But Who's the Girl?


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CHAPTER 3

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3.1 Who's Speaking? Free Indirect Discourse and Speaker-Utterance Attributions.

With La danse de l’araignée (2017), Laura Alcoba closes the series begun a decade ago with her opera prima, Manèges: petite histoire argentine (2007) --La casa de los conejos (2008); The Rabbit House (2008) – and followed by Le bleu des abeilles (2013) --El azul de las abejas (2014). Manèges was an immediate critical and commercial success in its French and Spanish versions. In some quarters, it is regarded as firmly established in "the landscape of the memory of the dictatorship" (Ducrozet 2014). Critical interest grew significantly in the last few years, and the “landscape” became less uniform. Although passionate endorsements and equally passionate rejections sprang from its very publication, they were very much in the minority. Conversely, in the last two years or so, along with nuanced discussions form a variety of perspectives, there has been a resurgence of critical works that present either a blanket rejection or a blanket endorsement of Alcoba’s book.

As suggested in the Introduction, this polarization seems to follow an analogous general climate in public and private discussions about the politics of memory that have taken place for the last fifteen years. The same slim volume, within the same time-frame (2014-2016), has been
judged to be a pro-dictatorship pamphlet by some readers, and dismissed as *propaganda montonera* by others.

At this point in the overall argumentation that concludes with this chapter, it will hardly come as a surprise to see the approach and orientation of the following discussion aiming in a different direction – even if, in so doing, it implicitly rejects the claim that *Manèges* endorses *specific* political views. Instead, this chapter presents and fleshes out three ways in which Alcoba’s work challenges our interpretive practices.

First, *Manèges*’ nimble use of free indirect discourse, conversational implicatures and other rhetorical, pragmatic, and performative devices, prevents us from making speaker-utterance attributions (i.e., matching a given utterance to a specific speaker) in crucial dialogue scenes. If we have no textual support to match a given utterance with a given speaker, and, in addition, all speakers are equally likely to have proffered the utterance, we have no way to adjudicate the issue.

Needless to say, who the speaker is makes a crucial difference in the sense and connotations of the utterance, the dialogue, and often the entire scene, unsettling our whole interpretive landscape. While we cannot settle on any one interpretation, I argue that the scenarios *Manèges* suggests are worth exploring, and that, in fact, the impossibility of reaching interpretive closure is conducive – or should be conducive, if my argument is sound -- to forms of interpretive discussion that are likely to break the tendency toward polarization prevalent in textual and political accounts of Argentina’s recent past.

Second, the reading process demanded by *Manèges* involves the triggering of "performative loops" analogous to the ones discussed in Abad's *Traiciones*. While the latter targeted, for the most part, our memory, the former aims at our capacity to make judgments, a tendency that, as is well-known, is bound to be exacerbated when contentious issues are under
discussion. In an opposite direction – what was earlier dubbed centripetal effects --the narrative voice “suggests” that the reader go beyond the text in a variety of ways.

If the first two points involve the identification or perception of textual features and cognitive-affective abilities that may unwittingly go amok, the third and last point focuses on two specific themes that have been touched upon when discussing Traiciones and Los rubios. Namely, the figures of the child and the woman.

The narrative is based on relatively straightforward and well-known events: in late 1975 Laura Alcoba's mother moved with her 7-year old daughter to a small house in the outskirts of La Plata, Buenos Aires, Argentina, where they lived until mid-1976 with a young couple --Diana Teruggi and Daniel Mariani--who belonged to the same guerrilla cell of Montoneros that was in charge of printing Evita Montonera, the official media outlet of the organization. The Evita aimed at (and, on the leadership’s view, was crucial for) the OPM’s cadres, i.e., it was not aimed at a general audience. Its contents included official communiqués regarding ever-stricter rules and procedures; concrete orders for all cells as to how to approach and deal with the rapidly changing fighting conditions; directives and advice on how to move in the (also rapidly changing) territorial divides or zones --"safer" areas, vulnerable spaces, territories heavily infiltrated and dominated by the enemy, etc.; updates on the latest developments in the military and political fronts, and vignettes depicting specific combats or highlighting the actions of specific militantes.

The “front” for the printing press was a make-believe, minimally functional, small business purportedly specialized in rabbit-breeding and rabbit-based dishes. The services included home-delivery, which along with the few real food-orders they managed to get, was actually used to deliver, first and foremost, stacks of Evitas to key distribution points in a rusty Citroen van driven by the young couple.
Despite a seemingly auspicious beginning, soon things deteriorated. As paramilitary squads first, and military forces later—after the March 24 coup—began to close in, tensions mounted, and Alcoba's mother engaged in protracted negotiations that eventually played out in her favor: by mid-1976 she was allowed to leave the rabbit house with her daughter, with a view to going into exile. The young Laura sorely lamented saying goodbye to Diana, with whom she had forged a close relationship.

A few months later, her mother reached Paris, while Laura lived with her grandparents keeping as low a profile as she could until her new "official" passport arrived. Only then could she fly safely to France, and be reunited with her mother – two years later. What Laura doesn’t know when she meets her mother again is that the house of rabbits – along with Diana and six other militants who were in the house – was obliterated during one of the largest-scale, most brutal military crackdowns launched by the regime. Diana's husband, Daniel, wasn't in the rabbit house, but was murdered soon thereafter in another safe-house. Their months-old daughter, Clara Anahí, was the only survivor, and, as per military orders, was taken unharmed, and "placed" in a military or pro-military family --a destiny shared by over 500 children of desaparecidos. Isabel “Chicha” Mariani, mother of Daniel and mother-in-law of Diana, has been searching for Clara Anahí since then, eventually co-founding and presiding Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo for a decade. To this day, Clara Anahí hasn’t been found.

Formally, Manèges appears to be equally straightforward. There are a few exceptions: three short texts (a Prologue-Letter and an Epilogue-Letter, both of which bear the typical markers of authorial texts, and both addressed to Diana; and an author-penned middle chapter briefly describing a particular aspect of Alcoba's research.). Also, there is a passage from Poe's "The
Purloined Letter" inserted or, rather, quoted, in the Letter-Epilogue, and the graph of a crossword puzzle drawn by Laura in the second half of the book.

The main text is, otherwise, a seemingly simple narrative; a conventional, smooth textual surface (divided in equally conventional chapters), narrated in first person by a 6-year old --soon a 7-year old, i.e., Laura-qua-child, who is, however, fairly intellectually precocous. This overall and widespread feature is apparent from the very opening of the book, when Laura explains:

Si nous avons quitté notre appartement, c’est parce que maintenant les Montoneros devient se cacher. C’est nécessaire parce qu’il y a des personnes que sont devenues très dangereuses : ce sont les hommes des commandos de l’AAA, la Alianza Anticomunista Argentina, qui enlèvent les mitants comme mes parents et les tuent ou les font disparaître. Alors il faut que nous nous mettions à ‘labri, que nous nous cachions et aussi que nous répliquions. Ma mère m’expliqué que ça s’appelle « vivre dans la clandestinité » « Maintenant nous allons vivre dans la clandestinité. [“If we’ve had to leave our apartment it’s because, from now on, the Montoneros have to hide. It’s necessary, because there are some people who have become very dangerous: men from the commandos of the AAA, the Argentine Anti-communist Alliance, who “pick up” [n.b., kidnap] militants like my parents, and kill them or make them disappear. So we have to move to less exposed places, safe places to protect ourselves; to lay low and try to go unnoticed; and also to retaliate My mother explains that this is called "going underground." [n.b., pasar a la clandestinidad] (7).1

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1 "Pasar a la clandestinidad" was the more widespread expression; shortly afterwards,"vivir en la clandestinidad" was also used --and that's what Alcoba writes in the French original, "vivre dans la clandestinité"
Laura's mother highlights that it’s very important not to say anything to anyone. To bring the point home, she tells her about a boy whose parents had forgotten to explain to him “to what extent it is important to be silent” (“a quel point il est important de se taire;” 9). The police raided the place, and the boy, quite unaware of the consequences of his actions, pointed at the hiding place where his parents hid compromising material. This landed them in jail. The text goes on:

Mais pour moi, c’est différent. Je suis grande, je n’ai que sept ans mais tout le monde dit que je parle et raisonne déjà comme une grande personne. Ça les fait rire que je connaisse le nom de Firmenich, le chef des Montoneros, et même les paroles de la marche des Jeunesses péronistes par cœur. Moi, on m’a tout expliqué. J’ai compris et j’obéirai (But my case is different. I’m a grown up; I’m only seven but everybody says I already talk and reason like a grown-up. It makes them laugh that I know the name of Firmenich, the chief of Montoneros, and that I know by heart the lyrics of the Peronist Youth march. They’ve explained everything to me. I’ve understood, and I will obey; 18)

The above, as well as other exchanges, are not given directly, in dialogue form, but by appeal to free indirect discourse (or a relevantly similar variation of it), which undoes standard ways of linking speakers and utterances. As said above, the nimble use of this device, often in the

clandestinite“ --yet to refer to the condition and characteristics of haber pasado a la clandestinidad, i.e., of having gone underground; of having crossed a threshold that involves living, or, more bluntly, surviving, in that space that suspended, or cancelled, almost all "normal" forms of social interaction] (7).
form of a “natural” shift, leaves us with neither explicit markers (e.g., dialogue tags, inverted commas, indentation, etc.) nor implicit ones (e.g., conversational implicatures). As anticipated above, even critical pieces that focus on the use of narrative voice (including Karen Saban’s excellent discussion [Saban 2012; 2013], which does make an incursion into Alcoba’s use of free indirect discourse, as do shorter but incisive pieces such as Daona’s and Peller’s) don’t draw the full implications of its operation in Manèges, i.e., for our purposes, mainly a) its effects on speaker-utterance attributions (e.g., their dislodging and suspension); and b) the way in which Manèges artfully leads readers to miss or fail to see this operation.

Let us see how this occurs in the above passages. It seems we are before an unequivocal, straightforward dialogue, even if rendered in good, old-fashioned, “reported speech,” which gives a faster pace and agility to the prose passage. And yet, the smoothness with which the text moves from that form of indirect reporting to free indirect discourse (or a relevantly similar variation of it) makes it difficult to realize that the standard markers of speaker-utterance attributions are no longer there. As a result, we may likely go on reading, unwittingly projecting one of the many possible and plausible sets of speaker-utterance attributions that are offered by the text, but which are simultaneously withheld. For, despite the suggestive variety of possible matchings between utterances and speakers, there is no textual indication or support whatsoever that would give us reasons to choose one over the others. Therefore, if we do keep reading and making specific attributions --regardless of whether we do so intentionally or not; inadvertently or not;

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2 Another reason why this absence of textual markers may go unnoticed, of course, is that the identification of those markers has become almost second-nature, and we don't usually (or consciously) interrupt or even slow down the reading pace to make these matchings, let alone stop and reread to confirm whether we've made the right ones.
unconsciously or not --we shall be exerting violence on the text. That is, we shall be making 
*arbitrary* choices, on the basis of which we articulate a given interpretation of the scene.

For instance, if we reread the above-quoted passages (especially the one beginning, "*But my case*..."), we should notice that there are *at least* four interpretive possibilities. It *could* very well be what her mother said to Laura after telling her the rather grim story of the boy who unwittingly led his family to jail. After all, it is reasonable that a mother should want to appease her 7-year old, and give her some reassurance after telling her such a story. Grammatically, all we have to do is replace the possessive “*my*” with “*your,*” and we have what could be a typical phrase to reassure a child: “*But your* case is completely different; *you’re* a grownup now.”

Still, the mother could have just told her the story, quick and to the point, and then remained silent. If this were the case, the whole scene changes: the mother is leaving Laura alone to gather strength on her own. That is, we would have to conclude that 7-year old Laura is cheering herself up, silently talking to herself, after a smooth transition from her mother's words to her own thoughts: "*I’m 7 years old now, and everybody says that I speak and think like an adult.*" In this scenario, Laura, would be next to her mother, but left alone, in a situation in which they could be gunned down at any moment.

Third, part of the sentence could have been uttered by her mother, and part by Laura. Alternatively, part of it could have been an utterance, and part of it, a thought of Laura’s. Fourth, the passage could be construed as *a repetition or recasting of her mother's words*, perhaps *told to her daughter in past circumstances*, and *retrieved now* by Laura in order to cope with the unwelcome news and the more unwelcome silence. There remain other possibilities. For our purposes, though, these should suffice.
In sum, we have no way to decide which of the above possibilities is the case -- *we cannot settle on any set* of speaker-utterance attributions, and therefore, on any one interpretation. This operation becomes increasingly important in the increasingly politically-laden scenes.

There is a related aspect of Laura’s speech that is worth noticing. As seen above, Laura picks up issues of “adult conversations” (e.g., the Peronist Youth march; the snippet of information about the chain of command within the OPM— the name of the first commander of the OPM’s *Conducción Nacional* – henceforth, CN -- Mario Eduardo Firmenich). Laura “will obey,” as she said, because she’s “a grownup;” and she’ll do so, she adds, “even if they come to hurt me . . . even if they bore little nails through my knees. Really, I have understood to what extent it is important to keep silent” (“[m]ême si on venait à me faire mal. … Même si on me plantait de tout petits clous dans les genoux. Moi, j’ai compris à quel point il est important de se taire; ” 18).

Evidently, Laura picks up adult speech *not always in a smooth way*, but, at times, as incrustations or clashes with her child-like speech. Torture described as driving “little nails” or “small nails” (“*petits clous*”) into her knees sounds more like a child trying to translate or grapple with the unpalatable, almost incomprehensible reality of torture, into the worldview of a child.

This uneasy linguistic blend may suggest, without stating it explicitly, that Laura may be struggling to put together and make sense of, on the one hand, the harsh realities of the adult world towards which she’s being pushed, and, on the other hand, the safety of her childhood world. The tone of the narrative, then, shifts among the following:

a) sense of vague danger accompanied by an equally vague notion that she has a duty to fulfill;

b) a sense of game-playing; and

c) a sense of simple normalcy, of being just like everybody else living their everyday life.
The actual unfolding of the above scenarios isn't as clear-cut as this brief schematic sketch might suggest, and, moreover, at times it would seem that the shift becomes a blend of sorts, or an oscillation that blurs the borders of these three scenarios. Furthermore, Laura develops rudimentary (and, sometimes, quite elaborate) defense mechanisms that are connected with these scenarios --and with the needs of the guerrilla cell. When the "feel" of childlike play prevails, Laura sometimes resorts to literal playing, though, more often than not, she has to negotiate her (stereotypically "infant-specific") desires with her increasingly habitual chores -soon-to-be duties --that her living situation demands. Soon thereafter they meet the young couple with whom they'll share the small house that hides the printing press: a 24-year old Diana Teruggi, whose pregnancy is not very noticeable yet, and her husband Daniel Mariani. Laura is immediately fascinated by Diana, and they will become very close.

In what follows, I discuss one scene in which the mechanism of speaker-utterance attributions exemplified above becomes very relevant. If successful, this discussion will make a good case for the view here advocated, and help as well to show the points where the polarized interpretations are wanting.

3.2 Between Interpretation and Naming: Disappearance qua Social Isolation

Laura sits by the door in the late afternoons and watches passersby. In time, she notices and enjoys the brief but everyday presence of a neighbor, coming home from work. Laura’s new acquaintance is in her mid-to late twenties --a bit too "old" for a 7-year old, but not for Laura, accustomed by now to spending most of her time among adults; and a bit too young for the young woman, who is nevertheless taken by Laura’s loquaciousness and inquisitive mind. Eventually their little chats grow into an invitation to have tea. Laura is thrilled. The blend of Laura’s "adult
woman" roles with her typically childlike fascination when trying on her neighbor's shoes, for instance, makes the brief description of their tea-party both a vivid illustration of the complexity of Laura's position, and a respite from the sense of danger that besieges the narrative. Or so it seems. For, the next day, Laura's mother storms into the kitchen, screaming at her, demanding that she explain what happened with their neighbor.

Diana calms both mother and daughter down, and tells Laura that the neighbor had asked them what was wrong with "that poor girl," who went about saying she had no last name. Laura is confused and doesn't seem to remember. Diana patiently helps her to reconstruct the scene:

J'ai juste dit mon prénom car je sais que c'est la partie de mon nom que je vais garder. Ensuite, je crois qu'elle m'a demandé : Et ton nom de famille? Sincèrement, je ne me souviens plus de la suite. J'ai dû paniquer, car je sais très bien que ma mère est recherchée et que nous attendons qu'on nous donne un nouveau nom et de faux papiers. Est-ce que moi aussi je suis recherchée? D'une certaine manière oui, sans doute, mais je sais bien que je suis là par hasard. (I only said my first name because I know that's the only part of my name that I will be able to keep. I'm allowed to keep. I think she asked me, And what's your last name? And, really, I don't remember anything of what happened afterwards. I must have panicked, because I know very well that my mother is being chased, and that we're waiting for our new last name and false papers. Are they looking for me as well? In a way, yes, no doubt about it; but I also know very well that if I'm here, it's entirely by chance; 72).
At the beginning of this kitchen scene it was clear who the speakers were, and who was saying what (the author used dialogue tags), but, as Laura withdraws, and we reach the quoted passage, we don’t even know whether this is still the report of the dialogue (and, if so, we don’t know who the interlocutors are), or Laura's thoughts, or simply the continuation of the narrative.

The passage reads well; we get a clear idea of the overall situation. Furthermore, the smooth interweaving of what could have been her mother's words, or Diana's, or Laura's – or even Laura’s thoughts, and no longer a report of the dialogue --easily makes readers fail to notice the problematic issue of speaker-utterance attributions. The more widespread view is that the passage is, at most, a blend or combination of the two narrators, i.e., Laura-qua-child, and Laura-qua-adult narrator --the latter smoothly and imperceptibly insinuating herself into the narrative of the child.3 From this starting point, readings differ vastly as to the kind, degree, effects, and evaluation of this interplay between the two narrators. At their most extreme, some of these readings construe this scene as Laura’s decision to side with the cause of her mother – and that of Montoneros (Ros). Others draw the opposite conclusion (Santos 2014 and 2015).

Yet, if there is no way to determine who the narrator is, both of the above groups of (admittedly, very roughly sketched) readings lose their footing. The following discussion (mainly focused on the fourth sentence and on the much-discussed statement about "chance") aims to argue for this crucial point, which, if sound, undoes the polarized interpretations, and suggests a broader, deeper critique than the ones these interpretations seem to read in Manèges.

3 In some, Adult Laura comments on aspects of, or on events experienced by, her younger self. Peller 2012 argues that Adult Laura is leaving traces of the way she regards this long-past event, thus showing some compassion towards some of the less-than-welcome experiences her younger self went through, without sounding self-indulgent or melodramatic. See also Punte 2013 and 2014.
Let us start with the fourth sentence, "I know very well that my mother is being chased" (there was an arrest warrant, her picture on the papers, etc.). It could, as most accounts affirm, be Laura's utterance. But it could also be an unspoken thought of hers. Furthermore, there are many ways of "transposing" the above passage in dialogue form, and in the case of this statement, all we'd have to do is change two pronouns, and then it'd fit perfectly well in a dialogue where it is the mother who says, "You [instead of "I"] know very well that I’m being chased [instead of "my mother"]"

If we ascribe the utterance, then, to Laura's mother, and we bear in mind that we know the basic outline of the scene (i.e., her mother stormed into the kitchen in anger), then it's quite likely --not certain, but very likely-- that the utterance was part of, or was relevantly related to, a rather violent, perhaps guilt-inducing, reproach: "You know very well that I’m being chased!" which would have, in turn, conversational implicatures related to reproach (e.g., “If you knew, How could you do such a thing!”) However, the very same utterance would take on a very different meaning if attributed to Diana. Coming from Diana's lips, the utterance could be either a much milder reproach, or even the opposite of a reproach: a defense of Laura.

This possibility gains even more plausibility if we not only switch the attribution of the utterance (i.e., if we shift from the mother to Diana), but we also change the addressee: it is perfectly consistent to read the passage as if that utterance were proffered by Diana, and yet not addressing Laura, but her mother, in which case it could be construed as a plea in defense of the girl: "I know very well that you’re being chased…" would then be the free indirect discourse rendering of, "She [Laura] knows very well that…." which Diana could have said to Laura's mother, making the case that the blunder was not a result of Laura's silliness or forgetfulness or irresponsibility, but, on the contrary, of a deep awareness about, and concern for, her mother's
situation. And it might have been this awareness and concern what made Laura freeze instead of coming up with some explanation.

This interpretation could be further strengthened if we take a small further step and attribute the preceding clause (“I must have panicked”) to Diana again. This is indeed plausible, given the proximity of the two clauses (“I must have panicked, because I know very well that my mother is being chased”), and, perhaps more importantly, given the likelihood that it be an adult, and not a 7-year old, the one speaking of "panic attacks."

Yet this doesn't mean that Diana is a "better" candidate than the other adults: it favors the suggestion that any adult might be a better candidate than 7-year old Laura --her mother; Laura-qua-adult narrator… and still, we shouldn't forget that young Laura's precociousness doesn't allow us to rule out that it might have been she who uttered the stereotypically Argentine middle-class psychologizing conjecture about panic attacks.

The underdetermined possibilities notwithstanding, we could --and, insofar as we want to make sense of the scene, we must (hypothetically and temporarily) "fix" one or more speaker-utterance attributions, yet only under the hermeneutical proviso that this pairing or set of pairings is no more legitimate than others, i.e., only under the proviso that these pairings allow us to explore interpretive possibilities on which we cannot settle; scenarios, so to speak, through which we engage with the situation the characters face.

For the sake of simplicity, let us go back to the first instance discussed above; and, for the sake of argument, let us "fix" the interpretation --more modestly: the attribution --of that first clause as an utterance proffered by Laura's mother; lastly, let us assume that it was indeed the "correct" attribution, i.e., that it was, without a doubt, a furious reproach to Laura. Even though we could legitimately grapple with a variety of questions that might come up in this light (e.g.,
how would Laura feel, or what does this outburst allow us to infer about her mother's character, and/or about her relationship with Laura; or what is the connection between these questions and the broader context of military repression), we wouldn't be able to answer them in more than a very tentative fashion. We could judge her mother harshly, but how harshly? Do we have enough information to settle this issue?

These questions depend, in part, on the way or ways in which we flesh out this very general interpretive starting point (i.e., the claim, taken as the "right" attribution, that reads, "'You know there's I'm being chased me' is an angry reproach that Laura's mother directs at her daughter"). And the way we flesh out this statement is likely to vary, depending on the subsequent pairings between speakers and utterances. 4 "Are they looking for me as well?" asks Laura a sentence or two later. The answer to this question, widely assumed to be uttered or thought by Laura herself, could very well be attributed to her mother. Again, all we'd have to do is switch a few pronouns (i.e., from "In some sense, yes, no doubt about it, but I know very well, too, that if I'm here, it's just a matter of chance" to "In some sense, yes, no doubt about it, but you know very well, too, that if you are here, it's just a matter of chance"), and, at once, we'd be able to construe these two lines as a mother-daughter exchange in which the mother attempts to temper, or make up for, her violent outburst. How to interpret "chance" here is an open question, but it could certainly be construed as part of the overall reassuring answer, e.g., roughly, in ways that would convey that

4 In other words, the various speaker-utterance attributions, even if taken one at a time, will change the meaning of other clauses (and of their respective speaker-utterance matchings) with which they form a web. That is, they could reconfigure, in whole or in part, the conversational implicatures of specific exchanges, but also of whole sets of exchanges, for, even within whole sets, each speaker-utterance pairing is a link in the thread or web of utterances that form a conversation.
Laura is *not* to blame, and that they are *not* really after her; that she is, simply, a "non-combatant" daughter of a montonero cadre.

Then, the picture of the abusive mother would have to be modified --not necessarily ruled out, but at the very least reconsidered or tempered. Consequently, even if we construe "*I know that my mother is being chased,*" as an indirect rendering of an angry utterance proffered by Laura's mother, the interpretation that might begin to take shape is halted or reshaped or suspended.

More generally, even if we fix the first clause by indexing it to a given speaker, subsequent speaker-utterance attributions (and/or their being unsettled, and therefore subject to change) would likely make us reassess the meaning of the "fixed" utterance.

However, we need not draw skeptical conclusions. We can explore different possibilities by fixing some speaker-utterance attributions and not others. Moreover, we could start in a very simple way, by fixing, *ex hypothesi,* all or *most* of all subsequent instances of unstable or indeterminate speaker-utterance attributions. The combinatorial possibilities are innumerable, and they all open up interesting, concrete interpretive paths that yield different scenarios, different psychological and intersubjective scenarios, *within* the same scene, episode, or chain of episodes.  

The text, then, *demands* that we entertain a wide range of possibilities, *excluding* the possibility of adjudicating among them. Now, the widespread critical tendency is the opposite. As

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5 A caveat: it is *not* possible to settle on any one interpretation, but *this doesn't mean* that we can simply read anything we want *into* the episode, for the "brute elementary data" (*pace* Arendt), or basic "facts" are indisputable, and impose constraints on their interpretation. In the scene at hand: Laura said she had no last name; her mother stormed into the kitchen in anger, and an argument ensued. These "hard facts" set parameters *allow us to rule out* certain interpretations.
said above, most critical accounts tend to fix speaker-utterance attributions arbitrarily, and to regard them, at best, as the central or most important ones; and, at worst, as the only possible ones.

Not only does this tendency exert violence on the text (for there is no textual support to favor one interpretation over others --let us emphasize: not just over one other, for, as we hope to have shown, what's at stake is not an issue of ambiguity between two interpretations); not only does it impoverish the interpretive suggestions of the text; worse, it also contributes to reinforce the dichotomic, irreconcilable, gridlocked "stalemate" among different accounts of Argentina's ties vis-à-vis political violence.

If what has been argued so far is accepted, we would have to accept too that Alcoba's text shows us not only that our interpretive practices exert violence on, and distort, the text, but also that -- regarding the events in question -- it is certainly too soon to judge (i.e., to draw normative conclusions). Moreover, it is too soon even to think that we have a minimally or sufficiently elaborate descriptive view (i.e., a minimally “thick” and nuanced descriptive view of the events in question). If the few but very different interpretive possibilities sketched above are plausible --and let us emphasize that they all refer to one event involving three people in one single (his)story of one single thread of Argentina's Dirty War ---then, a much more complex picture of the seventies begins to emerge in the interpretive horizon of Manèges; a picture that doesn’t allow for, or that shows the inadequacy of, dichotomized, polarized views.

3.3 Memory, Sociality, Agency: Self and Judgment in (Reading) Manèges

It is quite telling that Laura appears to have forgotten --erased, pace Abad? -the whole episode in which she told her neighbor that she had no last name (including the belated realization that her answer was far from convincing). It wasn’t until the reconstruction she engaged in with
the help of Diana that she managed to remember (not without lacunae and uncertainties) the main features of the episode. This suggests, on first blush, a view on memory not quite identical with, but resembling that of, the intersubjective views discussed in regard to Traiciones and Los rubios.

Again, as in Carri and Abad, we find a variation of the notion that the reconstruction of a fragile memory can hardly be elaborated in the isolation or solipsistic space of a Cartesian cogito, nor in the restrictive confines of (many) liberal conceptions of the self, according to which one's memories are conceived of, as it were, under the model of --or from the standpoint and standards of --ownership in general, and property ownership in particular. If this is so, my memories are not altogether "mine," if they are in whatever ways "mixed" with yours. For, if that happens, my memories lose their (and ipso facto my) uniqueness as features of a self.

Instead, as in Abad and Carri --memory (both collective and personal), as well as identity and other related notions (e.g., agency, autonomy, etc.), is presented mostly qua intersubjective activity. The flipside, however, is that when intersubjective activity is restricted, reduced, or subjected to detrimental circumstances --as is the case of the process the guerrilla cell is undergoing --the effects on one's identity and related features is much more pronounced. And this is, it would seem, the situation Laura finds herself in.

The mounting pressures and the increasing isolation, in addition to Laura's cunning and eagerness to be part of her little community's "world," gradually lead the guerrillas to give Laura more space in their activities. They oscillate between treating her almost as another member of the cell, and refocusing on the fact that she is, after all, a 7-year old. That is, they oscillate between attributing to Laura character traits and abilities of an adult (along with their attendant agential features) and recalibrating these attributions to those of a child.
By the same token, Laura wavered between prolonged moments in which what predominated in her was the desire to be, and behave like, an adult—in part, driven by the desire, and even anxiety, of Laura (and in this she displays a feature common to Argentine middle-class children) to please her mother—and moments in which she became dimly aware that there was something amiss in her almost-impossible attempt to fit an impossibly stretched-out set of shifting roles.\(^6\)

A case in point is that of the relationship Laura establishes with an external militante. Besides the members of the guerrilla cell, two "external" cadres visited the house to build the embute: "the Worker, and “the Engineer.”

Laura begins to spend time at the working zone, intrigued by the construction, and is pleased with the conversation she begins to have with the Engineer, while he supervises the remodeling of the house. During one of their encounters, he tells her that his design and architectural plans for this embute were inspired by Poe’s "The Purloined Letter," which captures Laura's imagination.

The imminence of the Engineer's arrival energizes Laura. "Each time the Engineer comes to the house to work, I rush to the construction area” (“Chaque fois que l’Ingénieur vient travailler à la maison, je me précipite sur le chantier,” 60) she says, , as if the distances within the small house of rabbits justified or even allowed one to "rush" or run anywhere. The actual house is small; the patio where the "construction area" was located, even smaller; the false wall that hid the embute before the brutal military crackdown obliterated the area no longer exists, but there is a line of

\(^6\) In these moments, she felt outbursts of childlike “cravings” for playing games and partaking in activities conventionally associated to her coevals. Diana, who would give birth in a few months, often indulged her, playing with her, but also giving her school-like lessons.
bricks or *traces of bricks* that survived the attack, which gives an idea of the approximate dimensions of each of the "areas" Laura inhabited. One would be hard-pressed to speak of "amplitude" in such reduced spaces, *let alone* "rush" or run toward the "working zone." Laura’s spatial perception, then, is likely influenced by her emotions, feelings, and expectations.

Captivated by the mechanism of the *embute*, she has now something to look forward to – a sense of possibility that opens up and gives amplitude to the house, which seems to swell up or shrink with the ebbs and tides of Laura’s perceptual and emotional states.

When the Engineer finishes the *embute* and shows his work to Laura, he is euphoric; his work is impeccable; he praises and thanks Poe's story again, and then explains to Laura how even the remote-control system that opens and closes the doors --two loose wires --would be absolutely hidden by being absolutely exposed; that is to say, hidden in broad daylight: resting on a visible corner, as if left there by dint of negligence or clumsiness.

“Everything's working perfectly well,”, he says. “Soon I'll stop coming, and you won't see me again” (“Tout fonctionne à la perfection. Bientôt, tu ne me verras plus.”). Laura is taken aback, and rests her gaze on his face.

Se tournant vers moi tandis qu’il teste une nouvelle fois le dispositif d’ouverture et de fermeture de la porte d’*el embute*, il prononce ces mots avec un grand sourire qui illumine son visage tout entier. Je n’avais jamais remarqué à quel point il était beau. Ses cheveux sont très foncés, presque noirs, mais sa peau est claire, laiteuse. Quant à ses yeux, je ne saurais dire de quelle couleur ils sont exactement. Gris-bleu, gris-vert ? C’est que la couleur de ses yeux change selon le temps qu’il fait, selon la lumière aussi, et puis, je crois, selon son intention à lui, selon l’éclat qu’il veut bien leur donner … il est bien plus grand et élancé, me semble-t-il. Je me sens si petite á côté de lui... (60)
Laura stalls, her back pressed against the last false wall of the house that hides the embute, and plays with her hair. Then she musters courage and says, “It’s awesome, this thing you’ve done. Maybe you could build another embute, a smaller one, in the house? I don’t know… In the living-room, or in my bedroom, for instance » (“C’est génial, ce que tu as fait…Tu pourrais peut-être faire un autre embute, plus petit, dans la Maison. Je ne sais pas... Dans le salon, ou dans ma chambre, par exemple ;60).

The Engineer laughs heartily, and explains he has to go work elsewhere. Embarrassed, Laura retreats to her room. Note the inverted, or disarrayed, chronology:

“Je me sens vraiment ridicule de lui avoir demandé ça. Je crois même que lorsque j’ai entendu son éclat de rire, j’ai rougi,” is a commentary that entails some distance in time, and not the immediacy that the sentence-order suggests. Only after that reflection does she « return » to the patio, about to retreat to her room, where she will wonder « I think I blushed as soon as I heard him laugh” (61).

She rummages through her clothes and moves things around, pretending to be busy, but she tells herself, “I’ve wanted to play the adult, the militante, the housewife, but I know well that I’m small, wholly small, incredibly small” (“J’ai voulu jouer à l’adulte, a la militante, a la maîtresse de maison, mais je sais bien que je suis petite, toute petite, incroyablement petite même. ” (61)

Regrettably, other than a bowdlerized observation to the effect that Laura feels "un cierto enamoramiento" (“a sort of crush” Daona 2013); or that the text is humorously suggesting a fake erotic attraction to argue that her interest in the Engineer operates merely as a deviation from, or
rejection of, concerns about the relevance of the Montoneros cause (Santos 2015),7 the clear markers of a sexualized child - more so: of a sexualized girl-child -- have been for the most part gone unnoticed, ignored, or smoothed over.

Interestingly, her being “petite,” or, rather, that condition of “smallness,” of which Laura speaks, is quite semantically dense: at times it seems she refers to being a child; other times, to a sheer matter of size, and not age or any normatively related notions of adequacy or inadequacy, propriety or impropriety. Other times, instead, she does seem to refer to inadequacy, but not of a moral, but a physical and (perhaps) psychological sort, unrelated to her age or considerations regarding her status as a child, but, rather, as an inadequacy that doesn't allow her to fulfill her desires: she wants to help Diana kill the rabbit that will be their dinner, and she blames her being petite again. However, "petite" is often attached to the very objects of her desire: recall that she referred to the embute as "cette petite piece secrete" (57);" [this small secret room]; she asks the Engineer to build "un autre embute, plus petite… dans ma chambre" (61).

In this connection, Sarah Ahmed’s view on space, orientation, and desire could be a lens through which we may have an initial grip on these issues: “If orientation is a matter of how we reside in space,” Ahmed writes, “then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence; of how we inhabit spaces as well as 'who' or "what" we inhabit spaces with " (Ahmed 2006, p. 1). This attempt to rethink the “sexualization of space, as well as the spatiality of sexual desire” may be judged, the theorist says not without playful yet serious irony, “odd, bent, and twisted” (and so much so, let us add, in the case of the more widespread, normative views of infancy). Ahmed

7 Santos 2015 ingeniously remarks that “il prononcet cet mots” includes the word embute, which, the critic observes shrewdly and humorously, involves, if we imagine or mimic the pronunciation of the word, a movement of the lips looking as if they were giving a invisible kiss.
hastens to add that the role of spatial proximity with other bodies doesn't exhaust the analysis, nor other, grimmer possibilities that are, in some cases, a cause, and in others, an effect, of disorientation, which affects the spatial and affective (and sexualized) relations among people and objects.

Also, if, as seen above, losing her last name accentuates what could be called a “pre-disappearance process,” (i.e., an increasing process of social isolation), it is also the case that restrictions in (or, conversely, expansions of) her agential attributions accentuate the tensions involved in the constitution of Laura's sense of self. Socially transmitted in linguistic and non-linguistic forms, these agential attributions include naming certain traits or abilities (as well as actions or concepts tied to those traits or abilities), and/or ascribing them to this or that person without explicit naming (e.g., expressed in commands or requests based on the assumption that one has the requisite ability to perform them).

Bracketing the factual or fictional status of (some or all) scenes in Manèges, the uneasy balance between attributions that become agency-enhancing, and those that are agency-thwarting – amply documented by varied ongoing research programs (Ahmed 2006 and 2010; Susan James 2015; Velleman 2009 and 2013) --is vividly incarnated in Laura-qua-girl, and perhaps in Laura-qua-adult as well.

But this isn't the whole story, for, in addition to the external pressures --the externally imposed isolation --there is a well-documented phenomenon that in a way intersects with, or, in the complex constellation of factors at play, worsens, the effects of external isolation; namely, the attempt made by most militantes to pull in the opposite direction: to intensify and strengthen the social bonds among members of the same cell, and the tendency to weaken those with non-
members, as was mentioned briefly with regard to the testimony of Roberto Carri’s unidentified friend in *Los rubios* (Vezetti 2002 and 2009; Ollier 2009).

Once the Engineer is done and stops coming to the house, Laura's social life is virtually reduced to her interactions with Diana, very sporadic meetings of all the cell members -- five or six people -- and brief conversations with her mother, who works non-stop in the depth of the printing press, so close and yet so far from her daughter.

News of the military's crackdowns on houses and *embutes*, murders and disappearances, turns the house of rabbits into a fragile hiding place. The unmentioned thought that theirs might be the next safe house to fall turns everyday contacts and sounds from the external world into ominous, possibly mortally dangerous signs. Only Diana and Laura are in the house when the door knocks, and “Diana too was in fear” (“Diana aussi a eu peur” (116), we read, not fully aware yet of the reasons why the text should emphasize Diana’s fear.

In any case, Diana walks slowly toward the door. Laura is terrified, and her reaction brings to mind the brief passage by Ahmed, though showing a different nuance; it lends itself, in fact, to a variety of approaches. Suffice it, for now, just to highlight her simultaneous desire to hide (and survive); and the seemingly contradictory desire to adjust her movements to the rhythm of Diana’s, and to blend or fade into her until she disappears,
did so to be even closer to her. I wanted, perhaps, that she take me in her arms. I think I would’ve wanted, more than anything, to adjust to her movement and let go, dissolving in until I disappeared; 117).

Again, an abrupt shift. When Laura recognized the voice of the blond neighbor of the thousand shoes, she breathed again. *Would Laura want to come over for a cup of tea?*

But let us go back to the kitchen scene, triggered, precisely, by the previous tea-party with the neighbor: Laura's feeling of vulnerability first, and panic soon thereafter, when she was asked her last name, would seem to show that she *is* aware --in however inchoate a way, i.e., at an emotional level, at least -of the state of suspension she is in. If and when her new (counterfeit) papers arrive, she will be able to have a name. Until then, she will remain in a state of uncertainty regarding something as deeply attached to one's sense of identity as one's very name.

Being asked her name and being unable to answer such a simple question was a painful confirmation of her *suspended status* in the world of the living. Granted, a name is a convention, but one that not only children, but also adults, find of importance for their sense of identity. It's not by chance --no pun intended --that, upon being hurled into any of the more than 300 illegal detention centers that were active during the military regime, the first thing military personnel used to do to the newcomer --the soon-to-be disappeared --was to deprive her of her name, and replace it with a number.

If a paradigmatic scene that shows the operation of free indirect discourse revolves around *hiding* Laura's *last name*, another scene revealing of yet another strategy central to *Manèges* revolves around unwittingly *displaying* her last name. Laura is wearing a sweater that has, in embroidered, small letters, the name of her uncle—that is, her father’s *last name* --which would
easily give them away. One of the cell members begins to chastise Laura for being so negligent. In the previous pages, the narrative had consistently and gradually built up and configured a Laura fairly well adjusted to her role of the careful, adult guerrilla, so when the man begins to chastise her, we are disposed to "take sides" --to "side" with him --and reproach Laura, until (one would hope) we "catch ourselves:" we realize or "remember" that we are siding with an adult who is verbally abusing a 7-year old. Presumably, we shift from siding with the adult abusing Laura, to reframing our interpretation, and, at the very least, to wonder about the appropriateness of attributing such responsibility to a 7-year old. We may go further and "side" with the girl, while, correlatively, censoring her abuser.

The kind and degree of reader's endorsement or "siding" with one character or the other is very likely to be variable. Yet, it need not be a strong empathetic reaction, whereby the reader vicariously experiences a (variable) array of affective engagements. As Angela Smith and Jennifer Saul have forcefully argued, the mere (and even transitory) absence of attitudinal stances (e.g., cognitive or affective discomfort or dissonance) that we would consider an appropriate way of being “attuned” to events (e.g, our relative—again, even if transitory—“indifference” to the scene of brutal verbal abuse) constitutes sufficient grounds for questioning in our capacity to judge and evaluate actions (Smith 2004 and 2006; Saul 2015).^8

\[\text{^8 We caught ourselves siding with the adult, and going ahead with scape-goating Laura. But, is this so serious? Wasn't it a mild, harmless shift in a readers' attitudinal "orientation," which is rapidly corrected and doesn't lead to harmful behavior? Sara Ahmed, Harry Frankfurt, Angela Smith, and David Velleman are but a few scholars who would question this claim. From very different starting points and theoretical commitments, they redefine the space and range of effects of "activity" (i.e., not full-fledged action, and yet an attitudinal stance that transpires and has a variety of positive or negative valences) and "passivity,"}\]
Are we, or have we been, vicariously complicit in a scape-goating process? From the safety of our abrupt shift --siding with Laura, against the man --we may hasten to deny it; or we may acknowledge a minimal degree of "distraction." If Laura --wholeheartedly, it would seem --blames herself and believes she is entirely responsible for putting the whole guerrilla cell in danger, we, as readers, may conceive of ourselves as witnesses, or even bystanders. Yet this is a subject position that doesn’t entail being free from responsibility, as the “distraction” in which Manèges made us slip shows. Again, a minimally honest assessment reveals that, if only for a shortest instant, we were impassive or mildly supportive of a scapegoating process that targeted a 7-year old.

It might be something more (or less) than a scape-goating process. The five or six people who live in the safe-house --the house of rabbits-- are all under pressure, barely able to meet the minimum requirements of a life that wouldn't look suspicious, while trying not to leave the house, because being outside always entails the risk of being stopped by the police, the military, or the paramilitary cracking down on guerrillas or suspected guerrillas. Could the adults, then, be checking every detail? Shouldn't Laura --so precocious and smart in so many respects --take care of something so (purportedly) obvious like not letting her last name be shown?

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the latter conceived of not as "quietism" or "suffering" or "immobility," but --in the versions I find most persuasive --as a stance based on "I cannot rise to the occasion," says Laura ("No estoy a la altura [de las circunstancias]"), or --in the original French, there is a non-humorous pun that conveys both Laura’s taking responsibility (i.e., a result of her victimization?) and the acknowledgment --perhaps elliptical --that she is just a child: “Je ne suis pas à l’hateur.” The "original French," is, perhaps, a bit of a misnomer, given the interplay between Alcoba’s French and her Spanish "translation," which is yet another instance of hybrid suspension or in-between languages.
The episode, then, might be *not just* an instance of scape-goating. Granted, on the face of it, it'd seem to fall squarely under scape-goating, but upon reflection it might be regarded as a blurry zone in which *scapegoating* and impossible *double-binds* intersect. In turn, the reader's judgment (or the judgment we pass on the reader?) also breaks down, and cannot fit the neat distinctions of the grid made by the concepts of perpetrator, victim, witness, bystander, and the related concepts of gray zone, double-bind, scapegoating. In this failure, the text is implicating us in a way that puts pressure on our conceptualization of the events we are reading about, as much as on our conceptualization of ourselves as interpreters.

In a way, *Manèges* --and, from different angles, *Los rubios* and *Traiciones* as well -- respond to the need for a more nuanced, fine-grained elaboration of categories that have begun to be used, more often than not, as facile end-points, when they should be starting points to begin to grapple with these issues; conversation starters, and not conversation-stoppers. It would seem that placing Laura in the broad category of *victim*, and the Engineer in the broad category of *perpetrator* (or, let us say, in the slightly more nuanced but still insufficient category of forced perpetrator, or victim-turned-perpetrator); our understanding and judgment of the events were close to being satisfactory.

If this is our conclusion, one would be hard-pressed not to wonder whether "reasoning" pieces of this kind are the expression of intellectual laziness, compassion-and/or evil-fatigue, or fascination with the roles of victim and perpetrator --or whichever combination of the above one could think of (LaCapra 2009; 2013).

The insufficiency of the above considerations --including the suggestion to characterize these episodes as in-between phenomena, at the intersection of scapegoating and double-binds -- suggests a further interpretive move, which, while not yet minimally adequate, unveils or calls
attention to these inadequacies. To call it an "interpretive move" might be too generous. It is, rather, an observation aimed at blocking the temptation to feel satisfied with the above considerations. Namely, if all we've done is shift from siding with one character to siding with the other --aren't we still within the binary logic of friend and foe; within dichotomy structures that our interpretive practices have been trying so hard to leave behind --and for the most part failed to do?

Put differently, this oscillation between siding with the adult, and siding with Laura, complex and richly layered as it may be (re)conceptualized, thorny as the double-bind nature of the oscillation is, does not escape, if we leave it at that, a deeply binary "trap:." Is the moral of the story that we are in a state of suspension between two alternatives, i.e., between finding ourselves, at times, either sideling with the "bad guy" and, other times, with the "innocent" victim?

In sum, unless we do work out a more fitting schema or conceptualization of the grid, we might be moving too quickly, unwittingly or not, toward yet another dichotomic, double-bind conclusion, which would, quite likely, put an end to a discussion that has barely begun. This very lack of solid ground that Manèges sheds light on reminds us that there is a sore need to focus on these loci of violence, vulnerability, and precariousness that yoke large groups of people, as much as large, if weakened, capacities or frameworks of description and judgment. Like Traiciones, the performative loop in Manèges undermines (or gives us a more precise view of) our limited epistemic position. Unlike Traiciones, the focus isn't our own memory, but our view of self-knowledge and self-interpretation, which bears strongly on antagonistic discussion, as well as on

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9 Happy as we may have been to characterize the episode as a case of scape-goating-meets-double binds, to think that thus we are not presenting a simplistic picture is a bit too quick --or naïve, or facile. Certainly, each of the two are, on their own, complex and "unthinkable" enough; compounded, they are certainly formidable; regarded as closing the discussion, unacceptable.
(or as a function of) the confidence with which we hold our convictions, weigh evidence for or against them, and are willing to change our minds in light of evidence contrary to them.

In sum, it bears strongly on our capacity and flexibility to see, hear, and evaluate phenomena about which we were not aware, or about which we hold deeply ingrained convictions. Performative “loops” of this sort weigh against Manichean views that are still very much alive in the memory regimes of the seventies. Furthermore, they put into question both the assumption of societal “innocence” --and the opposite tendency: the hasty condemnation and demonization of sociopolitical actors, who acted, or failed to act, in ways that are prescribed according to present-day, hindsight-influenced, and ideologically-driven standards.

Now, is this exercise in close reading doing enough “work” to justify drawing conclusions about issues concerning the politics of memory and recent history? On its own, it might not. However, if -- in addition to the exploration of the intra-textual operations driven by the text’s centrifugal impetus -- we take heed of the second “condition” imposed by the text --- i.e., the need to go beyond the text to restore (part of) its context -- our situation qua interpreters may change. That is, provided we take seriously the fact that Manèges points in many directions outside and beyond itself, in a centripetal impetus that blurs the borders between text and world.

3.4 Context and Restitution. Puzzled Letters.

Earlier, we mentioned and touched upon a third text, in addition to the Prologue and Epilogue, in which Alcoba-qua-author explains a particularly important aspect of her research. The word embute was the first thing that came back to her “from the instant when I started to look into my memories” [“[d]és l’instant où j’ai commencé à fouiller dans mes souvenirs.”] (49). She
tells us how strange it was to remember the word, but not its meaning, and how much stranger it was to pronounce it and feel a flood of memories streaming down through her – but the meaning of the word still eluding her. “Car ce terme tant de fois prononcé et entendu, indissociablement lié à ces morceaux d’enfance argentine que je m’efforçais de retrouver et de restituer, je ne l’avais jamais rencontré dans un autre contexte.” She searches various dictionaries, but, “pas de trace d’embute” (49).

Not without differences, Laura’s search brings to mind that of Abad’s. Both are rather bizarre, and Laura’s becomes increasingly so when she “lands” on a Mexican blog devoted to “des questions sexuelles plutôt techniques et pointues.” Soon, in a grotesque, eerily funny, oneiric atmosphere, Laura begins to ask questions during a debate whose title seems more apt for a self-help book than for an obscure blog on risqué sexual practices: Beso negro is the theme (beso negro or “black kiss” is used across Latin America in the same sense of the American English “slangy” expression, “rimming.” But the debate takes place under the almost didactic, “Intro to X”-sounding name: Beso negro: ¿qué es?

Tancred, as if springing from the forest after killing Clorinda, responds to Laura’s call. (for Tancred, landmark in trauma studies from Freud 1920 onwards, see Caruth 1996 and, more relevantly for our approach, Caruth 2013). Alcoba writes that “one person .. under the name of Tancredo wrote: the word embute is much used by don Nadie (Mr. Nobody) (“une des personnes… sous le nom Tancredo écrivait: La palabreja embute también es muy empleada por don Nadie” 53).

But this Don Nadie, Monsieur Personne, or Mr. Nobody can’t be found. And, since everyone appears under a pseudonym, Tancredo may not be Tancredo. And Nadie, or Personne, or Nobody, may be nobody.
Again the issue of names and identity. With an added component: the charged wordplay making a less indirect allusion to disappearances, yet one in which something close to humor prevails; the contrasts between French, Spanish, and English: \textit{personne} – nobody – sounds like the Spanish \textit{persona} (person); and “nobody” is, if split in its two components, “no body,” which is the thrust of the cruel methodology of disappearances: presumably dead, but no body to confirm whether this is so. No \textit{corpus delicti} – an expression that blends the physical and the legal aspects of the crime.

But Laura limits herself to say that \textit{don Nadie} couldn’t be found. Eventually, some vaguely referenced Argentines tell her that the word \textit{embute} “seems to belong in the jargon of the revolutionary movements in Argentina, dated for years, and visibly disappeared” ("semble bien appartenir à un forme de jargon propre aux dévoté to mouvements revolutionaires argents années plutôt daté et \textit{visiblement disparu} (53, emphasis added).

Again, the humorous (?) paradoxical formulation: “visibly disappeared.” And again, not a reference to the real \textit{desaparecidos}, but to a word.

Lastly, the serious, authoritative authorial tone with which this short chapter began (tone, and content: Alcoba is apparently speaking of the search that led her to bring back the memories on which the book is based) gradually shifts toward an implausible, half-funny, half-grotesque, half-playful series of statements.

Like Carri, Alcoba may be \textit{not only nudging us to confirm} what she is saying, but also, perhaps, warning us about the alleged authority of the voice of the witness or survivor.

Alcoba’s brief \textit{embute} reflection is but one of the many nudges to the reader—perhaps the most conceptually explicit. However, there are others, which take different forms and emphases.
Perhaps the most urgent, in terms of the need to understand the characters and the sense of relevant scenes in the narrative, is the one presented in a scene in which Laura created a crossword puzzle.

Stuck in the house, Laura accepts Diana’s offer to give her grade school-like exercises. Now, as a surprise, Laura attempts to design a crossword puzzle – she manages four or five words, which she put together on the grid, laboriously and with some frustration.

Diana approached her, looked over her shoulder, and smiled. Laura feels she partially succeeded, for she had chosen words to make Diana laugh [“pour faire rire Diana”] (125); also, words that “spoke a bit about what was happening to us” [“parlaient un peu de ce qui nous arrivait”] (123), since all of them alluded to Evita Montonera.

Among them, “le slogan qui servait toujours a clore les articles les plus importants du Evita Montonera ou les déclarations de Firmenich” (125). Next to a reproduction of the crossword puzzle, the page reads thus:

**Horizontales:**

*Del verbo “ir:”*  
VA

*Imitadora fracasada y odiada:*  
ISABEL

*Del verbo “dar:”*  
DA

*Patria o...*  
MUERTE
Verticales:

Asesino: VIDELA
Casualidad: ASAR
Literatura, música: ARTE

Diana points out a spelling mistake: Laura had spelled “azar” (“hasard”/"chance") with an “s,” that is, “asar”, or “to grill,” as Diana explains. “That’s where “asado” comes from. The word you’re thinking of is a noun that means or refers to the occurrence of something unexpected, . But it must be written with a Z” (“C’est de là que vient le mot asado …. Le mot auquel tu pensais, c’est le nom commun qui a le sens d’occasion ou événement imprévisible” Mais il s’écrit avec un z” (124)

Laura’s revised version looked almost the same. She simply changed one spelling mistake for another: she corrected “azar,” so that the word she so much loved be correctly spelled, but inevitably turning “Isabel” into “Izabel.” She made, however, a minor revision in the directions. To the original line – “Imitadora fracasada y odiada,” (in Spanish in the original; “Hated and Failed Imitator”) she added a parenthetical clarification. So, the initial line,

Imitadora fracasada y odiada: ISABEL

became,

Imitadora fracasada y odiada (con una falta de ortografía): IZABEL
All Laura did was have the courtesy of warning her reader that there is a spelling mistake. Perhaps, this is yet another displacement: if the verb “to disappear” is seldom used to refer to the “methodology” of the military regime, but to losing everyday objects; if there’s not a single gunshot or drop of blood in the whole book, but the streets are criblée des trous (16), perhaps Laura’s “trick” is yet another displacement -- an allusion to the complex, often confusing, relationship between words and world.

Laura doesn’t change the object to which the definition refers (i.e., she doesn’t change the word, “Isabel,” which is the “object’ to which the definition refers—the “reference,” one might be tempted to say). Instead, she changes the definition or "description" of that "reference," so that there is an artificial "fit" between definition and word – between description and reality, so to speak.

This move – changing the definition or description, as if that were to change reality – was a move typical of the military regime, and, according to Rodolfo Walsh's critical reports to the CN of Montoneros, an error the organization was prone to committing, too (Walsh 1976). That is, assuming, for the sake of argument, that nouns can be regarded, even if playfully, as “second-order” objects, which we identify by way of descriptions or definitions. Of course, proper names make things much more complicated, so, changing the “description” of “Isabel” is not such an easy compromise as Laura tends to think. Ironically, a proper name—a proper last name – is what Laura is missing; or omitting. Still, when she receives her new false name, which one will be her “real” name?

The configuration of the tensions between performance qua acting and “identity,” and between original and copy, are given here another turn. If in Traiciones, Roux obliterated the distinction between original and copy by drawing a “new’ original from a “copy” whose “real”
“original” was in the hands of Mr. Rey, , which one is Laura’s name? Which papers stipulate her real name? In a crossword puzzle, she can resort to facile solutions. But, as we have seen in the kitchen-neighbor scene, things aren’t so easy in the real world.\(^{10}\)

Now, what to make of the crossword puzzle proper? The plea to go beyond the text in order to restore -- reponer or restituer -- the necessary context couldn’t be clearer. First, all foreign editions of Manèges feature the puzzle –and the “directions” -- in Spanish. So does the original French edition. The first step, then, will involve a dictionary. But soon we should realize that, like the suicidal translator in “Nota al pie,” a dictionary won’t really help. His Appleton was no longer useful. Likewise, What use could we make of knowing that “imitadora” is the feminine form of “imitator” or someone who mimics or pretends to be someone else, whether in jest or with the intention to deceive? One may start with some general background information – a few lines in a footnote\(^{11}\) can dispel some doubts – or, perhaps, we might get to understand the brief sentence,

\(^{10}\) During the neighbor episode, Laura had sensibly wondered, « Je crois qu’elle m’a demandé : « Et ton nom de famille ? » … Ça n’existe pas une petite fille de sept ans qui ne connaît pas son nom de famille et qui pense qu’il est possible de ne pas en avoir… Mais qu’est-ce que je pouvais répondre, alors ? C’est quoi, mon nom ? (73)

\(^{11}\) The first three words are, Muerte, Videla, and Isabel, i.e, "Death," "Videla" (at the time of the events, Gral. Videla was de facto President and head of the military junta); "Isabel" was the nickname of María Estela Martínez, maiden name of Mrs. Perón, who came to marry the exiled leader years after the death of Eva, and years still before he could come back. But when he returned in 1973 and ran for President, he chose her as running mate; no one quite liked it – or her --, but still, he won with over 62% of the votes with the ticket “Perón- Perón,” took office, held the Presidency for nine turbulent months, and died on July 1, 1974. Then, Isabel, VP, was sworn in. It would be Jose Lopez Rega, personal secretary of Perón for over a decade, the one making major political and policy decisions. Former policeman, rabid anti-Communist, and head of the Ministry of Welfare (appointed by Perón himself), the Minister was in charge of attending
“Failed and hated imitator” or perhaps “failed and hated fake. “But, in what sense is that related to Isabel? And why would “Patria o Muerte” would make Diana laugh?

In the absence of a minimum of historical knowledge, we can hardly make sense of any of these questions; and, insofar as they are relevant to understand Diana (as well as many issues of the narrative), we can hardly make sense of relevant aspects of the narrative. In this case, contextual information – the second condition imposed by these texts – seems to be not a luxury but a condition of possibility of reading itself.

The first place to look for, we hope it is evident by now, is Evita Montonera proper. Evita Montonera, the whole reason why everyone is risking their lives in the rabbit house, is withheld from us; but scenes like this one strongly suggest that it is on us to search for the Evitas and try to make sense of Diana’s (and the whole cell’s) actions.

And, as it wouldn’t be hard to guess, a fairly simple internet search can take us to reliable sources where the collection of Evitas can be downloaded in PDF form.

The juxtaposition and parallel reading of the Evitas and Manèges takes on, somehow, a form analogous to that of some of Traiciones’ texts (e.g., recall the juxtaposition of the US State Department memos on the "detention" of Susana Panero, who might have led to the Borges poems: no commentary on the juxtaposed texts).

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to the needs of the health-care system, of unions and professional associations, and, among many other things, of commanding and equipping the paramilitary death-squads of the AAA—mentioned by 7-year old Laura on the first page of her book. The other words were Va, Dar, Arte, and Azar, i.e., "[He or she] goes," "To give," "Art" and "Chance," which -- Laura says -- was formed by chance, while she was working on two other crossed words. 11 The crossings, if we go back to the previous page, permit reading fragmentary phrases such as VA – ISABEL – DAR – MUERTE (“Dar muerte,” in Spanish, means “to murder” The death-squads began to operate under her Presidency; possible under her husband’s)
Before taking a quick look at the issues of *Evita Montonera* corresponding to the period in which Laura Alcoba lived in the "rabbit house" --from late 1975 through July/August 1976) –let us give a brief overview of the “ending” of Laura-qua-girl’s story.

Her narrative closes in a few deceptively brief pages. By mid-1976, Laura’s mother negotiates a way out --she wants to take her daughter away from the rabbit house, with a view of going into exile. After some protracted negotiations, she is allowed to leave.

The story narrated by Laura-qua-child ends here. There follows a transition toward the epilogue-letter; this transition takes the form of brief paragraphs separated by asterisks, which highlight the main points of her post-rabbit-house life, from a guarded, low-profile stay at her grandparents,' through her trip to France, once the new papers finally arrived.

After the last asterisk, the text takes on a more explicit letter-like "tone" and form of address, which, like the prologue-letter, bears all the markers of authorial texts that precede and/or succeed fictional and non-fictional narratives (e.g., prologues, introductions, epilogues or post-scripts, etc.). Therein, Alcoba recounts how she learned of the attack on the house of rabbits, referencing a conversation with her mother as well as the laconic words of her father, who gave her the well-known and much-debated book, *Los del 73. Memoria Montonera*, from which she quotes the account of the attack on the house of rabbits; she also cites excerpts from a newspaper piece (quoted in the aforesaid book), which cites, in turn, the official military communiqué. (Note the layers of mediation, which, strictly speaking, aren’t necessary).

The seven *montoneros* – Diana among them – contained the attack for almost four hours. Only when mortars and other light artillery were brought to the place and used to blast the walls did the military forces manage to break into the house and murder the seven youth. (Painceira
They murdered everybody, except the one-month old daughter of Diana and Daniel, who was taken alive, and “placed” into a military or pro-military family.

In 2004 --we are told in the epilogue-letter --Alcoba visits Chicha Mariani, and they go together to the house of rabbits, which has become an important sitio de memoria. (Wallas 2013; 2014). With some difficulty, Alcoba asks how the military found out about the guerrilla cell and the printing press. Mariani tells her that the information was given away by the man who built the printing press—the Engineer.

Alcoba protests: he didn’t know where the house was. He had always been brought to the house “tabicado” (blindfolded). Mariani explains that he didn’t have to know where the house was. It was more than sufficient to know, as he did, how to look for the house. Since he had designed and built a whole new part of the property, where he had set up the embute and the printing press, he would be able to identify it, provided his point of view was that of a regular designer or architect when looking at the “map” or on-paper design (now, mostly on computer) displayed on a big design-table when they work—or when they show their customers the way the

In what was probably an unintentional admission, the official account coincides for the most part with the manifold accounts that have since then been amply documented: police and military forces surrounded the house; snipers and machine-gun teams took aim from the roofs of neighboring houses; and yet, Diana and six other cadres contained the military for three hours and forty-five minutes, armed with FALs (semi-automatic rifles) and .45 mm pistols. Only when reinforcements carrying mortars and other light artillery were brought to the place did the military forces manage to break into the house and machine-gun the seven montoneros. See Painceira 2007, probably the most reliable study of the last days of, and the attack on, the house of rabbits, its repercussions, and the still unsolved gaps in the events that followed, including questions regarding the disappearance of the body of Diana --machine-gunned from behind, but subsequently burnt and carbonized in situ --and the fate of her daughter, Clara Anahi, who was taken alive by the military, and to this day searched relentlessly by Chicha Mariani, first on her own, then as founding member of Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, and nowadays from the Clara Anahi Foundation, an NGO created as an institutional resource against past and present political and social “disappearances.”
house is coming. These “maps” are, one could say, drawings on scale seen from above. The military combed the whole city in helicopters, block by block, with the Engineer to tell them which was the house (130).

Alcoba is stunned. She regains some composure, and says to herself, as if to confirm what she’s heard, “C’était donc l’Ingénieur” [So it was the Engineer] and, with an eerily aloof, cold tone, she wonders, “Avait-il infiltré le mouvement dès le début, ou avait-il tout simplement craquée sous la torture?” [Had he infiltrated the organization from the beginning, or did he simply break down under torture?] (139-40)

Soon thereafter, Alcoba picks up “The Purloined Letter,” and begins to read. When she reaches the passage in which Dupin explains his theory, Alcoba remembers very vividly the Engineer. But she is more specific about what she remembers: “Je me souvenais avec une grande netteté de son regard et de son sourire tandis qu’il exposait sa théorie. C’était étrange d’entendre ainsi, de nouveau, l’ingénieur, derrière les mots de Dupin” (I remembered with palpable clarity his eyes and his smile while he presented his theory. It was strange to listen to the Engineer again, behind the words of Dupin; 140).

The memories of the Engineer while explaining Poe’s theory come back to her; and, with them, the attraction she felt for him. If the scene of Laura-qua-child approaching the Engineer was lost on the reader, the lexical choices might help. Now, in 2004, she speaks of “son regard et de son sourire.” Thirty years and thirty pages earlier, she had referred to his big, gran smile that lit (or “illuminated: “brightened) him entirely” (his “grand sourire qui illumine son visage tout entière,”) adding that she’d never admitted the extent of his good looks.

But the Engineer’s voice in Dupin’s words, bringing memories with erotic undertones, are suddenly interrupted. “The famous passage about “excessive evidence” left me frozen. I reread,
unable to believe at first; horrified later. I have read I more than once since then. (“le fameux passage sur “excessive evidence” m’a glacée. Je l’ai immédiatement relu, incrédule d’abord. Puis épouvantée. Depuis, je l’ai relu plus d’une fois.” (141)

She reproduces the famous ten lines in which Dupin describes the game.

Yet then again, immediately after quoting the short passage, Alcoba writes, straightforwardly, with candid bravery, that since she read that passage, she hears the clear pronunciation of the Engineer’s voice in her head—“Since I reread that passage listening to the voice of the Engineer over the words of Dupin…” (“Depuis que j’ai relu ce passage en entendant résonner dans ma tête la voix de l’Ingénieur sur les mots de Dupin; 141)—but thinking, in astonishment, how he had managed, after all, to figure out how to apply the “game” to the military chase of the house of rabbits; how he was “capable of reading, from the sky, the lines and the figures… the enormous letters, the bloated characters” that allowed him to spot the house (“capable de lire, depuis le ciel, les lignes et les traits … les lettres énormes, les gros caractères;” 142).

She wonders whether it was all part of a detailed plan; whether they were pawns in a game they could not control. “Il y a des manèges subtils, trop subtils… pour dominer autrui et avoir le dernier mot. “ (142, emphasis added). It is worth noting the contiguity between domination and having the last word.

And she asks herself whether those manèges are also “[p]our retrouver une lettre volée, ou pour sauver sa peau, quitte à provoquer un massacre ? (“to retrieve a stolen letter, or rather, in order to save one’s skin, cause a massacre, or let it take place? 142)

The appearance of symmetry, or Design -- as opposed to Chance – is clear… initially. Soon a sort of trompe-d’oleil complicates the problem. The binary Design-Chance rests on the letters-qua-alphabet characters that she couldn’t decipher, whose initial idea rests within a letter-qua-
epistle which is part of a text (Poe’s story) within another letter that is part of yet another text/story (i.e, the epilogue-letter within Alcoba’s book).

Despite this appearance of symmetry and perverse order, which might point at a secret design or intentionality, Laura refuses to accept such a thing, to favor that “placeholder” that recurs in her speech: chance— with a non-capitalized “c” (“Hasard” in the original French). “Non, ça ne peut être si simple. Et Poe ne peut pas être de mèche. Non. Pas plus que Dupin. Je veux croire qu’il y a le hasard. Je veux croire aussi qu’il y a bien d’autres ‘excessives évidences” (143)

But, at the same time, chance doesn’t fully satisfy her – was it by chance that she couldn’t outwit the Engineer? Neither a carefully designed plan – Design – nor mere randomness – Chance – seem appealing. But, is there a way out of this dichotomy?

Again, Alcoba as much as Abad and Carri seem to require a kind of reading that we may be ill-equipped to embark in. We are required to hold on to the discomfort and feeling of unsettlement that the compressed, cunningly crafted last pages of Manèges both instill and dissolve.

As mentioned earlier, critics often refuse to accept this uncertainty, and prefer to advance reading hypothesis that, while not implausible, are not warranted. A recent critical piece claims that although Laura brings up again “the question of the intentionality and responsibility of the engineer,” she refuses to adjudicate on those matters, and that she prefers instead “to settle the sense or meaning of the story (and of History) in mere chance” [“la cuestión de la intencionalidad y responsabilidad del ingeniero ... [pero se resiste a atribuirla] para asentar el sentido de la historia (y de la Historia) en el mero azar”] (Santos 2015, 17)
Yet, there is no such definition. There is however, the possibility – even the imperative – to check out some information. Thus, the ambivalence about the Engineer, for instance, could be dispelled.

Yet, immediately after *wondering* about the role of the Engineer in the demise of the house of rabbits, *the authorial voice shifts* and “changes the subject,” addressing Diana again, and at the same time asking the reader to heed the plea of Diana's mother-in-law, Chicha Mariani, who is still searching for her granddaughter.

“Clara Anahí lives somewhere,” writes Alcoba. “No doubt under a different name, she probably ignores who were her parents and how they met their deaths.” Then, addressing Diana, thus reminding us that the Prologue and Epilogue are “letters” in which the “intra-textual” addressee is *someone who isn’t there*, she adds, “But I'm sure, Diana, that she has your bright smile, your strength, and your beauty.” (“Clara Anahí vit quelque part. Elle port sans doute un autre nom, elle ignore probablement qui furent ses parents et comment ils sont morts. Mais je suis sûre, Diana, qu’elle a ton sourire lumineux, ta force et ta beauté,” 143).

“This, too, is excessively obvious” ("Ça aussi, c’est d’une excessive evidence,” 143), ends Alcoba’s Epilogue-Letter to Diana -- and, with it, the book.

This is, perhaps, the most explicit of the many "invitations" to go beyond the book, outside the text and into the "real-life" correlate of the events therein narrated. And it's also the most effective – and, perhaps, the most misleading, for it’s more than *tempting to follow Alcoba’s shift and focus our attention on this issue* – unquestionably important (probably one of the symbolic pillars of the increasingly broader political relevance and interests of Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo) – but in so doing, losing sight of the other, thornier ones.
3.5 Not the Last Word? To See and Not See What’s Before Us.

Recall the observation and the question that Alcoba, in 2004, poses almost in passing: “It was, then, the Engineer. Had he infiltrated the organization from the beginning, or did he simply crack under torture?” (“C’était donc l’Ingénieur. Avait-il infiltré le mouvement dès le début ou avait-il tout simplement craque sous la torture ?)

Here, as anticipated in the last section, the intra- and extra-textual movements must work in tandem. On the one hand, the derisive or cavalier attitude when referring to someone speaking under torture should bring to mind the two other scenes in which torture becomes part of the conversation. On the other hand, this seemingly extraneous issue could be construed, again, as a call for the reader to restitute or bring back contextual information.

Let us start with this last point. The presentation of the trial in absentia of Roberto Quieto --bracketing the appropriateness of the term "trial" --is a central feature of the 12th issue of Evita Montonera (December 1975/January 1976). Its complementary and (purportedly) "reinforcing" counterpart is also pervasive in the same and subsequent issues --and this time it does transpire in a few moments of Manèges: the heroic deaths of "true" revolutionaries, who --unlike Quieto -- either died in combat or (allegedly) didn't speak under torture.

If the capacity to withstand torture is simply a matter of "ideological conviction," as the official line of Montoneros' held (and had published in the Evita more than once), then Quieto's behavior was indeed tantamount to treason, as the verdict of the trial concluded. The barrage of propaganda in the Evitas contrasted with the puzzled reaction of many sectors of the montonero militancia, for whom the issue of torture was still an open question, and for whom it was hard to change views about Quieto overnight.
Needless to say, to take for granted a sort of equivalence between speaking under torture and infiltrating an organization -- an equivalence between, let us say, Lt. Astiz infiltrating Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, and Roberto Quieto’s “treason” in the torture chambers – is, at the very least, a proposition that cannot be accepted without reasonable argumentation and evidence.

Some cadres were absolutely convinced that will-power and political conviction could win over physical and psychological pain. Others believed it could be possible; others hoped it would be. (Vezzetti 2009; Ollier 2009 for fieldwork on these issues).\(^{13}\)

Differences notwithstanding, it is a historical fact that the normative view of the OPM was that a true revolutionary could, and must, withstand torture. This was a hard-and-fast “order” of the CN. And yet, their conceptual confusion (to put it charitably) became evident when they manufactured and distributed cyanide pills for their cadres. A real montonero withstands torture…. But how many “real montoneros” do we really have, if we must launch mass production of cyanide? So, while keeping the normative view on torture, the CN also admitted that the main error was to be captured alive. If one didn’t die in combat, and ran out of ammunition, the cyanide pill would take care of any potential ideological lapses.

El Negro Quieto, as he was known and called with unanimous affection by thousands of working class Peronists and left-wing militantes – had been a leader of the Peronist Resistance from times prior to the creation of Montoneros. Unlike the younger generation that led the OPM, Quieto had risen from a social stratum in-between what Argentines call, rather vaguely, lower

\(^{13}\) Yet others thought it was sheer naiveté or idiocy to even entertain such an idea, which seems to rest on either voluntarism, or some form of dualism – a radical separation between “mind” or “soul” and “body,” whereby strength of the former might control and, somehow, be inaccessible to the pain of the latter. Others – Walsh among them – rejected the idea, and considered it was impossible to know what or how would one’s organism would react under extreme, limit-situations.
middle-class and the “clearer” (?) working classes (the Montonero leadership came from middle-
to upper-middle class, university-educated, Catholic background).

Quieto had managed to earn a law degree, and moved from legal to underground battles against right-wing forces in light of the repeated coups that rendered legal procedures mostly ineffectual. Courageous but not reckless or suicidal, he was known for the careful consideration he gave to operations in which the lives of cadres under his command were at risk.

When he was detained in December 1975 -- caught, inexplicably, in broad daylight, during a visit to his family (a visit that was meant to be short in light of the dangers that contacting one's family entailed by that time) -- the Montonero leadership launched a national and international campaign demanding that Quieto be freed. Among others, Sartre and Simone de Beuvoir signed the petition.

The campaign was halted abruptly days later, when some Montonero safehouses "fell," thus evincing that Quieto was, or had been, “cantando” --speaking under torture. Hence the trial in absentia, the death sentence, and the campaign against Quieto's reputation, backed by allegedly "real," "committed" revolutionary conduct whose examples flooded the pages of Evita Montonera.

It is against this background that the pictures of Diana and the Engineer become more complex. It is against this background that one should read Diana’s words when, after meeting a fellow militante Diana says to Laura, "See that woman? They tortured her, but she didn’t talk. They did horrible things to her; you know, things one cannot talk about with a girl of your age. But she didn’t open her mouth.” (“Tu vois, cette femme. Elle a été torturée mais elle n’a pas parlé. On lui a fait des choses horribles, tu sais, des choses que l’on ne peut pas dire à une petite fille de ton âge. Mais elle n’a pas ouvert la bouche.” 119)
Laura didn’t ask any questions to figure out what those things were. “I too know how not to talk; how to keep silent.” *She just imagined them.* Laura concludes with the following confession. “And I thought of the woman, who didn’t open her mouth…. and then I told myself . . . *that is what being a strong woman is.*” (“je me suis dit, de moi a moi, qu’être une femme forte, c’était ça,” 119)

Diana seems to make this comment with admiration, though it’s not clear whether there might have been something more than admiration. In any case, Laura picks up, or understands, or thinks she understands, that *withstanding torture is not a supererogatory action, but, rather, something closer to an obligation or requirement.* The issue is handled with subtlety and, again, reading and rereading carefully offers a variety of possible scenarios, but does not settle the issue.

It is not moot to bring back Diana Taylor’s early discussion of the then-politically incorrect issue of "mirror-reactions" of many organizations, and, more so, of women, who had to "prove themselves" and unwittingly mirrored, or followed in one way or another, a script that was *not* an alternative, but a "contra" attitude and behavior -- *counter*-hegemonic, and therefore tied to the hegemonic – the “hyper-masculine”, *pace* Franco 2013 -- ideology of male cadres who, paradoxically, claimed and demanded that the OPM members be "uncontaminated new men," freed from bourgeois excrescences.14

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14 Diana Taylor’s early and lucid discussion presents further points that help us think about these issues. What does it mean to confront an hegemonic power? Does that turn us, *inevitably*, in a mirror image—*counter*-hegemonic? Does this picture constrain women to replicate “scripts” against which Vicky Walsh and her generation fought? For more recent discussions, see Ahmed 2010 and Franco 2013, chap. 5, in which she analyzes, from a feminist perspective, the Codes of Revolutionary Justice of some Argentine armed organizations. For a different, though equally critical, view of the Codes, see Vezetti 2009 and the
Having said that, or precisely because of that, the possibility of Diana’s (Teruggi’s, not Taylor’s) views on the demands of the hombre nuevo and the “real” or “strong woman” having had some influence on “adult Laura” cannot be ruled out—though it does appear to be “out of character”, as a provocation of sorts. What can, and must, be ruled out is the notion of a blunt, mechanical, monocausal relationship between Diana-quamartyr and Laura-qua-impressionable child who is “indoctrinated.”

Again, by posing a Diana that is at once “real” and not always – not often – transparent; by posing scenarios in which slightly different “Dianas” would act in slightly different ways, the text compels us to grapple with the problem.

Manèges doesn't lionize Diana --it presents her as a remarkable woman, yet with the limits that no ready-made revolutionary consciousness can shake off. Even if it is not a live issue anymore -- or even if it is not an issue for, say, a middle-class American – the question is not futile. More so if one aims to understand, to attempt to understand, both Alcoba’s text, and – to some degree – the life and times in the rabbit house—and in the seventies. Like the “different Carris” in Los rubios, perhaps adult Laura, in the Epilogue, is planting a carefully crafted problem, and not, as it would appear if we follow publishing conventions, expressing a personal opinion or a view of Laura Alcoba qua person or qua author.

After all, immaculate heroes are easy to make, and quite convenient too: they aren't at our reach: we are not at their height; we are petite; we cannot but admire them; sit together and spin yarns about them, but never discuss the ways in which we might be able to follow and deepen the

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recent hybrid pieces of Uondo, daughter of Paco Uondo—whom we mentioned earlier—a renowned poet and montonero officer, who was demoted because he began to see his soon-to-be second wife before getting a formal divorce—and for not bringing up the issue to the CN of Montoneros.
tracks they opened with their discoveries—and the ways to avoid their mistakes and blind spots; especially, to concoct ways of spotting them before the mistakes are made.

A scared Diana -- "Diana aussi a eu peur" (116), writes Laura when the door knocks, near the end --. who nevertheless walks cautiously to the door -- Laura under her dress – ready to peep and act according to the circumstances, is more admirable than the idealized image of a fearless warrior, who, in the montonero imagery, was also very feminine, very much fulfilling the role of housewife, and at the same time ready to fight like the ideal guerrero. (the ideal warrior, or the ideal of the warrior). A more “real” Diana, a scared Diana—more like us—establishes an example, perhaps, with a certain comparative demand for reaching the standards of the admired behavior.

It is against this background, too, that Manèges has begun to cause unease among some former montoneros—and satisfaction among others. Both among former cadres and among readers and critics, there is an incipient but increasing polarization. The picture of Diana is not that of the more widespread, quasi-hagiographic versions cherished by the memoria montonera.

In the last chapter, we argued that the child is doubly silenced: first, as legitimate speaker and interlocutor about the events Carri is bringing up; second, as agent or bearer of some agential features, probably in an in-between state that tends to cause discomfort—hence the projection of “pure innocence” (Brennan and Erpp 2015, 3) onto children who seem to be already in need of hardening themselves if they want to survive.

In the case of Alcoba, we find something similar, only this time focused on sexual innocence. The narrative of one of the last persons alive to have shared everyday life with the heroes of Calle 30 cannot be construed as a sexualized child. This would mean that, to some extent, she is not pure—and is not, therefore, to be trusted or regarded as reliable.
If sexualized at an age when girls should be utterly ignorant of sinful matters, forced to “grow up” abruptly, through no fault of her own, but nevertheless neither pure (and therefore, no longer a child) nor adult; neither innocent nor blameworthy, she is nevertheless not to be trusted. She is the “knowing child,” who, actually, is no longer a child, for her childhood has been “stolen.” And she is dangerously close to the third myth Brenna and Erpp discuss: the “out-of-control” prepubescent child—the “other” kids who might corrupt mine. The “bad girls” who, according to surveys carried out in the US and Canada, can taint our children. This “out-of-control” child, whose figure is “not neutral with respect to race, class or gender” (p. 7) – mostly identified as African American, of “twisted” inclinations (LGBT) and/or “ignorant and uneducated (socioeconomic status).

If sexualized, Laura is no longer a child – she had known evil – and she was not an adult either. She was a “knowing girl” or an unfortunate being whose childhood had been stolen – the very expression some interviewers and critics began to use to refer to Alcoba’s life in the house of rabbits. To which Alcoba usually responds that it’s obscene to speak of hers as a “stolen childhood” in the context of State terrorism, when so many children were really stolen.

Still, before the questions about “the girl” (“Who’s the little girl?” became, around 2014, the most frequent question surrounding, and addressed to, Alcoba), she was, for the most part, regarded as innocent and asexual. A view that carries a double risk: allegedly “asexual” children are not well-equipped to deal with their own desires—or with other people’s. Keeping them in the dark, or leaving the learning of those “things” to others, may ultimately be detrimental to their well-being.
Worse, the “innocent” child is erased *qua* person, and becomes a *tabula rasa* where adults might find a certain unconfessed appeal, since they are “that which *is not* yet, but *can be*, corrupted” (Brennan and Erpp 2015, 4)

Along the same lines, and, perhaps not by coincidence also in the context of a discussion on *what* girls *should* and *should not* know about an adult world devastated by violence, Castillo writes in regard to Caryl Churchill’s play, “Seven Jewish Children”,

If innocence and purity are figured in the child, and otherness in the inassimilable stranger, what… if the other to be expelled is itself described by the figure of the child? … this fear of the oppressed and objected minority also enforces a kind of ineluctable intimacy. The child, an inappropriate object for either hate or (sexualized) love, becomes the most potent representative of this confounding and undesired intimacy. *Children seem eternally suspended between nations, families, and homes. Their contagious discomfort models our affective response. ... the fascination with a safely-distanced, victimized child serves as one form of* melancholic, nostalgic connection to the collective, just as the nesting instinct brings us back to individuals, families, our own homes. (Castillo 2011, 132; emphasis added)

Alcoba was silenced in her childhood, under a terror regime that aimed to paralyze a whole society but that targeted (as a means to spread terror, and also as an end in itself) the very group of people with whom she lived. What is more striking and unsettling is that she should also be silenced 40 years later, under a democratic regime. Certainly, this does, at least, unmask the fact
that it is a society still captive or prey to blindness and other forms of conscious or unconscious bias (Saul 2015).

Not only do we silence aspects of the child that we may find uncomfortable; *we silence relevant aspects of the account of an adult woman* – of her life as an adult, even when, naturally, such life coexists, so to speak, with the “selves” of our past.

Be that as it may, it is still the case that we are not responding to (the figure of) *an adult woman owning up to – taking responsibility for – her adult experiences*. It is an address – a call -- of a woman who owns up to her desires – whether erotic or violent—without yet settling the issue.

She faces a disquieting quandary: still *attracted to, yet loathing*, the Engineer; *perhaps even inured at the idea of torture* when she wonders how he gave away the safe-house. Perhaps wanting to disengage from the feelings of attraction, which at times she seems to do – when they’re replaced by anger – yet soon again enjoying his voice spinning in her head.

Granted, this could be a fictional addendum to the “faithful” memories of Alcoba. Yet, in this juncture—in the context of an almost complete silence about the issue – the question of whether her quandary is veridical or not seems to be beside the point. If even from the safe distance of reading we do not see, or we pretend not to see – if we are not capable of facing the address of an adult person *qua* sexualized woman, *still attracted to, yet despising* the Engineer, perhaps *inured at the idea of torture* when she wonders how he gave away the safe-house -- what should we conclude? *How not to conclude that we have not yet risen to the occasion? That no estamos a la altura or on n’est pas a l’hauteur?*

*Manèges* brings up a rare opportunity to discuss historical events in the context of a non-agonistic, exploratory, scenario-projecting proposal to think together, to think through and out and beyond the complexities of the *militancia* and the repression. And, instead, the text is reduced to a
device framed within the logic of friend-or-foe, and both "Laura" and Diana are either mechanically reified and purified, or dissected and thinned down, eviscerated.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

If what I have argued about the challenges posed by Laura Alcoba’s *Manèges/La casa de los Conejos/The Rabbit House* (2007), Héctor Abad Faciolince’s *Traiciones de la memoria* (2009), and Albertina Carri’s *Los rubios* (2003) is sound, or at the very least merits consideration in light of its plausibility, we should think, or begin to think, about revising certain practices. For a start, we would tentatively propose the following two changes.

a) *renouncing "argumentative," or "strong" interpretations*, which often, despite our efforts, still partake in agonistic models. These, in turn, may easily slide towards interpretive analogues of zero-sum games, which tend to take the form of explicit or -worse --implicit binary, dichotomic structures in the context of which texts and "textual support" are much more easily violated, for the sake of “not losing ground.”

b) *taking up a much more active role in the construction of the (sense of the) work itself*; a role that may, and often does, involve two opposing but complementary movements: careful (intra)textual analysis (i.e., a centrifugal impetus characteristic of the works discussed in this dissertation); and an equally careful extra-or para-textual inquiry (i.e., a centripetal impetus leading the interpreter --nudging her, and at times almost gently pushing her --*beyond* the work itself) in search of information that, sometimes, becomes as important as to constitute a condition of possibility of intelligibility of (relevant aspects of) texts.
Other times, it places the interpreter in an in-between vantage point from which one may pursue equally compelling avenues of inquiry: some lead us further "away" from the text, while others "return" to it.

It is not a matter of abandoning textual support in toto, but, rather, of abandoning a certain way of using the text to give credence and plausibility to a given interpretation. If, as I argue, in these texts there is no “strong” textual support (i.e., no textual support that can be strong enough to bolster a given interpretation over others), no strong readings are warranted.

On the face of it, these points seem to involve a severe loss. Yet, as we argued in this dissertation, the impossibility of settling on any one interpretation opens up the possibility of exploring more thoroughly, with more "time" and detail --again, "reading more slowly," as Daniel Hernández suggested in "La aventura de las pruebas de imprenta" -- the different scenarios that these texts suggest.

These works propose, in other words, that we engage in reading projects whose common denominator is the following pair of features: the strong suggestion of many different interpretive possibilities, and the equally strong suggestion of the impossibility of adjudicating among them. Each of these possibilities, in turn, branches out into several further ones.

The assessment of these possibilities yields a wide range of scenarios --some very similar to one another, with just a slightly different nuance or change here and there; others, instead, are radically different and even mutually exclusive --which, needless to say, involve different assessments of the characters' attitudes and actions; of the scene under discussion; and therefore, of the impact and overall interpretation of the text.

It is worth emphasizing that abandoning strong interpretations does not entail any less commitment. The text certainly engages the reader and commits her to grapple with questions
that tend to be thorny and thornily avoided: What would we have done in that situation? Not *qua* question, but as a *condition of intelligibility* of the text, provided we accept it on its own terms, i.e., provided we accept the impossibility of settling on, or articulating, any "reading" or "interpretation" of the thorniest, most politically charged scenes, and accept, instead, that they are *scenario-eliciting artifacts* embedded in the narrative.

Moreover, in light of the second condition – contextual information – a counterpoint-like form of reading is likely to enhance the interpretive interplay among different textual artifacts.

This may sound as little more than a Pyrrhic victory, especially if we bear in mind the serious epistemic limitations that Abad “imprinted” on us. However, *first-hand experiences* of our epistemic limitations (should) carry more weight than merely reading about them. Put in slightly hyperbolic terms, epistemic fragility or precariousness might prevent or reduce our second-nature tendency to approach the discussion from a standpoint that tends to be, *from the outset*, laden with political and interpretive "armors" --entrenched biases --which are, as is well-known, more pronounced when dealing with politically fraught issues like the ones these works grapple with.

The second point --the demand for a much more "active reader" than the over-used expression connotes --leads to performative operations that bear a resemblance to those of *Traiciones*, which, along with those of *Manèges* and *Los rubios*, form a complementary set or constellation of performative loops that act on the reader, in a frequently unsettling way that *makes these works' demands ---* -interpretive as much as ethical --*almost physically apparent*.

Talk of "imposition" and "demands" might be misleading; perhaps it is more accurate to speak of these performative loops as making almost *physically apparent* the *terms of engagement* that these works present or pose to (or require of?) the reader. One important corollary of this challenge is the *questioning of voices that we have been trained to consider* as either fully
authoritative or as having a vastly superior claim to authority – as having “the last word;” and in this case, the three works go for a very provocative instance: the voice of the survivor/witness. Like many other issues in these works, this is a problem that is being presented as subject for debate, as a conversation-starter, and not, necessarily, as a pre-conceived conviction to be defended, or attacked, disregarding whatever arguments against our own position there may be.
WORKS CITED


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