

## Filling the Absence: the re-embodiment of sites of mass atrocity and the practices they generate

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### Abstract

Despite the particularities that are present within every instance of genocide or state terror, one thing they all share is that, once the physical violence ends, there are always sites that are left behind, many of which contain material reminders or even concrete evidence of the violations that occurred within their boundaries. By focusing specifically on la Escuela Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA), the largest former concentration camp in Argentina, this article examines these sites as places that allow for a certain set of shared, embodied practices to be performed both by the curators or organizers of the sites, as well as the visitors to the sites. I argue that it is never the spaces themselves, but rather the practices that transpire within these spaces and through the process of transforming the space from a site of atrocity into a site of memory that influence the constructive processing of past violence. They do so through their ability to make people re-encounter and re-activate the past in the present.

**Key Words:** Argentina, ESMA, memory sites, embodied practice, Auschwitz

Despite the particularities that are present within every instance of genocide or state terror, one thing they all share is that, once the physical violence ends, there are always sites that are left behind, many of which contain material reminders or even concrete evidence of the violations that occurred within their boundaries. From the former clandestine detention centers of the numerous Latin American dictatorships of the 1970s and '80s to the Killing Fields of Cambodia to the former Nazi death camps of the Holocaust, what occurred within these spaces represents the absolute pinnacle of man's inhumanity to man. Despite the horrors perpetrated within the boundaries of these spaces, they are also among the first places where the death and violence is remembered and reflected upon after the conflict ends. Not all of these spaces endure, but those that do remain become emblematic of all of the horrors that occurred within the period of violence (Young 1993; Lennon and Foley 2000; Sharpley and Stone 2009). These sites of memory serve as sacralized spaces (MacCannell 1976), set outside of the framework of daily life as places for remembrance and commemoration of a bloody past. Determining how exactly to deal with and curate these sites then becomes a continuing challenge for every post-conflict society.

Much has been written of these former sites of mass atrocity, their memorialization, and how they contribute to the formation of collective memory (Young 1988, 1993, 1994; LaCapra 1998; Stier 2003; Meng 2011). Rather than focusing on the sites themselves, this article will expand upon the current literature by highlighting the performativity of these sites (Austin 1962), asking what and how they contribute towards the processing of past violence. Specifically, I will examine these sites as places that allow for a certain set of shared, embodied practices to be performed both by the curators or organizers of the sites, as well as the visitors to the sites. I argue that it is never the spaces themselves, but rather the practices that transpire within these spaces and through the process of transforming the space from a site of atrocity into a site of memory that influence the constructive processing of past violence. They do so through their ability to make people re-encounter and re-activate the past in the present.

To make this argument, I will focus mainly on the development of sites of memory in

Argentina following the last military dictatorship, which occurred from 1976–83. During the seven-year period following the 1976 military *coup d'état*, the entire country was subject to a reign of terror during which around 30,000 Argentine citizens were 'disappeared' by the military junta because they were deemed by the neoliberal dictatorship to be leftist subversives. These 30,000 were kidnapped and detained in one or more of the 500 clandestine detention centers that existed across the country and within which they were tortured, forced to perform slave labor, and subsequently murdered. This article will focus especially on the *Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada* (The Navy Mechanic's School), more commonly known as ESMA, a former clandestine detention center that is now a site of memory in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Once the largest concentration and torture center in all of Argentina, almost 20 per cent of the people who lost their lives during Argentina's last military dictatorship passed through ESMA. As such, it has become an iconic space and the site of many tense battles in Argentina's fight over memory (Brotsky 2005; Memoria Abierta 2009). While ESMA will be the main space that frames this article, I will reference several other sites in my argument, including not only other sites in the Argentinean context, but also former Nazi concentration camps in Europe. While the crimes that occurred during the military dictatorship in Argentina and the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust are specific events, each with their own set of contextually-specific circumstances that need not be compared, one infamous and paradigmatic aspect of the Holocaust was the construction of concentration and death camps, many of which are now sites of memory. The way that post-Holocaust societies in Europe have dealt with these spatial remnants of the past has deeply influenced the way people think about memorializing sites of mass atrocity around the world.

The principal link between all of the practices I will discuss is found in what exactly they are responding to—a force that I call *resonant violence*. Resonant violence describes the affective and social aspects of large-scale violence, which continue to perform—to resonate—long after the physical violence of genocide or state terror comes to an end. It refers to the insidious and enduring forces that shape daily social interactions among groups and that serve to continue genocide's work of tearing a society apart by atomizing its citizens (Arendt 1968, 1970). The Holocaust resulted in the death of six million Jews, but when the camps were liberated in 1945, the widespread anti-Semitism that allowed for those deaths to occur did not just vanish. Similarly, while Argentina's military dictatorship ended in 1983 after disappearing 30,000 citizens, the political divisions and the level of social discord that allowed for those deaths did not disappear along with it. These enduring forms of hatred and social dissonance are examples of resonant violence—the *felt* experience of violence, which, due to its ability to resonate, is actually much more persistent than the physical violence that leads to torture and death and the structural or legal violence that can be changed with the passage of new statutes.

Since resonant violence is an affective force that is felt within and amongst the individual and social body, it can be transformed or, to continue the sonic metaphor, re-composed through acts of the body that can make it resonate less or differently. These practices can lead to the creation of new forms of agency and power. This article examines a specific subset of these practices—those that are facilitated through the creation and visitation of former sites of mass atrocity. Herein lies the question with which the remainder of this article will be concerned: what practices are generated within former sites of mass atrocity that potentially transform the already-present, destructive force of resonant violence into an affective and social force that is more constructive in nature, and how do they do that? To answer this question, I will now turn to ESMA, the main site of this investigation.

### ESMA: Context and Background

ESMA is not just one building, but a complex that expands over 42 acres and that includes more than 30 buildings, all in the same neoclassical architectural style, all with white facades and orange tile roofs, and all standing within the boundaries of a brick and wrought iron fence that separates the complex from the busy avenue in front of it. It is located in the heart of one of Buenos Aires' nicest residential neighborhoods, directly alongside Avenida del Libertador, one of the busiest thoroughfares in the entire city. It is anything but hidden.

Most of the crimes that occurred in ESMA happened within one building in the complex, the *Casino de Oficiales*, or Officers' Headquarters. In this building prisoners were detained, forced to perform slave labor, including tedious tasks like manufacturing forged documents to be used in covering up the disappearances, and tortured, or, as the officers referred to it, 'questioned'. Prisoners were subjected to any number of horrific acts, supposedly in an effort to get them to confess to their subversive tendencies or to name other leftist subversives, who would subsequently undergo similar treatment. After this dehumanizing process and when prisoners were no longer viewed as useful, they were sent on 'death flights', where they were drugged and thrown from the side of planes into the Rio de la Plata, the river on the coast of the city. Unable to swim due to the sedatives, the bodies of the prisoners were swept away into the ocean, and most have never been found.

Throughout the entire period of the dictatorship, ESMA was operating as both a detention, torture and extermination center *and* as a military training academy. After the fall of the dictatorship, ESMA remained in the hands of the Navy for over 15 years, until 1998, when then-president Carlos Menem had the Navy moved to another site so that he could initiate a project to destroy ESMA altogether and replace it with a small memorial plaque and tree. Menem's plan to demolish ESMA—and thus destroy all evidence of the crimes that took place there—was met with hostility from the public, who refused to allow Menem to use the site of ESMA as a means to facilitate a process of reconciliation that the society as a whole was not ready to accept. Menem's initiative was ultimately shut down by the Argentinean courts (Bell and Di Paolantonio 2009), but it was not until six years later, in 2004, that new president Nestor Kirchner held his important press conference on the grounds of ESMA. In this watershed moment, Kirchner apologized to the Argentinean people for the crimes committed during the dictatorship and declared that ESMA would be converted into a site of memory so that what happened there would never be forgotten and would never happen again. This process of converting the site of atrocity into a site of memory was neither simple nor quick (Brodsky 2005; Bell and Di Paolantonio 2009; Druliolle 2011). The practices that were generated through and as a result of this process, however, have contributed to the re-composition of resonant violence for Argentina.

Like most former sites of mass atrocity, before ESMA was re-embodied as a site of memory, it underwent a process of alteration, destruction, and evacuation. Whereas those engaged in the positive transformation of resonant violence are most directly involved in re-embodiment of the spaces, the perpetrators' final acts in the spaces usually make that process exceedingly difficult. When the military left ESMA, they took with them anything they thought could be used against them in future trials. Even more, the perpetrators sought to alter the space architecturally in an effort to debunk survivor testimonies of what the center looked like.

Faced with the remnants of destruction and alteration in ESMA and other similar sites, those involved in the re-composition of these sites must decide how to respond to this emptiness. How will they fill the literal and figurative absence that has been left behind? The decisions they make on filling these emptied spaces are directly related to the practices that these spaces come to generate. Here, ESMA is a particularly interesting case, because the decisions that have been made to fill this vast complex have led to a diversity of different, often conflicting, practices through which visitors address the resonant violence of the space's past. To examine these choices more thoroughly, I will discuss some of the various practices that have occurred within ESMA, analyzing how they allow for both encountering the past and activating that past in the present.

### Encountering the Past

Perhaps the most essential embodied practice experienced by visitors to former sites of mass atrocity is the very factuality of their physical presence at the actual place where such massive crimes occurred. In *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, historian Dominick LaCapra writes, 'Witnessing is a necessary condition of agency' (1998: 12). While LaCapra is speaking specifically about concentration camp survivors and their need to tell their story in order to regain the agency taken from them by the trauma they have endured, the other meaning of witnessing—the act of seeing—can also be an essential experience in the formation of agency. According to a 2012

survey released by the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum—perhaps the preeminent site of Holocaust memory—the vast plurality of individuals who visited the site (33.2 per cent) did so in order to obtain 'knowledge of the history of the camp' (Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum 2012: 23). What is interesting about this data, however, is that historical knowledge is something that can be attained anywhere: history books, documentaries, classroom lectures, newspaper articles. Presumably, people feel as though the knowledge they are receiving by being in the space itself is qualitatively different from the knowledge offered through these other sources. I would argue that the difference comes from the affective or felt knowledge that the subject experiences when visiting the site, and it is this felt experience that has become particularly important to the postmodern subject.

John Lennon and Malcolm Foley were among the first scholars to highlight the connection between the rise in visitation to former sites of mass atrocity and the onset of postmodernity (Lennon and Foley 2000). In its most general terms, the move from modernity to postmodernity is marked by an abandonment of the notion of universality for what Peter V. Zima has called a 'solidarity with the particular' (2010: 66). Whereas in modernity, the notion of a universal truth still held sway, 'the postmodern condition', to use Lyotard's famed phrase, is characterized by a great pluralism of thought and belief, increased recognition of subjective experience, and what Lyotard has called an 'incredulity toward metanarratives' (1984: xxiv). This incredulity, this need to find subjective truth through individual experience, has a definite connection to the notion of agency, particularly for the postmodern subject. The experience of 'seeing for oneself' that is offered by these former sites of mass atrocity is one way of allowing the subject the agency to construct their own narrative and framework for understanding such violence.

Moreover, the physical act of visiting these sites is, in itself, a mode of re-composing resonant violence. According to one guide at Auschwitz, the physical presence of visitors is essential to the existence of the site. He says, 'I think that to come here is a form of commemoration...I tell [visitors] that this visit is not only a visit, but also a commemoration. That we build a virtual monument by coming here. That it's a sign that people are coming, so it's still a living place of remembering.'<sup>1</sup> With this statement, the guide argues that the site itself is secondary to the act of people visiting the site. While the site can be seen as one kind of monument, the embodied act of visiting the site represents the construction of a 'virtual monument' that has implications for the present and future, validating the existence of the site and saying, as he also said in our interview, 'that this physical place is important, that it exists, that it will keep existing, that it should be maintained.'<sup>2</sup> In this way it is not only the embodied practices of the visitors that are constituted by the site, but the site itself that is constituted and sustained through the embodied practices of the visitors.

The Officers' Headquarters is the one section of ESMA that is dedicated especially to these embodied practices of visitation where visitors are permitted to be in the actual space of death, where the most horrific of the crimes of the dictatorship were enacted roughly three decades ago. ESMA, like most former sites of mass atrocity, is an emptied space, so much so that without some sort of information to frame the visitor's experience, it is unlikely or even impossible that they would be able to understand what the place is and how it functioned. As a result, the public entity that manages the Officers' Headquarters, known as *Instituto Espacio para la Memoria y para la Promoción y Defensa de los Derechos Humanos* (IEM), has to decide how to contextualize this vacant space. This is a choice that must be made by every former site of atrocity, as it is being re-composed as a site of memory.<sup>3</sup>

While the infrastructure and architecture of ESMA still exist, the perpetrators sought to erase and cover up all evidence of the crimes they committed there when they vacated the space in the 1990s. In deciding how to address this emptiness, one point that emerged in the discussion was the fact that maintaining this emptiness might be the best possible response to the horror of what occurred in the space. Speaking about the discussion of how to manage the space of ESMA, Argentinean sociologist Horacio González writes, 'Among all the ideas put forth to shatter classical representation, the idea of emptiness is the most significant. Somehow, emptiness would suppose...the possibility of underscoring the absence of that which was wrested away by the horror' (González 2005: 245). Here, González asserts that highlighting the emptiness of the space may be the best way to represent what was lost through the violence that occurred there. However, González is also quick to note that a move

towards emptiness is not a passive decision; this emptiness 'must be constructed, planned, and given architecture' (2005: 245). Emptiness must be curated in the same way as a room filled with artifacts.

In the case of the Officers' Headquarters at ESMA, the emptiness of the space has been 'given architecture' through the presence of informational placards in various rooms throughout the tour. Some of these placards include architectural ground plans that show how, for instance, the basement torture space was set up at various times throughout the operation of the camp. Others of the placards give brief descriptions of what occurred within particular rooms. But the most prominent of the placards display the testimony of survivors talking about what they experienced in the place where visitors are standing as they read the testimony. At ESMA, the stories of individual survivors are given a special importance in contextualizing the space for the visitors. The testimony of survivors is understood as the predominant mode of knowledge transmission, since so little archival documentation exists or has been made public by the military. This focus on the subjective testimony of survivors in the construction of an objective history narrative increases the ability of visitors to identify with the site; by focusing on individual stories rather than dates and figures, the affective experience of being in the space is increased.

Choices made by curators as they lead visitors through the emptied sites lead to the filling of a more metaphorical empty space within the visitor, which may best be described as the gap between what Alison Landsberg calls 'prosthetic memory' and some more direct form of empathy or affective identification with the victim. Landsberg develops the term prosthetic memory to describe those memories that are not necessarily experienced personally, but that are publicly circulated to the level that they become an effective part of one's own experience and subjectivity (Landsberg 2004). For Landsberg, prosthetic memory is connected intimately with modernity and mass media, which have allowed for the generalization of specific, subjective experiences to the masses. For example, because of its centrality in countless films, stories, television shows, and other media, the Holocaust has become a part of the prosthetic memory of many. This example illustrates a central feature of prosthetic memory—its interchangeability and exchangeability. Prosthetic memory is not something experienced purely subjectively, as it is a concept that describes how the memory of certain events, especially traumatic ones, can be transferred all over the world, even to those who have no direct connection to that event.

While prosthetic memory can do a great deal in connecting people through a shared awareness of certain historical traumas, the notion of prosthetic memory speaks more to an intellectual awareness than to a shared affective state that is felt in the body. This sort of affective, bodily identification with the past or with the victims is what Marianne Hirsch describes as a key goal for postmemorial artists—subsequent generations of traumatized groups who attempt to transmit the memory of their forbearers to others (Hirsch 2012). Hirsch, who focuses especially on the visual artist, writes,

The challenge for the postmemorial artist is precisely to allow the spectator to enter the image, to imagine the disaster "in one's own body," yet to evade the transposition that erases distance, creating too available, too direct an access to this particular past. (Hirsch 2012: 98)

This same description of postmemorial work can be extended to the curators of memory sites. Rather than working merely through images, these 'postmemorial artists' are working through the medium of the site of atrocity itself, recomposing it in such a way that the visitor can experience a traumatic past in their own body. Following Kaja Silverman, Hirsch believes, however, that there is a point where the individual can be allowed too direct an access to this memory; for them, it is essential that there always remains a distance between the postmodern subject and the past they are encountering, so as not to make the individual believe that they are themselves the one that have been victimized. Kaja Silverman calls this mode of remembering 'heteropathic memory' or 'identification-at-a-distance,' which acknowledges that there is always a large and insurmountable divide between the memory of those who go through a traumatic event and others who did not experience the event directly. The inevitable and persistent existence of this divide, however, does not mean that others should not attempt to cross or at least minimize this divide through postmemorial practices (Silverman 1996; Hirsch 2012).

This line between encouraging the affective identification of the visitor without taking away from the experience of the victim is one that all postmemorial artists, including the curators of memory sites, must walk.

One way the curators of ESMA attempt to manage this process is through controlling the ways people can encounter the traumatic space. Even with the informational placards throughout the space, those who are interested in visiting the specific portion of the complex where disappeared people were detained and tortured must call in advance and schedule a tour of the site. There is no option to show up at the site unannounced, nor is there an option to go through the space on one's own. Visitors must be accompanied through the site for a number of reasons. First, since trials against the former perpetrators who worked at ESMA and other clandestine detention centers are still in process, the site itself is described by the IEM website and by guides at the beginning of every tour as a crime scene, the evidence of which must be preserved. According to the IEM website and published information of the memory space, 'certain security measures are taken during the tour in order to preserve its interior, considering that it is material evidence in the judicial trials that are being realized in the federal sphere'.<sup>4</sup> Statements like this one and the ones made by the guides actually serve a double purpose: not only do they ensure the preservation of the space, but they also attest to its authenticity, adding for the visitor an extra layer of psychological presence. Unlike at former Nazi concentration camps, where the trials of perpetrators ended decades ago, processes of justice are still ongoing in Argentina, so the visitor to this site understands it not only as a historic space, but one that is still actively being engaged with in the public sphere.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, guides are essential because of the emptiness of the building. The Officers' Headquarters in ESMA does not look, on its own, like a place of terror. In fact, for many years before prisoners were detained and tortured there, it functioned as a training facility for young soldiers. Without a guide to explain to visitors what happened within various rooms along the tour, it is unlikely that visitors could grasp the full horror of what had occurred within the walls of the place. The basement of the building looks like any old basement until the guide tells of the forced slave labor and torture that occurred there. The stain on the ground looks like any old mark on a basement floor until the guide says that it is a bloodstain.

Visitors must also be accompanied by a guide because the curators of the site want to make sure that visitors understand the complexity of what occurred. The organizers of the tours are unashamed of acknowledging that they have a message that they want conveyed, and they want a trained and educated person with every visitor who can answer the questions that inevitably come up when people come to sites like this. According to IEM, the guides are there not only to tell how ESMA functioned during the dictatorship, but also how it fits into the larger 'political, social, cultural, and economic context'.<sup>5</sup>

At every historic site, visitors' practices of visitation are also greatly influenced by what they themselves bring to the sites in the form of knowledge and preconceived opinions and ideas. Visitors to these spaces rarely just happen upon them. Rather, they know at least something of the history of the site, and that foreknowledge pushes them to visit the place themselves. Unlike the former Nazi concentration camp sites, where the vast majority of visitors to the sites are from outside of the country where the sites are located—at Auschwitz last year, for instance, only 25 per cent of the visitors were from Poland (Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum 2013)—the sites in Argentina are visited mostly by Argentinians, partly because the history of their military dictatorship is not as widely known outside of Latin America.

Most people who visit ESMA already know the history of the place. In fact, as the dictatorship ended only 30 years ago, many people who visit this site actually lived through this period of repression themselves. Because of this, the types of preconceived notions and ideas that are encountered within the site are of a completely different nature. The history of this period in Argentina is still in the process of being constructed. ESMA is a piece in the puzzle of creating a universally agreed-upon collective narrative regarding the past, but that narrative is still being written by historians, activists, artists, the military (which still operates under a code of silence regarding this seven-year period), the courts (where trials against perpetrators are still ongoing), and the government itself, which only began active and open memory processes in the last decade. It would be difficult to find a person in Argentina who

was not directly affected by the dictatorship in some way, whether they had family members or friends who were disappeared or they were part of a military family. As such, the practices through which these expectations and pre-formed ideas are encountered are unique to the context.

From the beginning of every tour, guides make it clear that not only should visitors feel free to ask questions, but they should also express the ideas and knowledge that they have. Whereas in the case of Auschwitz, guides are framed as the keepers of 'the most objective' version of history, according to Alicja Bialecka, curator of the new exhibition at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum,<sup>6</sup> the exact opposite can be true in the case of ESMA. Since many visitors have a direct relationship to the violence of the dictatorship, guides look at visitors as potential sources of both objective and subjective information that can aid in the mission of the space. This is especially true given that many of the guides are university students, and so did not personally live through this period of Argentinean history, unlike many visitors. The IEM website states that they do not only seek to inform visitors through the tour, but also to encourage 'the participation, debate, and reflection of everyone who visits the place'.<sup>7</sup> This openness to accepting different accounts of past violence contributes to the construction of a collective memory narrative, but it can also lead to conflict and discord. Despite potential disagreements, however, this philosophy acknowledges a central aspect of collective memory formation that other sites might try to ignore through the goal of presenting an objective truth. As memory scholar James E. Young (1994: 37) writes, 'Given the inevitable variety of competing memories, we may never actually share a common memory at these sites but only the common place of memory, where each of us is invited to remember in his own way'. In general, Young eschews the idea of collective memory, instead opting for a notion of 'collected memory' (1993). While Young tends to describe memory sites as places for individual reflection, the philosophy of the guides at ESMA demonstrate that they can also be spaces of encountering not only the past, but also encountering others and their memories. This more active mode of recalling the past has the potential to lead to an entirely new set of practices, to which I now turn.

### Activating the Past

Every memory space is not only a place for visitors to encounter the past; it is also a place for them to interpret that past in a number of ways that activate it in the present. One of the most visible modes of activating that past is through the performance of embodied practices on the grounds of the site. Like many of the other memory sites across Argentina, the managers of ESMA have made it a priority to open up a vast space for interpreting the past through creative means. These practices extend beyond the mere physical presence of visitors in the site of death itself, and they are most clearly exemplified and institutionalized through the creation of the *Centro Cultural de la Memoria Haroldo Conti* (Haroldo Conti Cultural Center of Memory). Named after an Argentinean writer and professor who was disappeared in 1976, the Centro Cultural Haroldo Conti hosts an incredible array of artistic events and performances, including film screenings, theater, dance, concerts, and art exhibitions. While many of these events or presentations deal directly with the dictatorship, the only requirement for them to be hosted by the Cultural Center is that they address the broader theme of memory in some way. The openness of this mandate leads to a broad diversity of performances and exhibitions. For instance, during a single month of my field research in Buenos Aires, the Cultural Center hosted a video installation that featured archival images of the victims of genocides and violent conflicts around the world, a theatrical performance that followed the story of three women disappeared in the Chilean military dictatorship, a series of collages dealing with *Nunca Más*—the 1984 Argentinean truth commission that investigated the crimes of the dictatorship—and a tango concert by a premier Argentinean tango singer.

It may not be immediately clear what the purpose or, for many, the appropriateness of having, for instance, a tango concert in this former site of torture and death is. Is it not an insult to the memory of the people who died in this space? Does it not taint a sacred space with profane activities? The mission statement of the Cultural Center explains the reasoning behind these curatorial choices, however. Found on the Center's website, it states, 'Transforming what was once an emblematic site of privation, exclusion, and death into an open space for

the community is the greatest commitment and challenge to contribute to the construction of memory, truth, and justice'.<sup>8</sup> According to this mission statement, then, exactly what the site hosts is less important than the very fact of opening the space to the public.

In an August 2013 conversation with Eduardo Jozami, the government-appointed National Director of Centro Cultural Haroldo Conti, he admitted that the process of opening a cultural center within the space of ESMA was not necessarily easy at the beginning, though attitudes towards it have shifted with time. He says,

In the beginning, working here posed a certain difficulty, in the first moments. It is a space that everyone enters with an attitude of prevention, of respect, of fear, with an almost religious attitude at times... It was difficult in the beginning to think how the activity in the cultural center would develop.<sup>9</sup>

While there were always a number of people who spoke against the inclusion of cultural activities in ESMA, asking instead that the space be only a memorial to the victims, Jozami says that, for most of the public, this attitude changed over time. He continues:

It would not be viable in the long run to maintain a place like this where people gather just to keep growing the grass. But moreover, the fundamental thing is that we want the cultural activities that are realized in places like this to be a testimony to the process of memory. And we know they are because the sites of memory across the country that do not have cultural centers... still host cultural activities. Because it is difficult to think of what other thing could be there.<sup>10</sup>

According to Jozami, turning ESMA into a more passive space that does not include the sorts of activities hosted by the cultural center would not even be a viable option. For the space to be worthy of maintenance, it requires a certain level of activity. And the fact that hosting cultural activities on the sites is a proper direction for the site to take is proven by the fact that, even in former clandestine detention centers without cultural centers, people have still begun to perform such activities as a natural part of the memory process.

According to the authors of *Memorias en la ciudad*, a book that documents over 200 memory sites across the city of Buenos Aires,

The urban landscape has always been a field for the expression of social conflicts, and the State has intervened upon it at numerous opportunities, seeking to design it as a medium of control and discipline, in an effort to structure not only the space, but also the ways the space is used, thus regulating the practices and modes of inhabiting it. (*Memoria Abierta* 2009: 67)

During the dictatorship in Argentina, public space became a battlefield upon which a greater social war was waged. The restriction of public space, the regulation of who can move through it and how, and/or the effort to obscure certain sections of that space where the worst of crimes are happening was commonplace not only during Argentina's last dictatorship, but in every instance of authoritarian or genocidal regime from Nazi Germany to Rwanda in 1994 to Cambodia in the 1970s. This shutting down of public space also contributes to a breaking down of the social body, forcing it to fragment or atomize since there is no space within which that body can present itself.

The Centro Cultural Haroldo Conti, then, is a way of refiguring that closed-down public space. ESMA has become a symbol for all of the crimes of the dictatorship. Not only was it a site of around 5000 disappearances and many more instances of torture and slave labor, but it was also—both before and after the dictatorship—a site that belonged to the perpetrators and was used for their own training and discipline. As such, it is not just a space where crimes occurred, but also a space that was central in the planning and preparation for those crimes before the dictatorship and in the covering up of those crimes after the dictatorship ended. Now, with the institution of the Centro Cultural Haroldo Conti, the space has become a truly public space for the first time. Different events are held six days a week at the center, and admission to everything is completely free. The center also has a bar and coffee shop, where people often gather for afternoon meetings or for a coffee or drink before a performance. Since its opening in 2008, the Cultural Center has become an active and vibrant component of city life in Buenos

Aires. In essence the Centro Cultural Haroldo Conti is a performative act of defiance against the violent destruction of the dictatorship. It is a revolt against the death that occurred at ESMA when it was in full operation as a clandestine detention center—a rebellious response to the 5000 lives that were lost on the grounds of this place, not to mention the tens of thousands of others who were killed or imprisoned across the country. By filling this space of death with the vibrancy of the arts, along with the large audiences these exhibitions and performances attract, this once-restricted space has been made, for the first time, truly public. As such, it undoes some of the force of the resonant violence and its ability to isolate populations by opening a space in the public sphere for them to interact, engage, respond, and remember.

The artistic practices of Centro Cultural Haroldo Conti are not the only instances of such a vibrant and lively response to such a somber and violent past. ESMA plays host not only to a cultural center, but many of the complex's 34 buildings house various activist organizations, each with its own mission for the propagation and support of human rights. One of these organizations is the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* (Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo), whose mission is to recover all of the 500 children who were born in clandestine detention centers and appropriated by military families. To this end, they now have a DNA bank so that anyone who is suspected of being an appropriated child may be tested so that they can know their true identity. Another organization is the *Instituto de Políticas Públicas en Derechos Humanos* (Institute for Public Policies in Human Rights) for MERCOSUR, the international economic and political organization that includes Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela. The *Madres de Plaza de Mayo-Línea Fundadora* have an office there, as does the group *H.I.J.O.S.* One building in ESMA houses the National Archive of Memory, which is the nation's largest archive, containing documents and audiovisual material relating to the dictatorship. Each of these organizations uses ESMA as a headquarters for carrying out its own specific set of practices that relate to the positive transformation of resonant violence into policies that promote and raise awareness for human rights in the present.

One of the organizations housed within ESMA, the IEM, which manages ESMA and all of the other reclaimed former detention centers in Buenos Aires, hosted one particularly vibrant group embodied practice in 2008 on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1978 World Cup Final. This championship match—within which Argentina defeated the Netherlands to claim the World Cup—was played at a stadium less than one mile from ESMA at the very height of the genocide. This match was more than a small moment of celebration amidst the repression of the dictatorship, however. It was an opportunity that the military junta used to show the world that all was fine in Argentina. As Alicia Herbón, member of the Argentine Permanent Assembly for Human Rights, puts it,

[T]he perpetrators used soccer, that popular sentiment that we have always shared, as a way of showing the world that they were “right and humane” [*derechos y humanos*, a play on *derechos humanos*, or ‘human rights’] and that the dictatorship was not repressive, that what was being said outside of the country was not true. (Quoted in Instituto Espacio para la Memoria 2008: 32)

Indeed, the public exaltation surrounding the World Cup victory did a great deal in distracting the world and Argentina's soccer-obsessed population from the massive political violence happening around them. In response to this historic event and in honor of the disappeared whose lives were being taken from them at the same moment as their countrymen were cheering their national soccer team to victory, IEM hosted *La Otra Final: El Partido por la Vida y los Derechos Humanos* (The Other Final: The Match for Life and Human Rights), a symbolic soccer match to remember the 30,000 disappeared.

Thousands of people met at ESMA, including representatives from major human rights organizations and the government, as well as well-known figures in politics, sports, culture, and the arts. At this site of horror, the group unraveled a banner that stretched for several city blocks and that featured the photographs of thousands of disappeared people. Flanking both sides of the banner, the group marched from ESMA to the football stadium where the World Cup final was played 30 years prior. One large section of the stands was left completely empty but for a huge banner that read, ‘30,000 Detained-Disappeared: Present!’ After some opening remarks, two teams played an exhibition match as the crowd cheered them on. The teams were

formed by a variety of players, including three former players from the 1978 national team, ex-political prisoners and detained people from the dictatorship, children of several families that went into exile during the dictatorship, and the Argentine national youth (Under-20) league. The match was broadcast live on television and the national radio station so people across the country could participate virtually. After the match ended in a 1-1 tie, there was a concert where several well-known and well-respected musicians performed for the crowd (IEM 2008).

*La Otra Final* is an especially intriguing practice because of the way it connects several affective states that seem, at first glance, to be contradictory. Tying the memorialization of 30,000 murdered individuals with the joy of a soccer match could be viewed by some as an affront to the memory of those who were killed. Actually, it is exemplary of an enduring tradition of memory practice in Argentina relating to the dictatorship—one that relishes in making use of cherished cultural practices like soccer and music concerts to aid in the difficult task of remembering those who have been lost. Indeed, the organizers and participants in *La Otra Final* were quite aware of this contradiction. According to the organizers,

To reclaim all of the victims of this planned massacre, it was decided that the activity of “La Otra Final” would begin with a march that connected these two extreme places, that synthesized at a tragically symbolic level the agony and the celebration of the people put down by state terrorism. (IEM 2008: 28)

While the dictatorship was using the soccer match to distract from the crimes happening simultaneously at ESMA, this march was meant to highlight the connection that already existed between these two places.

In *An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich analyzes the deep connections between trauma and affect, challenging the idea that trauma can only be attached to affects of sadness and pain. Instead, she examines trauma ‘as a category that embraces a range of affects, including not just loss and mourning but also anger, shame, humor, sentimentality, and more’ (2003: 48). Cvetkovich argues that it is this range of affects that leads to the formation of new public cultures (2003: 10). Practices like *La Otra Final* acknowledge the multi-dimensional nature of trauma, embracing the fact that affects of despair can exist alongside affects of celebration. Juan Pablo Olsson, a participant in the match who was representing the group *Hijos e Hijas del Exilio* (Sons and Daughters of the Exile), an organization of people whose families had to flee the country in exile during the dictatorship, acknowledged these dueling affective states when he said,

The emotions were mixed. On the one hand, I had a lump in my throat, thinking of our history. But at the same time, I felt a profound sense of pride in representing the group *Hijos y Hijas del Exilio* in that event, together with the rest of the human rights organizations. I felt like many demons were being exorcised. (IEM 2008: 22)

In this quotation, Olsson demonstrates not only the ability for seemingly opposing affects to exist in the same moment; he also illustrates how this affect is experienced viscerally, through the body. The physical presence of the lump in his throat is how he describes the negative affect associated with his country's history. But he also *feels* the sense of pride and the exorcising of demons through his bodily participation in the event. These individually felt affects extend outwards to the social body, as well.

Allowing these contrasting emotional stances to exist alongside one another does more than merely ‘exorcise demons.’ It also contributes to the ‘bigger picture’ of addressing resonant violence in ways that have become especially pertinent in the Argentine context. Practices like *La Otra Final* work to fill the vacuum left by genocidal violence—which works only to destroy and to isolate—with vibrant forms of active living and modes of political engagement that might not have ever existed had it not been for the violence that sought to quell it. This first point makes sense in conjunction with cultural studies scholar Emily Klein's notion of citizenship in the twenty first century. According to Klein, in contemporary, globalized society, citizenship ‘is increasingly being thought of and studied as an embodied act, a dynamic set of behaviors, and a category of live (and lived) performance’ (2011: 102). Thinking about citizenship as a performed mode of being rather than as a legal category provides a new framework for understanding public forms of engagement, dissent, and activism. Practices like *La Otra Final*,

then, represent what Klein would call 'spectacular citizenship', a particularly visible mode of engaged, civic participation that demonstrates the visibility of a people and a cause through spectacle. Spectacular citizenship, especially in cases that respond to the presence of resonant violence, are important because they allow for people to conceive of themselves outside of the role of the 'victim-citizen', a traditionally passive and powerless position (Klein 2011: 119). Instead, collectives are able to resort to spectacular displays of public affect as a means of reclaiming the lost agency owed to them—not only as citizens, but also as human beings. This level of public passion would be difficult to generate only through the emotions of mourning; by allowing powerful positive emotions to exist alongside the more negatively-affective emotions of sadness and loss, participants in these practices create more enduring connections among each other and more spectacularly visible displays so that the resonating effects of their performed citizenship extend beyond those participating directly to the wider public.

*La Otra Final* is an example of a practice that re-embodies the disappeared, making them present, both through highlighting their absence (through the empty stands reserved for them) and by symbolically carrying them out of the place of their torture and death to a place of joy. They were unable to celebrate with their countrymen as their team won the World Cup Championship in 1978, but now there is another final being played, and this one is especially for them. This staging of conflicting emotions serves as a means for transforming the resonant violence of the past into the productive force of a collective stand against such violence in the present. Through a collective, embodied practice, a place with a troubling history again becomes a place for community and passionate living. In other words, the enduring effects of resonant violence are being converted or recomposed into new and powerful sources of power and agency.

Embracing ambivalent emotions through practices of re-composition also demonstrates that the transformation of resonant violence must not be only a painful act, but can be a pleasurable one, as well. Filling spaces like ESMA with positive affect is a particularly fitting response to the violence of the dictatorship since the affective life of the prisoners there was a particular target for the perpetrator's wrath. For instance, in *Club Atlético*, another clandestine detention center in operation at the beginning of the dictatorship, prisoners were put into isolated sequestration for exhibiting any form of emotion. Laughing, smiling, and crying were all impeachable offenses; in the continuing effort to destroy their humanity, prisoners were forced to remain completely without affect (Memoria Abierta 2009: 130). Given this history of dehumanization through de-emotionalization, focusing on the cultivation of multiple forms of affect—mournful and celebratory—seems like a particularly appropriate mode of re-composing the resonant violence such processes created.

As Jozami noted, however, the presentations that occur within Centro Cultural Haroldo Conti, events like *La Otra Final*, and the bevy of other memory practices occurring across Argentina do not occur without debate or resistance from one group or other. Determining how to adequately and appropriately remember the past is a difficult task, the parameters and necessities of which change as society and its relationship to that past changes. In his publisher's note to the book *Memory Under Construction: The Debate over ESMA*, which was published before the official opening of the site and which seeks to document all of the conversations and opinions about how the space should function as a memory site, publisher Guido Indij writes:

If this museum [ESMA] was not created 30, 15, or 5 years ago, it is because the social and political conditions for it were not present. This fact is sufficient to understand that the manner in which we view today what happened in [ESMA] is surely different than how we will view it in 5, 15, or 30 years. Given that human activity finds itself in a fluid state, calling ourselves to permanent debate and constant reflection regarding memory is the path to stop the coagulation that converts memory into merchandise. (Indij 2005: 43, author's translation)

If Indij is correct, the very fact that debates exist over the types of practices that are fitting to occur within these memory spaces is, in itself, contributing to an active discourse relating to the past that prevents the 'coagulation' of memory. Herein, then, lies perhaps the greatest practice housed within the fences that surround ESMA: the lively debate that ensues as a

result of experimentation with differing forms of memory practice. Robert Musil famously wrote, 'There is nothing as invisible as a monument' (quoted in Young 1993: 13). But if the physical presence of monuments themselves can serve to disappear the past that they are intended to represent, the active embodied practices that occur within memory sites are much more difficult to make invisible. They also stand as an especially meaningful means of transforming the resonant violence of Argentina's last military dictatorship since the most horrific crime of the junta was to disappear bodies—to kidnap, kill, and dispose of individual bodies in a way that erased all evidence that they ever existed. It makes great sense that the most effective way of responding to that violence, then, would be in ways that make the body as present and public as possible. Whether this presentation of the body leads to controversy or contentment does not take away from the fact that this presence of the body makes it ever more difficult to leave the past behind.

### Conclusion: The Concentration Camp and Society at Large

Concentration camps as a phenomenon got their name from their objective of concentrating large groups of people into a single, confined area. While the term most readily evokes the extermination and work camps of the Holocaust, concentration camps have been a central tool of many genocidal regimes in the twentieth century, including those across Latin America, in Bosnia, and in Cambodia. While the name does refer to the concentration of individuals imprisoned within these sites, there could be a second, more figurative meaning of the term.

In her analysis of the concentration camps of Argentina, Calveiro addresses the function of concentration camps and the role they have in society as a whole. According to Calveiro, a necessary component of the concentration camp is a society that willingly ignores its existence. This willful blindness on the part of a society that knows wrongs are being committed but that refuses to see them, whether for their own protection or because seeing what is actually happening is simply too horrible, is what Diana Taylor has called *percepticide* (Taylor 1997). Percepticide is an essential factor in allowing genocidal regimes to carry out their crimes. While percepticide can occur everywhere within an oppressive society, the level of performed blindness that sees, but does not see the concentration camp operates on a completely different level. The concentration camp is a mechanism of power, but its scope of control does not fall merely within its walls. Rather, it is a producer of resonant violence, as the physical acts of violence that occur within its boundaries resonate far beyond its walls to affect the entire society. Calveiro (2008: 147) writes,

The society that, like the disappeared person himself, knows and does not know [of the camps], functions as a resonance box [*caja de resonancia*] of the power of disappearing and concentrating, permitting the circulation of sounds and echoes of this power, while at the same time being its primary addressee.

According to Calveiro, the camp is not only in existence to address its power to its own prisoners. Those displays of violent force resonate outwards to society at large, and they do so because that society permits the existence of the camp. As such, society and the camp are not separate entities. Rather, they are mutually constitutive: the camp exists because of the society that allows it to exist, and the technologies of power at play within the bounds of the camp are the same that are playing out in society as a whole (Calveiro 2008).

The difference—and herein lies the second, hidden meaning of the term 'concentration camp'—is that these technologies of power operating within the camp are more concentrated. The concentration camp is a produced environment where the world is made less complicated, easier to decipher, and therefore easier to determine who must be eliminated from it. It is a binary world, where there is only the good and the bad. Calveiro writes, 'The reduction of reality to two grand spheres hopes finally for the elimination of the differences and the *imposition of a unique and total reality* represented by a strong nucleus of power, the State' (2008: 88). Totalitarian regimes also create this sort of binary world in society as a whole, seeking to annihilate the impure element once it has been identified. In the concentration camp, this process of dividing societies into two groups is at its most perfect, its most concentrated. In the camp there exist *only* the guards and the prisoners—those who are upholding and defending

society, and those who are destroying it and must, therefore, be destroyed themselves. Outside the walls of the camp, it is more difficult to know on which side of this divide each person falls; inside the camp, it is blatantly obvious. The concentration camp *is* the society that the perpetrators want to create.

What is particularly fascinating and ironic about ESMA today, then, is that the memory workers operating within the space are actually attempting to continue this power of the camp. ESMA is not only a space of memory. If it were, it might not require a cultural center and a bar. It might not house a slew of activist groups and human rights organizations. The choice not only to open ESMA to the public, but also to provide it with such a large mandate serves to make it a different sort of memorial space. ESMA is attempting to normalize this process of recomposing resonant violence, to make it quotidian, and to extend it outwards into society at large.

This mission seems appropriate, especially given the historical context of ESMA and Argentina in comparison to other memory sites. For instance, the concentration camps of the Holocaust—and especially the extermination camps—were almost always built in remote locations, outside of the limits of major cities. Likewise, today, these former camps that have now been converted into spaces of memory are not usually places people visit on a regular basis. They remain on the outskirts of life, far away from the realm of the quotidian. Visitors come to these sites to tour the grounds of the former camps, to commemorate those who were lost, to remember (Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum 2012). No one goes to Auschwitz to view an art exhibition, to see a play, or to meet a friend for coffee. Instead, it is a place where, according to the mission statement on the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum website, ‘one can have direct contact with the testimony and reminiscences of witnesses; and it is here that one can see with their own eyes the evidence of the Holocaust’.<sup>11</sup>

ESMA is also a place for memory, education, and commemoration. Tours of the Officers’ Headquarters are offered explicitly to educate people about the mass atrocities that occurred during the dictatorship. But it also has a larger mission. According to the IEM website, their mission is ‘to promote the deepening of the democratic system, the consolidation of human rights, and the prevalence of values supportive of life, liberty, and human dignity’.<sup>12</sup> This mission statement demonstrates that IEM does not see the sites as entities that only look backwards to the past, but places that they hope to have a direct impact on the present and future. This desire to influence the larger society is in line with the way the concentration camps functioned when they were sites of violence and terror. Unlike the Nazi concentration camps, ESMA and the other clandestine detention centers were deeply embedded in the urban landscape of Buenos Aires (and other cities across Argentina). These sites were not hidden; rather, people passed them by every day. To not know what was happening within the bounds of these sites required percepticide—a willful blindness—since the violence that was happening was so very visible.

As a result, ESMA the memory site is just as visible today as ESMA the concentration camp was during the dictatorship. And by including the Cultural Center and so many organizations within its boundaries, it is attempting to be as much an influence on greater society as it was from 1976-1983. Calveiro writes, ‘The same mechanisms that we analyze inside of the concentration camps operate in all of society’ (2008: 155). If this was the harsh reality during the days of the dictatorship, it is perhaps the great hope of the site today. The organizations, artists, and individuals that operate in ESMA are working for exactly this purpose: to make their mechanisms for the recomposition of resonant violence present in daily life throughout the society. If during times of violence the concentration camp represents a concentrated microcosm of the society as a whole, today’s ESMA shows that, during times of peace and reconstruction, the concentration camp can represent a concentration of the sorts of productive, creative practices that could manifest in the whole of society, as well. For, as Calveiro writes, ‘...the concentration camp and society belong to each other. One is not explainable without the other. They reflect each other and they reproduce each other’ (2008: 159). While the mutually-constitutive nature of the concentration camp and society is a sad reality during times of violence, it is also the silver lining for those who spend their lives working towards the transformation of resonant violence in post-conflict societies.

In their edited volume *Places of Public Memory*, which analyzes memory sites across a number of cultural contexts, Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian L. Ott break down some characteristics of memory sites. According to these scholars, one key feature of these sites is

that ‘they fashion themselves rhetorically to distinguish themselves from the everyday’ (Blair *et al.* 2010: 26). While this certainly seems to be true in many cases, this assertion does not really extend to ESMA as a memory site. In fact, through the myriad ways this space has been managed and activated, those involved in the memorialization of this space seem to want to erase the line that distinguishes this space from the everyday. Of course, the space is still set apart, still marked as exceptional by what has occurred there. Perhaps it would be better to say that, rather than distinguishing itself from the everyday, ESMA is attempting to slowly but surely influence and expand into the everyday. In doing so, however, it does not seek to become less important as it becomes quotidian; instead, it is seeking to make the quotidian more important, highlighting the way that this past violence has and does influence daily life. As a result, the re-composition of resonant violence can become a collective work that occurs not only within the boundaries of ESMA and other former sites of mass atrocity, but throughout the entire social landscape.

Received: 13 September 2012  
Finally accepted: 15 August 2014

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup>Anonymous Auschwitz guide, interview by author, digital recording, 4 December 2013, Oświęcim.
- <sup>2</sup>Anonymous Auschwitz guide, interview by author, digital recording, 4 December 2013, Oświęcim.
- <sup>3</sup>Just a few months before the publication of this article, in May 2014, the city and federal government voted to dissolve the independently operated Instituto Espacio para la Memoria. It appears that the ex-ESMA, as well as several other sites that were managed by IEM, will now be managed by the city government of Buenos Aires. At the time of publication, it is yet unclear how this change will affect the curation and day-to-day administration of the sites.
- <sup>4</sup>Instituto Espacio para la Memoria Informational Publication, available for free to public at ESMA and other IEM sites.
- <sup>5</sup>Instituto Espacio para la Memoria Informational Publication, available for free to public at ESMA and other IEM sites.
- <sup>6</sup>Alicja Bialecka, interview by author, digital recording, 4 December 2013, Oświęcim.
- <sup>7</sup>‘Visitas Guiadas,’ Instituto Espacio para la Memoria, <http://www.espaciomemoria.ar/visitas.php>, accessed 5 March 2013, author’s translation.
- <sup>8</sup>‘El Conti,’ Centro Cultural de la Memoria Haroldo Conti, <http://conti.derhuman.jus.gov.ar/areas/institucional/institucional.shtml>, accessed 24 June 2014, author’s translation.
- <sup>9</sup>Eduardo Jozami, interview by author, digital recording, 15 August 2013, Buenos Aires.
- <sup>10</sup>Eduardo Jozami, interview by author, digital recording, 15 August 2013, Buenos Aires.
- <sup>11</sup>‘Mission: Remembrance – Awareness – Responsibility,’ Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, [http://en.auschwitz.org/e/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2&Itemid=7](http://en.auschwitz.org/e/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2&Itemid=7), accessed 29 June 2014.
- <sup>12</sup>‘Misión y función,’ Instituto Espacio para la Memoria, [http://www.institutomemoria.org.ar/\\_institucional/1\\_institucional.html](http://www.institutomemoria.org.ar/_institucional/1_institucional.html), accessed 29 June 2014, author’s translation.

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