

## Revisiting the Appropriated Children: Subjectivity in Patricia Zangaro's *A propósito de la duda*

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On June 5, 2000, *A propósito de la duda*, written by Patricia Zangaro in homage to the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo Association and directed by Daniel Fanego, premiered at the Ricardo Rojas Cultural Center in Buenos Aires. Five dates were initially scheduled, but the interest it garnered, principally among the students and young people that make up the Cultural Center's regular public, made it necessary for the artists to put on two shows nightly, beginning on the opening night. Later, the play's run was continued at La Recoleta Cultural Center, one of the most important artistic spaces in Buenos Aires. By the end of November 2000, some 8,000 people had seen the play.

Zangaro and Fanego's expectations were vastly exceeded<sup>1</sup> when *A propósito* played for almost a decade in a variety of theaters and open spaces and with a number of local casts. The year after it opened, it became the first play in the repertoire of Teatro x la Identidad, a group of artists who went on to collaborate with Las Abuelas on a continuing basis. The show's extension nationwide also spawned more than 20 local Teatro x la Identidad chapters around the country, involving local artists who went on to create their own artistic repertoire for half a decade.

*A propósito* deals with the problem of the appropriated children of the disappeared. During the last military government (1973-1981), children of "political opponents" were taken from their parents and relocated in other families, while their parents were "disappeared," secretly abducted, tortured and murdered, their bodies hidden. Las Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo have documented 260 cases of abduction and appropriation of children, but the Association believes that there were in fact around 500 cases, with the assumption that not all cases were reported. Furthermore, the number of people identified through genetic testing has increased dramatically in the

past decade. At least 126 adults have been identified and the majority of them have been returned to their biological families with the assistance of the justice system.<sup>2</sup>

### Avoiding the Theory of the Two Evils

Initially, Zangaro proposed doing *Última luna* (1998) as an homage to *Las Abuelas*, a play that had premiered in France in 1998. However, a few months before the premier, she decided to change it, concerned that the play was too ambiguous and, therefore, would not adequately convey her message. In particular, as she states in the interview cited below, the playwright was worried that *Última luna* would remind audience of controversies associated with the 1973-1981 dictatorship, which would in turn make it more difficult to focus attention on her objective, which was to contribute to the work of *Las Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo*.

Tenía una obra que [. . .] se llama “Última Luna”. [. . .] Por esos días, en una de las marchas, sí claro, que fue el 24 de marzo [aniversario del golpe militar] de pronto sentí que la obra no correspondía para la causa, porque podría prestarse a una lectura engañosa. [. . .] la obra es sobre una abuela y su nieta. La abuela es una cautiva que escapa de los toldos y la nieta que fue separada de su abuela cuando vino el malón, siendo una niña, escapa de su padre, escapa de lo que es el ejército, la civilización porque quiere encontrarse con su abuela. Pero si a esto vos lo ponés en un contexto tan específico como es el de las Abuelas, tendés a hacer analogías entre una cosa y la otra. El ejército pasaba a ser el ejército represor y el malón pasaba a ser la guerrilla revolucionaria. Entonces, dije, ésta es la teoría de los dos demonios, que por cierto repudio. No era eso lo que yo quería decir.

It is of note that Zangaro should point to the march that took place on the 24<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the military coup as the guiding moment in her decision to write a new play. Since the beginning of the democratic transition, the actors involved in such commemorations have rejected, with ever increasing vehemence, the theory of the two evils. This theory first appeared in the official report on the disappearance of persons during the military dictatorship, *Nunca más* (1984),<sup>3</sup> which attributed responsibility for the extreme political violence committed to both the military government and the left-wing guerrilla forces. Moreover, it made the argument that the violence exercised by the military came *in response to* the violence exercised by the guerrilla forces.

Rejection of the theory of the two evils by the organizations involved in the anniversary marches and the progressive construction of the figure of the “disappeared” led to what Marina Franco calls a “motion for self-censorship” in Argentine society (2). That is to say, in certain political and intellectual spaces, it became socially possible to talk only about the military government’s responsibility for its crimes, whereas any attempt to examine the actions of the guerrilla forces or to study that heterogeneous and conflictive world of stories lumped together by the military government as “subversives” —and again lumped together by human rights organizations as “disappeared”—became morally unacceptable. In part, this was because the view of two evils not only complicated the prospects for justice for the victims of dictatorship, but also suggested a measure of legitimacy in authoritarianism. It is from this perspective, then, that Zangaro conceived of her new play, in which the focus is almost exclusively on the children who were appropriated. Their disappeared parents are represented as an *absent presence*, devoid of any biographical or political elements that might cloud the innocence of the appropriated children. As such, the burden of the violence of appropriation is placed squarely, and exclusively, on the military dictatorship.

### **The Authority of Real-Life Accounts**

In the span of fewer than three months and using audiovisual materials from the Las Abuelas archive, Zangaro came up with a script that structures the voices of those who gave real-life accounts of disappearance and child appropriation into a disjointed dialogue that is at times polyphonic and at others choral. It does, however, reveal a hierarchy of voices, contributing to a certain historical interpretation of the crime of appropriation. By allowing the story to be told by those who lived it the playwright fortifies her text with a legitimacy that combines authenticity and the unquestionable innocence of victims.

Other studies of the play have interpreted the use of these real-life accounts from various points of view. Some see them as a “source” for the play (Arreche 111) or as a specific type of writing classified as theater of information,” which, according to María Luisa Diz, “renuncia a toda invención, se sirve de material auténtico y lo da desde el escenario sin variar su contenido (2). For others, “la obra se asume, desde el texto dramático, como un espacio biográfico—habitado por una variedad de géneros discursivos [. . .], concernidos diversamente por la narrativa vivencial (Arfuch 165). From my point of view, Zangaro’s use of first-hand accounts instead of other

established dramatic techniques suggests two things. Most significantly, she seems to place a considerable trust in the voices of victims and perpetrators—and perhaps too much trust in their memories—as a way to avoid symbolic (and historical) ambiguity regarding the crimes of disappearance and appropriation. In doing so, she participates in what Beatriz Sarlo calls the “fetichización de la verdad testimonial” (63). As Sarlo points out, real-life accounts are not necessarily more reliable than other sources of information about the past (61-64). In the context of the theater, then, meaning does not become any more realistic by building a play around such accounts. It does, however, make it more subjective, and as such, more personal.

At the same time, account-based fiction has the pragmatic function of paring down the significance of events in the play and of tightening and narrowing the interpretation of certain matters for the audience’s benefit. This simplification becomes apparent in the superficial nature of references made to the past—paradoxical if the author’s intent is to elucidate historical events—and in the fact that meaning becomes condensed around the voices of the victims and against the backdrop of crimes committed by the military government. The play gives primacy to testimonial fragments that come from a relatively small number of personal experiences and limits the depth of its interpretation of the past to the denouncement of these unpunished crimes. It calls upon the audience to be witness to a problem that has been streamlined so as to simplify interpretation of what in reality is a more complex issue. In much the same way as an old-fashioned teacher, the play offers the audience a parcel of knowledge, which must be accepted as a single unit, and then assigns them a task, as Zygmunt Bauman uses the term, instructing them to share in the belief that Argentine society as a whole is still suffering the after-effects of these crimes and that the damage must be undone in order for society to move forward (26).

#### *A propósito de la duda’s mise-en-scène*<sup>4</sup>

*A propósito de la duda* is not a conventional play with acts and scenes but rather a chain of monologues spoken by characters with generic names, like Muchacha, Muchacho, Abuela, Apropiador, Hombre, Niño y Coro de Jóvenes. It begins with an off-stage voice, which acts as a foreword, an opening discourse that provides a specific framework of meaning for the performance.

VOZ EN OFF (*oscuridad en el escenario*). ¿Quién soy? ¿Quiénes somos? Porque aunque el viaje sea individual, hay un destino

colectivo. Por eso la pregunta: ¿vos sabés quién sos? Y la duda y más preguntas. La memoria agradecida. (156)

According to Anne Ubersfeld, off-stage voices and choruses have been used since the days of Greek theatre to interact with the audience, acting as a “mirror” in which the collective viewers can see themselves reflected (25). Such techniques conveyed to the audience ideas that the playwright and director considered central to the play, the most common being honor, moral obligations, responsible citizenship, and a common value system: “Whatever imaginary receiver the monologue’s enunciator faces, he addresses his utterance to a universal instance, an instance that should—as it is supposed to do—reassure him, comfort him, absolve him, provide him with solutions” (Ubersfeld 25).

In the brief monologue cited above, the voice suggests to the spectator a close connection between memory and the identity of the appropriated children of the disappeared. The voice calls upon the audience to contemplate the children of the disappeared as an issue that is inextricable from a “collective destiny.” The word “destiny,” which can mean different things, appears frequently in the accounts of those who identify themselves as children of the disappeared and alludes essentially to an interpretation of children as an element of continuity within the biological family, an interpretation informed by the reinterpretations of the military dictatorship. Therefore, the monologue serves a dual purpose: it reminds them of their moral obligation to become a part of the solution to the problem and also of their obligation to remember the political violence of the military dictatorship. This entreaty is further strengthened by Zangaro’s decision to utilize the moral authority of the victims in the play’s text and to construct a chorus of fictional voices.

Following the off-stage voice, the curtain opens and some of the lights come up. Three characters (Apropiador, Apropiadora, and Muchacho Pelado) are seated to the right of center stage, while three elderly women are seated to the left, all six looking directly at the public. This static distribution of the characters on stage is accompanied by the deafening sound of a helicopter and a harsh white light that shines down directly on the “Niño,” who comes to center stage playing with a ball. The light and sound then cease and the boy disappears. The ball, left behind, is picked up a few seconds later by the Abuela. In just under two minutes, the grandchild and grandmother are effectively sketched for the audience, while the kidnapping, torture, and murder of the disappeared parents are alluded to by a woman who appears on stage holding a baby and an empty chair.

On the other side of the stage, a light illuminates the Apropiadores. They are sitting with their son, Muchacho Pelado, who is around 25 years old. The plot revolves around this character, whose baldness helps to delimit the issue and thereby orient reflection. First of all, his baldness is a biological trait that brings the play into the conceptual realm of genetic heritage. On a discursive level, the baldness evokes the latent tension between the appropriators and the young man. As we will examine below, both Muchacho Pelado and his appropriators see it as the young man's only shortcoming and as something that must be corrected.

In the segment transcribed below, the audience's attention is called to the young man's bald head, first by the Apropiadora, who massages the young man's scalp, possibly in the hopes that his hair will grow back, and secondly by the three grandmothers, who stare at them and wonder whether they are biologically related.

ABUELA I. ¿La calvicie es hereditaria?

ABUELA II. La calvicie . . . es hereditaria . . .

ABUELA III. La calvicie es hereditaria. (*Hombre Apropiador se ríe*)

LAS TRES ABUELAS. ¡La calvicie es hereditaria! (156)

The grandmothers' chorus alludes to what took the Abuelas Association (and the experts) many years of hits and misses to construct: a body of discourse on the fundamental importance of repairing the biological bonds broken by the military dictatorship's disappearance of the appropriated children's parents, and thereby allowing generational transmission to be reestablished.<sup>5</sup> This discourse took shape as it became increasingly clear to the Association that "si las teorías no servían para fundamentar este pedido que por derecho legítimo le correspondía a las Abuelas, había que deshacerse de esos libros" (Gatti 102).

Apropiador's laugh, as he sits next to Muchacho Pelado, seems like an attempt to interrupt or silence the Abuelas, giving the chorus a cacophonous closing. The grandmothers' lines are immediately followed by a pair of monologues from the appropriators. As can be observed in the lines quoted below, the man recites a sort of "patriotic narrative" instituted by the military government. In it, the measures the generals took are justified as an attempt to save the nation, while later attempts at justice and what he views as historical revisionism are interpreted as a plot to criminalize the patriots and, at the same time, victimize the appropriated minors:

APROPRIADOR. Mi hijo tiene la seguridad de que somos sus padres. Tenemos nuestros documentos, todo en regla. Yo no

necesito hacerme ninguna prueba. ¿Para probar qué? Si acá no nos van a juzgar. Estamos condenados de antemano. Apropiadores, torturadores, represores, dicen que somos. Les pregunto si ven alguna señal de tortura en el chico. Yo lo único que sé es que trabajé toda la vida de policía. Y le decía al muchacho que nunca dijera que papá era policía. Y eso no era mentir, sino obviar. En esta casa no se miente. Hoy, en la Argentina, los que luchamos por nuestro país somos delincuentes. Pienso que a mí, como muchos, tendrían que levantarnos un monumento en lugar de perseguirnos. [. . .] tendrían al menos que dejarnos tranquilos. No a mí, que soy un soldado que está luchando contra la ignominia, pero a estos pobres inocentes. Ellos son los que más sufren. Es la familia lo que están destruyendo. Lamentablemente, los derechos humanos son de izquierda. Nosotros no somos humanos. No tenemos derechos. (156)

This monologue is of particular interest because, apart from establishing the appropriator's mentality for plot purposes, it puts an appropriator archetype on stage, as if he were on trial. Indeed, the monologue is based on defense arguments given at actual appropriation trials. Dramatically, this is necessary to build tension in the play. Didactically, the dramatist streamlines issues for the audience by using monologues to represent figures as well as discourses. Presented with characters and ideas that were significant in Argentine society at that time in a stereotypical way, the audience is conceptually situated within a more complex reality. Thus, we find an appropriator who argues his legal case, and it is no accident that he does not argue very convincingly. It is also of note that, in arguing his case, the appropriator portrays himself as a veteran of a great battle and as a patriot who finds his honor called into question, although he ultimately loses all moral credibility when he contradicts himself by shouting, "En esta casa no se miente" (156).

After the Appropriator's monologue, one of the grandmothers attempts to respond, "Mientras haya *una sola* persona con su identidad *robada*..." (157). However, her words are cut off by Apropiadora, who makes a maternal plea to the audience. She sets herself up as a mother afraid of losing her son and appeals to the audience on the basis of his innocence; he would be unjustifiably traumatized if he were to be returned to his biological family. Through the appropriators' words, one understands that they view the process of appropriation and concealment of his origins as a victimless crime. In essence, the appropriators see themselves as victims.

The three grandmothers follow the appropriators' monologues, finishing what the first grandmother attempted to say: "Mientras haya una sola persona con su identidad robada y falseada se pone en duda la identidad de todos" (157). The use of the words "identidad robada or falseada" is interesting; instead of using adjectives like "falso" to describe the identity of the appropriated children that have not yet been restituted, past participles are used. Discursively, this is a powerful choice, as it casts blame on those who, to date, have not disclosed the origins of the children they appropriated. It also echoes the vocabulary typically used by the Abuelas Association to make reference to the rupture caused by appropriation in the children's construction of their subjectivity. They were not allowed to form their identities within the original family lineage in which they were conceived, closing off the possibility that any real identity may have been forged during the child's life with the appropriators.

Within the field of psychology, significant efforts have been made to emphasize the desires of the disappeared parents as a foundational element in the subjectivity of their children.<sup>6</sup> In particular, it is assumed that even before birth, children are an "object capitalized on" by their progenitors and that their subjectivity is "pre-fabricated" by the institutions that they must, inevitably, assimilate very quickly into their existence in order to survive (Legendre 19). In that way, the notion of a "stolen" identity assumes the construction of a pre-identity that the children were stripped of, one that would have been formed before they themselves had even become conscious of their own existence, thus establishing the preponderance of ancestry and obedience to the older members of the family over individuality.

Kinship—which in itself constitutes a form of government over human beings, insofar as we are born bound to other individuals—was first legitimized long ago on the basis of blood relations and religious beliefs, then through the law, and, later, in the second half of the 1950s, on the basis of certain biological hypotheses, underpinned by findings in genetic science.<sup>7</sup> As such, the restitution of the appropriated children to their biological families can be seen as justified by an intricate combination of traditional, religious, legal, and scientific beliefs. The hypothesis or metaphor of "gene action" (Fox Keller 21) as operating agents that are capable of constructing an entire organism, a theory in vogue in Argentina at the end of the 1980s, entered into a peculiar synergy with the legal reinterpretations of the military's crimes. Within that synergy, the issue of the appropriated children was constructed on the basis of an unmodifiable connection formed by the parents' presumed desire, the



notion of biological identity,<sup>8</sup> and the historical truth that the appropriation was a systematic practice perpetrated by the military government. In other words, a metaphor of genetic memory—of genes as the principal agents in identity construction—operates in tandem with an obligation to family lineage—a hypothetical reconstruction of the past, which likewise constrains the children of the disappeared to construct themselves as individuals in terms of obedience to those who came before.

The Muchacho Pelado has, up to this point, been wearing headphones and moving his fingers as if he were listening to music. At times, he lifts his gaze, trying to follow what the other characters are saying, while maintaining a certain distance and indifference. Finally, he gets up to speak, and while his appropriator father holds his hand tightly, he delivers his monologue, without ever taking his headphones off:

MUCHACHO PELADO: Yo me salvé. Tengo una familia, una carrera, un auto. Me siento un number one. Con las minas tengo éxito. Igual que mi viejo. Dice que cuando estaba en la fuerza se las garchaba a todas. Lo único que me jode es la pelada. A mi viejo, el muy guacho, le sale pelo hasta en las orejas. Pero de joven era pelado, igual que yo . . . (*Se detiene confundido*). Yo me salvé. Cuando me reciba, el viejo me prometió regalarme un implante. No le gustan los pelados. Dice que tienen pinta de maricones, que le vienen ganas de arrinconarlos, y retorcerles las bolas. Mi vieja, por las dudas, se la pasa haciéndome masajes. Mejor peludo que con las bolas rotas, como el viejo . . . (*Se detiene, confundido*). Yo me salvé. Cuando crezca el pelo voy a ser igual al viejo. Me voy a coger todo. Me voy a llevar el mundo por delante. Voy a arrinconar a todos los pelados. Y retorcerles las bolas. No me gustan los pelados. Son iguales a mi viejo . . . (*El Muchacho Pelado se detiene confundido ante la mirada acusatoria del Apropiador*). (157)

The monologue highlights the inconsistencies of the character who, in an attempt to be more like his father, employs a discourse plagued with contradictions. On the one hand, there is a noticeable tension in his speech between the masculine, represented by the young man's insatiable sexual desire, which is furthermore an effort to emulate his (appropriator) father's perceived manliness, and the effeminate (homosexual) represented by his baldness. Baldness, then, is the final element that the appropriator must "discipline" to complete his appropriation of Muchacho Pelado, and which Muchacho Pelado needs to eliminate in order to complete his assimilation.

It is also reminiscent of what Diana Taylor calls a self-representation of the masculine, in which the military Junta viewed itself as “embodying the national being,” wherein society and the citizenry were feminized (71). On the other hand, the audience also experiences a tension upon hearing Muchacho Pelado’s repeated affirmation that he was saved (an allusion to some significant danger that he escaped at some point in his life), along with his ill-conceived belief that the appropriators really are his parents.<sup>9</sup>

He suggestively uses the phrase “Yo me salvé” on three occasions. The first time, the statement appears to slip out, even a bit out of context or isolated from the rest of his speech. The preterit verb makes reference to some unspecified moment in the past, when he must have been in danger, but he continues by describing his social and sexual success in an atemporal present tense. In effect, Muchacho Pelado presents the audience with two discrete subjects, one that needed to be saved and one that comes into existence after the moment of his salvation. Although he has no memory of appropriation and cannot know what he may or may not have been saved from, he builds his positive self-image on the basis of his feelings of success in life.

That positive self-image is undermined, however, by the character’s baldness, which acts as a destabilizing element in his image, his discourse, and his relationship with his parents. It is a blemish that both Muchacho Pelado and his parents would like to remedy and additionally for the latter an uncomfortable reminder of his origins. Furthermore, beyond being a simple literary device, the young man’s baldness is an image that resonates with the psychological and legal discourses I have identified in the play. It shows the power of a biological truth that fractures his subjectivity and gets in the way of any family-style relationship that might be established between the young man and his appropriators.

The second time Muchacho Pelado says he was saved, he says it as an expression of his desire to satisfy the appropriator’s desire, and thus complete his own salvation. With hair implants, the appropriated boy hopes to “correct” his appropriator mother’s fruitless efforts and to consummate both his appropriator father’s desire—“No le gustan los pelados”—and his own; he doesn’t want “bolas rotas” (158). In other words, the implant would replace the “defective” part of his identity while simultaneously masculinizing his “effeminate” body in emulation of Apropiador’s masculine potency. For Muchacho Pelado, the implant would create a subjectivity-body unity to successfully expel his apparent inner conflict.

Towards the end of his monologue, Muchacho Pelado mentions the idea of having been saved a third time in relation to his desire to be like his father. His comment that “[c]uando crezca el pelo voy a ser igual al viejo” is remarkably allusive to the classic boyhood aspiration, “When I grow up, I’ll be just like my dad.” He even attempts to imitate his appropriator father’s exacerbated machismo and violent homophobia, although it ultimately backfires. This suggests that despite his hope that all of the contradictions that slip out in his monologue may one day be put to rest, the truth of his identity may be impossible to suppress forever.<sup>10</sup>

Given that the young man is unaware of his origins and far from imagining what the other characters seem to know, his experience, and therefore his authority to speak, is called into question, placing him in a position of relative disadvantage to those who know the truth and have already been restituted. Following Muchacho Pelado’s monologue, the Muchacha I appears on stage and approaches him. When he takes off his headphones, she whispers to him, “No es lo mismo ser de un lugar que parecerlo” (158). This brief interaction sets the scene for the Muchacha’s monologue by momentarily disconnecting Muchacho Pelado from what he was listening to—which, among other things, may have symbolized the appropriator’s discourse—and thereby fills him with doubt and unsettles the foundations on which his falsified identity has been constructed:

MUCHACHA I: Mi vieja decía “Dame el tenedor”. Era una película de un cumpleaños familiar. Y mi vieja aparecía un segundo, y decía “Dame el tenedor”. Mi vieja estaba de ocho meses cuando la chuparon. Yo nací en el Pozo de Banfield. Una mujer policía se apropió de mí. Como mil veces habré rebobinado la película. Y mi vieja todo el tiempo “Dame el tenedor, dame el tenedor”. Es la única imagen que tengo de ella viva. A la mujer policía no quise verla nunca más, ni para putearla. Si alguien te miente en lo más básico, que es quién sos, de dónde venís, ¿cómo no vas a poner en duda todo lo que te diga? Uno en el fondo sabe. Aunque te mientan, uno en el fondo sabe. Porque no es lo mismo ser de un lugar que parecerlo. A mí me encanta ir los domingos a comer fideos con mi abuela. Van los tíos, los primos. Cada vez que digo “Dame el tenedor”, me río. No sé, es como sentir la presencia de mi vieja. No la ausencia, sino la presencia. (158)

As one can see, this monologue includes a direct reference to the young woman’s origins, establishing where she came from and what family she

belongs to; her mother was abducted, she was born in a clandestine detention center, and (as could be added in the same line of thinking) everything else was a lie. The importance assigned to origins as a central element in the monologue, serves to get around the confusion experienced by the children of the disappeared upon living in anomalous circumstances.

The military apparatus that made people disappear, of which the “concentration camps” were just the tip of the iceberg, implied a suspension of the rule of law.<sup>11</sup> As such, historical events, in this case the birth and appropriation of the children of the disappeared, occurred in an indeterminate legal situation (Agamben 110-11), following which the recently re-established democratic state lacked the conceptual tools needed to deal with the past. The appropriated children lived their lives in that indeterminate situation, and their biological families had to put their faith in the courts of law to one day entitle them to subordinate—which Legendre includes as one aspect of succession—the appropriated children into their biological lineages as descendants of the disappeared. Who exactly do the courts entitle, though, when the parents are disappeared? The trials dusted off the old theological and legal discourses and gave them new life by infusing them with biological metaphors in order to represent the disappearances as a problem of family continuity. The solution to that problem was to enact generational transmission, establishing the empty place of the parents as part of an irreversible and inescapable order. Explaining the importance of that transmission was a task taken up by a team of specialists who were called by the courts as expert witnesses. The experts argued that the descendants were spoken for by their forebears and that, regardless of their individual desires, they should construct themselves as subjects within the space set apart for them, even when the space of their parents is empty, and to find themselves in terms of that space as their origin and their destiny.<sup>12</sup>

This comes across in Muchacha I’s monologue, wherein the abduction of her mother, the circumstances of her birth, and the permanent place (the perceived presence) of her mother establish her origins and at the same time provide the answer to the question, “Who am I?” The monologue tells us that she is the disappearance of her mother, and that she is not the living subject she might otherwise be, since the individual *is* where the individual belongs. This apparently simple idea, that the individual is legitimate insofar as he or she takes the place that biologically pertains to him or her, finds its echo in ancient human orders that establish that individuals “are borne” and are made subjects by their procreators (Legendre 204).

At the same time, there are other identities and subjectivities, or at least social categories, that can be occupied without the enduring presence of one or both of the parents, including the orphan, the child of a single parent, the illegitimate child, and the adopted child. Indeed, some of these potentialities may have been the case (or the ultimate destiny) of some of the appropriated children of the disappeared. Nevertheless, such things may never be known, and, perhaps more importantly, such possibilities are precluded by the weight of the circumstances and the needs of the actors involved.

In essence, the establishment of an identity is an act of power, one that differentiates and makes it possible to conceive of them only as *children of . . .*, even if their parents are not alive. That differentiation seeks to exclude anything that may threaten the identity's coherence (disobedience, forgetfulness, contradictions, incomprehensible elements, the death of the parents, etc.), since dualistic identity is constantly in danger of being destabilized. Thus, returning once again to Muchacha I's monologue, we observe this effort to close off her previous existence: "Yo nací en el Pozo de Banfield. Una mujer policía se apropió de mí [. . .] no quise verla nunca más, ni para putearla" (158). By intentionally separating herself from her life under appropriation, the young woman shields her identity (as a restituted child of disappeared parents) from any possible ambiguity in the narrative of her life.

At the same time, it is not only the relationship with the disappeared parents that obligates the children to construct their identities as such. As I have pointed out, existing social and legal norms recognize the forebears' right to transmit and to speak for their descendants, obligating the latter to take their place as links in the biological-family chain. That transmission belongs, as Legendre points out, to the domain of the unspeakable, meaning that it is not an issue that can be directly addressed, since upon questioning it, the response is always the same; transmission is the "natural way of things." Therefore, it does not refer to a specific content, which may vary from family to family, but rather to the elders' power to subordinate the appropriated children into their disappeared parents' family lineages.

### **Concluding Observations**

At the end of the play, the lights come up and a group of restituted children and members of the Abuelas Association step onto the stage. I find myself applauding fervently along with the audience upon seeing their weary but determined stride, and I am moved by the fortitude in their voices. When they finish a brief personal account of how they became involved in the

movement, the actors and a musical duet prepare the audience for their exit from the theater by singing a few protest songs like “El que no salta es un militar” until they reach the foyer. There, crowded in and overwhelmed by a flood of emotions, we wait for the grandmothers and the actors, as if waiting for some signal. Then we exit to the street and disperse out into the city, each of us going our separate ways.

The play I examine here was intended to be a small contribution to a long process of construction of a singular social subject, the appropriated child of the disappeared. Specifically, it is a social subject developed by the group of specialists who were called to testify as expert witnesses in the courts and who worked as researchers in universities. Their labor has consisted in the collection of evidence that makes that subjectivity inhabitable.

In the play, however, there are no judges or expert witnesses. Rather, the identity of the appropriated children of the disappeared is constructed in terms of “truth.” Whether or not that identity seems inhabitable to any given individual, like Muchacho Pelado, that *is* his identity, while the other thing he believes to be his identity is just a lie. Therefore, each of the appropriated young people has a prefabricated identity waiting for them, somewhere—where they belong—and it is through a search for the truth that they will find it. Muchacho Pelado knows that he is living a lie; he just doesn’t seem to realize that he knows. This is why his discourse falls apart in spite of himself. In a way, Muchacha I attempts to console him, showing him that the space he belongs in is not only the right place for him to be, but also that it is a space of joy and meaning. It is telling that the play begins with the offstage voice asking rhetorically, “Quién soy? Quiénes somos?” It is not a question meant to be answered by the audience, and the voice goes on, without pause, to point out how we all share the same destiny, which can only be one of two things: truth or lies. Furthermore, the question has only one answer. We are *where* we belong.

By assigning such primacy to the individual’s place in the family lineage, the play is unequivocal; one can only be who (or where) one was supposed to be. It is interesting that truth in the play ends up serving the same purpose as well-being in the expert witness testimonies. In the appropriation trials, the psychologists called upon saw the disappeared and their appropriated children as the only victims. The fact that the children did not have the opportunity to construct their identities within their families of origin constituted a trauma to their psyches, and so, the only healthy place for an individual to be is with the family of origin. Although they take different roads, both the play’s Abuelas

and the trials' psychologists arrive at the same basic affirmation, one which furthermore found its way explicitly into the judges' sentences. Whether it is in the children's best interest or because it is the truth, the natural and unquestioned order of genealogy is the only social order possible.

The final step in the process is to make that natural place not only true and right, but also possible. *A propósito* delves into a problematic situation that arose with the appropriation trials, particularly in later years. By the late 1990s, the appropriated children had already grown into teenagers and even young adults. Although twenty-something Muchacho Pelado is not an anomalous case, right-wing sectors of society had raised the question of whether there really still was a case for returning them to their biological families, especially when their parents were dead. Moreover, some of the restitution cases had made headlines when the appropriated children, the very object of the dispute, came forward to argue against their restitution and against the imprisonment of their appropriators. As such, it was the job of the experts, who called into play the discourses of psychology, genealogy, and law, to make the new subjectivity of the children of the disappeared inhabitable. That role is taken up in *A propósito* by the restituted young people, who are evidently written with the experts' discourses in mind.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The following is from a news interview at the end of 2000:

PERIODISTA: ¿Los sorprendió la respuesta del público?

FANEGO: Sí. Nosotros no teníamos conciencia del efecto que iba a causar. Uno de los objetivos más deslumbrantes de esto es el público que lo ha visto, que es en su mayoría adolescente. FRIDMAN: Y la cantidad de gente que se acercó a Abuelas, luego de ver el espectáculo, para buscar información, cuestionándose un montón de cosas. Este año se encontraron siete jóvenes.

PERIODISTA: ¿Se acercó a ver la obra algún chico o familiar que haya sufrido el tema de la sustitución de la identidad?

FANEGO: Sí, muchos. El día de la última función en Recoleta vino una señora a abrazarme a la cabina y a decirme que había encontrado a su sobrino. Cuando me pasan estas cosas me pongo a llorar. Porque siento que lo [he] dicho tantas veces, el teatro como herramienta social, el actor como reflejo y espejo del hombre, el actor como comunicador social, está pasando (Frieria).

<sup>2</sup> Although the events surrounding the appropriation of the children of the disappeared vary, they can be schematically grouped into three general types of circumstances. Some of them were kidnapped at very young ages along with their parents, who were later killed or disappeared, and were placed with

families the dictatorship authorities considered decent. Others were born during their mothers' detention, and were then given away. Lastly, some were left abandoned in public areas, with neighbors, or at public adoption agencies. As mentioned above, a significant proportion of the stolen children were appropriated by families directly or indirectly connected to the military government, especially military officers and police officials or their friends. A small number of babies and young children were also killed during their parents' abduction and murder. Regarding the children placed in adoption, a number of well-known cases involved *Nomen Nescio*, a public institution where babies can be abandoned anonymously, to be subsequently given in adoption. Many of these cases violated the existing laws on adoption, although a few (no more than five) such adoptions did occur in accordance with the law. The children who were left with neighbors went different routes; some of them were immediately returned to their surviving family members, while others were returned with the assistance of the Abuelas Association, and some "remained" with the neighbors. Lastly, some of the children were kept hidden by family members who did not understand or were too afraid following what had happened to the rest of the family.

<sup>3</sup> When the military authorities left government, the constitutionally elected president, Raúl Alfonsín (1983-1989), established the Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas in the first five days of his administration. In less than nine months, the CONADEP had prepared a report, "Nunca Más," (1984) that stated that at least 8,690 people had disappeared during the military dictatorship.

<sup>4</sup> This analysis is based on the dramatic text as well as its initial stage performance at the Ricardo Rojas Cultural Center on June 5, 2000. Rather than analyze the entire play, I will focus on the parts that best exemplify the way the discourses of psychology, genealogy, and law have been integrated into the play.

<sup>5</sup> For further information regarding the establishment of such biological discourses as fundament for judicial decisions, see Abuelas, *Identidad, despojo y restitución* and *Derecho a la identidad*, and Osenda, "Redefining the Abduction of Children."

<sup>6</sup> The belief that reconstructing the disappeared parents' lives would help provide a foundation for the subjectivity of the appropriated children can be observed, for example, in the project known as Archivo Biográfico Familiar. "Desde 1998 y, en colaboración con la Universidad Nacional de Buenos Aires, el archivo de Abuelas reconstruye la vida de los desaparecidos integrantes de los grupos familiares de los hijos secuestrados y/o nacidos en cautiverio durante la última dictadura militar, tanto de aquellos que se encuentran apropiados como los que ya han recuperado su identidad" (Abuelas 2015a).

<sup>7</sup> Fox Keller was the first researcher to point out the importance of metaphors in structuring and legitimating biological studies, as well as the way in which certain metaphors affect the course of that research. In particular, she points out how Claude Shannon's information concept was carried over into the field of molecular genetics, leading to the location of genes in the DNA molecule and their interpretation as the root of both developmental and physiological processes, which assured molecular genetics a privileged place in contemporary biology.

<sup>8</sup> While the legal literature prefers the term "biological truth" to describe blood relations between individuals, one often finds the expression "biological identity" used in the literature on the children of the disappeared in general; "el arrebato de la identidad de los hijos apropiados expone, descarnadamente, el "punto cero" de la identidad: los genes, el ADN, la "identidad biológica", en otras palabras, aquella "mismidad" que desafía la concepción no esencialista abierta a la otredad" (Arfuch 68).

<sup>9</sup> As other studies of the play (Arreche, Botta, Diz) have pointed out, the notion of salvation is a charged one with regard to the military dictatorship, both because there was a belief that appropriation was a way of saving these innocent children from their own families, and also because the coup d'état was represented (by the Junta) as a way to save the nation from subversives.

<sup>10</sup> For some scholars, the baldness represents the lack of a true identity, and the implants represent the falsified identity (Diz 2; Botta 82).

<sup>11</sup> Agamben has pointed out that the "suspension of normality does not imply its abolition, and the zone of lawlessness it institutes does not (or at least does not seek to) totally split from legal order" (59).



<sup>12</sup> As Legendre notes, the “*infans*” of Roman law is the one who does not speak, but rather is spoken for. This conception may seem somewhat antiquated, but it is in fact not far-gone at all, especially if one considers that in the trials over appropriated children, the latter were, for over 25 years, held not as parties to the suit, but as the objects in dispute, such that they were not entitled to speak, even though many of them were of adult age at the time of their trials. In the past five years, they have been allowed to speak as witnesses and to provide specific information (205)

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