives is central to trauma discourse. As Kathleen Pratt Ewing writes:

> A central aspect of psychological survival and of the healing process is the possibility of putting one's experience into words—the narrativization of the experience of trauma. The process of narrativization can be seen as a recasting of memory and identity so that one's current identity can safely encompass the memory of a past trauma. [2000:249]

Narrativization is where healing processes begin. In her work on Turkish women's experience of trauma, Ewing, following the trauma literature, argues that disjunction between experience and narrative needs to be bridged. In this perspective, the unspoken needs to be spoken; silences need to be narrativized. In looking at the production of narratives of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Allan Young (1995) shows how the institutional production of narratives that conform to a basic structure, in the case of war veterans presenting their life histories, in order to obtain a PTSD diagnosis. The production of narratives is the "Rosetta Stone" of PTSD (1995:185).

Human rights storytelling and trauma narratives emerge at similar historical junctures and are linked together through the emergence of humanitarian psychiatry (Fassin and Rechtman 2009). In this way, Argentina represents both example and critique of this reigning global "Empire of Trauma" that Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman (2009) identify as valorizing traumatic victimhood and endowing it with moral standing. While the human rights appeal of organizations like the Mothers

and Grandmothers lies in the undeniable moral appeal of what happened to their children, they also largely reject the dominant assumptions of psychiatric victimology that accompanies the PTSD diagnosis. To cite one example of this tendency, a notable counter-example of the traumatized subject of human rights violations, Hebe Bonafini is one of the most famous Argentine human rights activists, a leader of one of two branches of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. The Mothers splintered in the 1980s over Bonafini's polemical positions, including refusing government financial restitution and rejecting exhumations of bodies. In this sense, she rejects conventional post-violence human rights understandings, the same one that engenders the politics of trauma and healing narratives. Consistent with her rejection of human rights politics is her rejection of human rights narration. While human rights claims are disseminated through empathetic appeals, Bonafini notably refuses this. In the 1980s, she stopped speaking about her disappeared sons. Unlike other human rights activists, she refuses to narrativize her life story for journalists or academics. Other members of her organization follow her injunction against speaking about their individual children.[5] Not only does she refuse to speak about her personal experience, she rejects notions of victimhood. "The majority of the Mothers never were in therapy. We didn't mourn because we never saw our children as dead and because death is different for us" (Kazi 2003:9). Bonafini also rejects images of the disappeared as suffering victims of torture or dead bodies; instead seeing them as political revolutionaries. This is why she rejects exhumations, commemorations, memorials, and museums. In other words, she not only rejects the conventional terms of human rights claims, she rejects its institutional forms and practices as well.

Bonafini also claims not to feel fear or death. As one supporter observed, "Hebe de Bonafini is human, I think. She gets tired, worn out, her feet hurt her, she gets sick and everything. But she still says she doesn't fear anything. And all human beings feel fear" (Bauducco 2004:10). When she gets death threats at her home or at the Mothers headquarters, she taunts them. More revealingly, Bonafini refuses to acknowledge the traumatic effects of the loss of her children and also claims not to believe in psychological repression (claiming not to repress anything), itself a radical claim in a country dominated by psychoanalysis. An even more curious rejection of trauma discourse is Bonafini's claim that her recurring nightmares ceased *after* her children's disappearances. In a 1984 interview, she claimed that,

> When I was young, I always dreamed that I was drowning. It probably had to do with my asthma. Later, I dreamed that my teeth fell out and I would see them in a tray or on the ground...I had the same dream for years... It was terrible...After they took my children, I never had this dream again. [*Reconstrucciones*][6]

In other words, she rejects the dominant responses to traumatic experience in the PTSD literature both in terms of its etiology and symptomology. The psychological discourse around trauma that Bonafini rejects (consciously or not), is the foundation of the global humanitarian and human rights movement that Bonafini also rejects, including the Ford Foundation that she terms an arm of U.S. imperialism. It is thus noteworthy that the Ford Foundation provides funding for the mental health team of a human rights organization.

In many ways, Bonafini represents an extreme example of traumatic resilience that is common within the Argentine human rights narrative. Ordinary citizens overcame traumatic loss and transformed tragedy into positive action for the common good. Like Bonafini, most who speak about their experience are public, accessible figures. Social scientists then use their experience to make larger generalizations about responses to state violence. In the process, they not only become empirical and descriptive models of how people respond to state terror, they become ethical role models for others to follow. The literature on the Mothers is emblematic of this. They are women who transformed their personal grief over the loss of their child into a public movement that achieved global influence and renown. Armed with courage, ingenuity and parental love, they openly confronted a dictatorship. They were "ordinary mothers" who only became political activists in response to the disappearance of their children. In interviews, like Bonafini, the vast majority describe themselves as apolitical before their children's disappearance.

That family member activists were "ordinary citizens" is an important representational claim in this narrative but it is also misleading. Theirs is not necessarily a representative experience upon which one can make generalizations about responses to state terror. In fact, the majority of family members of the disappeared are not active in human rights groups. Most mothers of disappeared children did not become Mothers. For victims of the dictatorship, a sharp division exists between activists who speak about their experience—those who subsequently become the basis for knowledge about the dictatorship—and others who do not. Ester's experience, although hidden, may be more representative than the Mothers'.

The literature on human rights conceals an absence. If the dominant narrative speaks of how people were able

to *superar* (overcome) their grief, what about those who did not? In the course of my fieldwork, interviews made references to numerous suicides by family members of the disappeared. Yet the mental health and human rights literature devoted to the dictatorship does not speak about them. A blank spot exists. When I raised this question with the mental health team of a prominent human rights group, they became defensive. I did not understand why. "What are you talking about? There aren't any suicides," they responded. I later realized that this mental health team worked almost exclusively with family members who were active in human rights. In raising the question of those who did not overcome their grief, I inadvertently challenged the dominant heroic narrative. Likewise, when I asked another question about family members who did not have a political transformation in which they acquire the politics of their disappeared children after their disappearance, I drew more blank stares. A parent could feel grief about the loss of their child but could object to their political goals and activities that led to their disappearance. These parents are also absent.

Despite the large amount of work produced devoted to examining the psychological effects of the last military dictatorship in Argentina, a gap exists between parents of the disappeared who joined human rights groups and those who did not. The dominant narrative is that of the family member turned human rights activist, one that is told and retold through popular and academic work. At the same time, only a minority of family members underwent the heroic transformation that this narrative entails. However, such a narrative cannot provide meaning for people like Ester, who remain outside of human rights organizations and largely removed from the attention of social scientists and mental health teams studying the effects of the disappearances.

Ester's Narrative

As I described at the onset of this article, my presence compelled Ester to produce a narrative during our second meeting. While it had a straightforward narrative structure, it also differed markedly from the narratives that came from other family member human rights activists. Rather than speaking about the consequences of her daughter's disappearance on her own life, Ester confined her narrative to her daughter's life. The narrative of her daughter's life was driven by political engagement. The first part detailed a dramatic crescendo of political involvement, beginning innocuously with her political awakening at Zumerland, the Argentine socialist Jewish summer camps, moving through communist youth groups, the influence of Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution, and ultimately joining the Montoneros, a revolutionary group. By the age of 20, she went into hiding to take part in armed struggle. The second part of Ester's narrative detailed what she knew about Ana's political activities up to her disappearance. This included Ana's involvement in a historic event that became known as the Trelew Massacre, in which she took part in an operation to liberate political prisoners held in a Patagonian prison and was among a small number who survived by escaping in a plane to Chile. After a stint in Chile, she went to Czechoslovakia and Cuba before returning to Argentina shortly before the coup, after which, her activities remained clandestine until her disappearance in 1978. At several points, I asked her about her own experience during this time, she mentioned that there was "great suffering" for her and her family but finally responded tersely, "there's not much to talk about." When I attempted to ask Ester about why she had never been active in human rights, she responded, "I should be at the Plaza," referring to the weekly protests of the Mothers. "But it wasn't for me," she added without explanation.

How to understand her reluctance to speak about her own experience? Following the trauma model, her silence could be a product of her inability to overcome her loss. Some of her statements support this interpretation. When asked about her daughter's children, her grandchildren, she said that she was unable to tell them about their mother when they asked about her—"It was too painful." In the end, they contacted her mother's friends to find out about her. Ester proudly reported that one friend told them about her mother, "Her only defect was that she was perfect." Stumbling over the line a few times as she recalled it, she finally said it with a beam of maternal pride. In this sense, following the trauma model, the incipient effort of narrativizing her experience could be seen as "therapeutic" (Ester, interview with author, April 5, 2004).

Other statements she made support a different interpretation, one that will transition to a concluding section about the relationship between narrative and the social sciences. When I persisted in my effort to direct the conversation back to her own life, she responded that, "*vivencias eran multiples*," a phrase that literally translates as "experiences were multiple." In the context of our discussion, I was unsure what she meant. Combined with another statement that "there was not much to tell" about her life suggested that, in contrast with her daughter, she did not see her life as a linear and coherent narrative.

Narrative Normativity

Ester did not appear to think of her life in narrative form although she was able to turn her daughter's life into a narrative. One of the dominant assumptions in the social sciences over the past several decades is that people conceptualize their lives as narratives. As Jerome Bruner argues, a "human 'readiness' exists for narrative" (1990:34), involving a "predisposition to organize experience into a narrative form, into plot structures and the rest" (45). In Charles Taylor's genealogy of the self, he argues that, "we cannot but strive to give our lives meaning or substance, and that this means that we understand ourselves inescapably in narrative" (1989:51). Narrative becomes the means by which people establish a meaningful continuity between past and present time—an essential means of capturing what Paul Ricoeur termed "the temporal character of human experience" (1984:3). The idea that individuals construct their sense of self through narrative is pervasive in anthropology. As Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps wrote, "we come to know ourselves as we use narrative to apprehend experiences and navigate relationships with others" (1996:20-21). Or, in the words of Paul Antze, "our very experience of identity, of being someone in particular, has a tacit narrative structure" (1996:6). In these understandings, the self is not a given pre-existing entity but is constructed through narrative. As one philosopher writes, "the self is given content, is delineated and embodied, primarily in narrative constructions or stories" (Kerby 1991:3). In this assessment, narrative is "one of the most characteristically human acts, acts that justifiably remain of central importance to both our personal and our communal existence" (1). In the anthropological literature, approaching narrative as a means of accessing how individuals understand experience originates from Victor Turner's work: "narrative is knowledge... emerging from action, that is experiential knowledge" (1981:163).

Experience is inchoate; narrative is what gives experience structure and meaning. Ricoeur developed the concept of "emplotment" to understand how individuals thread together the narratives of their lives—this process of how individuals reach self-knowledge (1984). Narratives in this sense serve as a vehicle for moral judgment, a position held by narrative theorists such as Hayden White (1987) and Charles Taylor (1989), who argued that narratives refer to our collective sense of the good. Through narrative, people fashion themselves into unique human beings. Narrative represents a primary site of individual agency. As Nigel Rapport argues, "narratives are universal, I shall say, because individuals are continually and continuously authoring them: individuals are writing the story (better, stories) of their lives, of their societies and selves" (1997:43-44). Narratives are primary sites of human agency where individuals can immerse themselves into the creative process of self-fashioning through narrative practices.

If much of this literature assumes an unnarrativized life is not worth living, some go even further and suggest an unnarrativized life is not human life at all. Julia Kristeva's (2001) analysis of Hannah Arendt's life and work argues that narrative is not only central to human self-understanding, but also fundamental to human life. For Arendt, life, action and thought can only be considered human when communicated in a narrative and shared with others. What she calls a "specifically human" life is one that "can be represented by a narrative, and shared with other men" (Kristeva 2001:7-8). Kristeva considers this Arendt's critique of Heidegger—her valuation of action over passive contemplation in which narrative captures the politically engaged life. Narration is essential for political action since it forms the basis of agency.

Denaturalizing Narrative

Philosopher Galen Strawson (2004) identifies and argues against two primary assumptions implicit in this view of narrative—that this view of narrative is both an empirical fact and an ethical ideal. First, he identifies what he calls a "psychological Narrativity thesis" which holds that "human beings typically see or live or experience their lives as a narrative or story of some sort" (428). As descriptive thesis, it argues that people invariably experience their lives as narratives. Strawson also identifies an "ethical Narrativity thesis" that holds "experiencing or conceiving one's life as a narrative is a good thing; a richly Narrative outlook is essential to a well-lived life, to true or full personhood"(428). This thesis is normative since it does not necessarily assume that human beings are narrative beings but it holds that they *should* be. After identifying these two theses, Strawson persuasively disputes both. He points to people who do not fit this model and shows how these understandings can "hinder human self-understanding" by missing out on other expressive forms in which people understand their lives while being "potentially destructive in psychotherapeutic contexts" by forcing narrativity upon them (429).

In Ester's case, her unwillingness or incapacity to narrativize her own life is revealing. I believe she is an example of someone non-narrative in understanding her own life (thus against narrative as a descriptive ideal) who still held a view of narrative as an ethical ideal. In this case, her inability to produce a narrative was tied to her inability to become a human rights activist and

take political action in the name of her disappeared daughter. In addition, although her understanding of her disappeared daughter's life was deeply narrative, this narrative sharply contrasted with the dominant human rights narrative. For example, several times during our interview, she spoke about her daughter's life as a "suicide:"

> All they had were their ideals. They ran risks without looking back. She was so happy. It was so attractive. It had romantic appeal...She chose her road. In the end, everything we suffered is erased but she gave her life for an ideal and I have to recognize and appreciate that. They knew they were going to fall. The military had everything. The kids had nothing but their ... It was suicide.

This is a language that human rights organizations vehemently reject when speaking about the disappeared. When I was at a human rights conference in rural Argentina, an audience member similarly referred to "suicide" in a question. Before she could even finish, she was interrupted by a human rights worker saying, "I object to this term. It was not suicide. They had 'life projects.' They didn't want to die."

At the end of our interview discussing her daughter's life, Ester added with a twinkle in the eye, "I wanted to go with her. I wish I went with her." When she told me this, I reacted with surprise. Besides the incongruous image of an upper-middle class, middle-aged mother following her daughter on the path of becoming an underground revolutionary, did she really wish she had followed in her path that ended with her daughter's disappearance, torture and murder? In the end, unable to construct her own narrative, she expressed a wish to be assimilated into her daughter's narrative. Just as her suffering would be, in her words, "erased," her daughter's narrative was part of Argentine history. However, if Ester had joined the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, key protagonists of the human rights struggle after the disappearance of their children, she would have had her own larger historical narrative to join.

The Ethics of the Voice and the Right to Remain Silent

> If our voice was not as strong and profound, we would not have elicited such a reaction.
>
> —Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo

Human rights require narrative constructions, but in whose narrative voice? In the literature on the Mothers, whether academic or journalistic, the notion of "voice" features prominently, whether others are "giving voice" to them or whether they refer to the group as a "voice of conscience," an "ethical voice," or the "voice of human rights." Their "moral authority" (Borland 2006) is constructed in terms of voice: derived from "speaking out" against the dictatorship or their "refusal to be silenced" (Navarro 1989). This rhetoric around "voice" is a powerful and pervasive one within the human rights and trauma literature (Felman and Laub's influential *Testimony* [1992] concludes with an analysis of Claude Lanzman's documentary *Shoah* entitled, "The Return of the Voice"), one that is self-consciously embraced by the *Mothers* themselves—their radio show is called *La Voz de Las Madres* ("The Voice of the Mothers"). Even the Mothers' current Wikipedia entry has a rambling, "citation needed" section entitled the "Significance of voice." Such analyses often take a quasi-mystical quality such as Marjorie Agosín's description of the Mothers as "strange specters" who are "transcendental" and "became the ethics and the memory of the country" in how they "forge a position of ethical clarity before life" (1996).

The question of "narrative voice" in this case appears obvious: the "voice" is that of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and other family member activists. Yet discussions of their "voice" rarely refer to any specific content but use it as an abstract ideal. Consider as well that the weekly protest marches of the Mothers during the dictatorship, which rightly brought them international renown were, in fact, silent. Appeals to "voice" in this ethical sense, thus invokes something more tacit. Philosopher Mladen Dolar's (2006) theoretical work on the "ethics of the voice" can illuminate its usage here. He traces the idea of "voice" as a philosophical object used to appeal to a transcendent, metaphysical, and divine source of absolute moral authority. This can be seen in Rousseau's "inner voice of conscience" and Kant's "voice of reason," "the power of the powerlessness, the mysterious force which compels us to follow reason" (2006:90). As Dolar writes, this inner voice of conscience is "a voice one cannot silence or deny—should one do so a disaster is certain to follow. It is a voice which circumvents all discursive argument and offers firm ground for moral judgment beyond discursivity, beyond the intricacies of deductions, justifications, and deliberations"(85). For Dolar, this voice grounds ethical claims and is the source of ethical responsibility even though, paradoxically, it is groundless and meaningless. "Ethics requires a voice, but a voice which ultimately does not say anything, being by virtue of that all the louder, an absolute convocation which one cannot escape, a silence that cannot be silence"(98).

If, as often alleged, human rights constitute a secular religion whose appeals contain an absolute moral authority stemming from dubious and contested foundations (based on ideas of "inherent dignity" and linguistic constructions in its first preamble that open each assertion with "whereas"), they ground this voice of conscience as inner voice with metaphysical force within human figures. In this sense, the transformative and transcendental power of the Mothers over many observers is a literal materialization of this earlier philosophical notion. The voice of the Mothers functions in the exact same way as a transcendental ethics. An emphasis on "voice" in scholarly work on human rights follows this inadvertent metaphysics, a means of grounding a historical and material claim into a transcendental ethics.

This human rights ethics assumes an inexorable obligation to speak—to bear witness to atrocities and not "remain silent" in the face of injustice and suffering. Silence is considered a negative state, an antagonist in need of conquering. This is a product both of the demands of human rights appeals as well as a view within the psychological traumatology literature that assumes the inability to incorporate experience into words is a result of repression and thus a pathological psychological response. However, as Dolar also writes, "Silence seems to be something extremely simple, where there is nothing to understand or interpret. Yet it never appears as such" (2006:152).

Recently, anthropologists have attempted to denaturalize testimony and call into question some of the underlying assumptions of this dominant view on silence as absence. For example, Carol Kidron (2009) argues against the logocentrism in social science understandings of silence in which it signifies both an absence of speech and voice. Like others, she questions the dominant view of therapy largely defined by narrativizing past experience and the assumptions that trauma is linked to the unrepresentability of experience. As Kidron writes, "With silence as the battleground of this academic crusade, failures to verbalize painful pasts become highly charged and contested objects of research" (2009:8). Silence does not have to be a marker of absence but can itself be a productive non-verbal signifying space. In a similar vein, Brigittine French questions the expressed goals of truth commissions in Guatemala in attempting to "return voice to victims" (2009:93).

Even within narratology, there has been a recent reaction against "narrative coherence" as an ultimate 'virtue' within a field in which, "Coherence was assumed as a norm for good and healthy life stories and coherence indeed was something that scholars ventured to investigate and to find, for instance, in life-story interviews" (Hyvarinen et al. 2010:1). Rather than focusing on narrative coherence as a means of making experience coherent, the authors argue to look for fragmentation and the unstructured in how people speak about their lives. An attachment to coherence, linearity and structure is too closely attached to the notion of a bounded and coherent individual identity. Examining what is not said can be as productive as examining what is said. If "giving voice" formed one of the dominant anthropological ethical and ethnographic imperatives of the end of the last century, perhaps "giving silence" will become a dominant trope of the 21st century.

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Notes

1 Research for the article was conducted in Argentina over a total of 15 months between November 2003 and January 2005 and December 2008 and January 2009.

2 Her difficulty in speaking about her daughter's life could not be simply attributed to her age. As we chatted earlier, she recounted reminiscences of my grandfather from 50 years earlier with ease and precision.

3 Gugelberger (1996) critiques how North American academics have canonized this literature.

4 I draw the notion of the "reproduction of conventional knowledge" from Allan Young (1980).

5 Activists from other countries often do not understand this position. Their default expectation is that victims want to tell their stories of suffering. For example, in an interview with a *Mother* from *Z Magazine* (July/August 2004, Vol. 17, No. 7/8), the interviewer writes, "When asked about her own dirty war fatalities, Juana is uncharacteristically hesitant. She says they do not usually tell their own stories, referring instead to the collective fight. Finally, she consents."

6 From a 1984 interview reprinted by Ayeshalibros.com, "Reconstrucciones de Desaparecidos," http://www.ayeshalibros.com.ar/html/reportajes/bonafini2.htm.

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