

# The Violence Within and the Violence Without: “La noche en blanco” by Reina Roffé

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Sephardic-Argentine author Reina Roffé’s short story “La noche en blanco” or “Sleepless Night” is, on the surface, the story of a young girl named Alicia whose mother suddenly disappears moments after she leaves the child with an elderly neighbor. The old woman reflects on her own traumatic past as she spends the night awake with the young girl who, by morning’s light, may have no one to shelter her from the terrors of the State or the dangers of the street because it seems the old woman will again flee the pain within herself and outside her apartment walls. Although the story partly unfolds through a superficial dialogue between these two characters, third-person subjective narration conveys much of the traumatic imagery and historical information, particularly through the old woman’s internal monologue—an effective strategy for accessing the external world as the violence remembered within brings the violence experienced without into stark relief.

Through Alicia’s brief interaction with the old woman, Roffé constructs an indirect comparison between France and Argentina at two different historical periods in time, both dominated by violent state doctrines or politics that promoted systemic purges of undesirable and divergent “Others.” This juxtaposition of the two chronological periods invites inquiry regarding the association of the traumatic memories of the Holocaust with other historical periods of extreme violence. My analysis posits that a transnational exploration of what I term a “recycled violence,” the traumatic memories engendered by it, and the appearance of the Holocaust as a historical and cultural referent for the Argentine military dictatorship are buried at the heart of the story. The 1976-1983 Argentine military dictatorship practiced several repressive methods, principally forced disappearances, that can

be traced back to practices utilized by the Nazis in the 1930s-1940s, including during the World War II German occupation of France (1940-1944).

After World War II, a considerable number of top and middle rank Nazi officers and other war criminals fled to Argentina. According to Marguerite Feitlowitz, the Argentine intelligence services were revamped by former Nazis, many with expertise deemed useful to Western block countries at the advent of the Cold War. Feitlowitz also states that, in Argentina, “torture was often performed beneath portraits of Hitler whose recorded speeches were blasted through the halls” (57). Thus, a violence connected to the Holocaust is later recycled by the Argentine military dictatorship. I investigate several interconnected transatlantic methods of violence manifest in Roffé’s text through a web of complex associations, including the persistent use of methods derived from the German’s *Nacht und Nebel* or Night and Fog, between an old woman’s traumatic past in Vichy France and a young girl’s trauma-in-the-making in Buenos Aires during the Argentine military dictatorship. My analysis exposes the “recycling” of violence—visible in both the private and historical spheres of the story—and its transnational connectivity through the lens of transgenerational trauma.

The old woman’s inner musings position the reader on the fringes of a violent act somewhere in the Southern Cone in a city that resembles Paris. This textual clue indirectly places the reader in Buenos Aires. The comparison between cities gradually surpasses the superficial level of architectural similarities in Roffé’s text as two time periods identifiable by their mirrored violence come into focus.<sup>1</sup> As the story progresses, further evidence accumulates to pinpoint the time period of the sleepless night. For example, Alicia reads a newspaper article that mentions President François Mitterand (French President 1981-1995) and the old woman makes references to “disappearances” and “war”—textual signs that the diegetic world is the Argentina of the early 1980s or the last period of the Argentine *Guerra sucia* or Dirty War during which the State warred against an “internal enemy” and suppressed or distorted information regarding *los desaparecidos* whom they labeled *subversivos*. Feitlowitz defines the term *desaparecido/a* as “the concept of individuals made to vanish [which] originated with the Nazis, as part of the doctrine of Night and Fog” (59). This practice made individuals simply disappear into the “night and fog”: no trace, no evidence, and thus no provable crime.

A RADIATING VIOLENCE, AN INNOCENT CHILD, AND A  
BELATED TRAUMA

Roffé's short story commences with the delineation of *la mujer del A*, the child Alicia's mother, and *la puerta del B*, where *la vieja* or the old lady lives. As a dialogue is established between the old lady and the child, the plot bifurcates. The result is a narrative consisting of two parallel temporal spheres—Alicia's present in Argentina and the old woman's past in France—each with their own life story, traumatic events, countries, wars, and familial tragedies. As such, the reader is provided with a privileged access to distinct histories of a radiating violence across time as they convene in the old woman's living quarters. The story begins with a sudden arrival: "La mujer del A los había visto llegar. Casi siempre lo hacían a la medianoche, no a esa casa de apartamentos, sino a cualquiera, en cualquier barrio, en cualquier parte de la ciudad. Sólo aquellos que eran buscados, a veces los veían llegar; los demás no querían ver ni oír nada" (Roffé 17). The most prominent aspects of this opening scene and introduction to the woman in Apt. A are that she sees "them" arrive and immediately rushes to Apt. B. "They" appear ubiquitous: they might arrive anywhere at any time. Yet "they" are also non-existent: only those they came for sometimes saw them. All other potential witnesses preferred not to see or hear (17). When two men, recognizable types to the woman in A, get out of the car, she wakes her sleeping child and rushes to ring the doorbell at Apt. B.

As she waits for an answer, mere seconds, the sound of the elevator descending heightens the tension as she clings to her daughter. When the old lady opens the door, Alicia's mother utters her first and last words in the story: "Pase lo que pase, no salga, no llame a nadie. Quédese con la nena nada más por esta noche" (17). In response, the old woman backs up, moves to the side, and the child finds herself alone with her in Apt. B: "Su madre había desaparecido" (17). Thus begins a night of quietly efficient violence, foreshadowed by the past participle *desaparecido*—a word loaded with implications—as the worlds of Apt. A and Apt. B converge. The woman in Apt. A is made to disappear, the young girl is left puzzled but believes her mother will return, and these two events serve as a catalyst for the resurgence of the old woman's turbulent past as she quietly mumbles, not once but twice, "Si esto no es una guerra . . ." (18).<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly, although aware of the danger, the old woman still answers the door and allows

the young child to enter and stay, implicating her in another's tragedy. She both sees and hears.

When the young girl is brought from Apt. A to Apt. B and again when she is first left without her mother in a new apartment with a stranger, she repeats, "¿Qué pasa?" (17). The young girl's disorientation and confusion—likely stemming from her present lack of knowledge concerning the implication of the events occurring outside Apt. B—provides an intriguing textual representation of the belated nature of trauma. The old woman and young girl wait expectantly, frozen, while events unfold outside the apartment, unsure of what will happen next.

Después de esto, ambas, la niña y la vieja, formaron dos siluetas fijas, pétreas, expectantes una de la otra y de lo que iba a suceder, de lo que ya estaba sucediendo. La presencia de los hombres se dejó sentir sin demasiada bulla en el edificio. Fueron certeros, expeditivos. Prescindieron de llamar. Dieron una patada en el A y entraron. La operación fue limpia, rápida. (18)

It is hardly felt by those outside of Apt. A; although the old woman appears to understand, given her comment about war, the young girl initially resorts to denial when she boldly contests the old woman's remark: "La niña, después de beber un sorbo, dijo desafiante: 'Acá nunca hubo una guerra.' La vieja, a la vez, saboreó su elixir, chasqueó la lengua. 'Me lo dijo la maestra, en el cole' se ratificó la niña" (18). Although the violence that claims her mother affects Alicia indirectly, through the loss of her parents, she has yet to fully register it, still frozen and expectant, still denying the existence of a "war." The violence that comes for her mother almost passes her by due to her mother's rapid intervention and the old woman's willingness to open the door. Ironically, through the young girl's unexpected yet temporarily permitted presence in the old woman's apartment, the aftereffects of this sinister violence (Alicia alone, deprived of her parents, and in need of care) spill over into the small space of Apt. B. Despite her ignorance of the events unfolding in the background, Alicia exhibits a keen emotional sense of them when she asks "¿Qué pasa?". She has simultaneously seen and not seen, witnessed and not witnessed, the events surrounding her mother's forced disappearance. As silence

returns to the apartment complex, it swallows up the sounds that had marked her mother's departure, sounds that had only subtly existed in the background: "El silencio persistía como antes de los ruidos que, de cualquier forma, habían sido discretos" (18). The moment of violence seems unreal.

Alicia also intuits the old woman's knowledge of events she knows nothing about when she forcefully states there was never a war. With this defensive statement, she asserts a degree of control by denying events she does not yet fully understand. Unfortunately, this sense of "something" happening and her denial of a "war" will not prevent the chain of events that has been set in motion this night. It does, however, reveal Alicia's underlying resistance in a situation beyond her control. In *Children: Rights and Childhood*, David Archard states, "Indeed, talk of the child's essential innocence is in danger both of being mythic and, ironically, of being sexualised" (105). Although Archard is discussing children/adolescents and the right to sexual choice when he makes this comment, I believe it is pertinent to representations of children as innocent beings in other contexts. For example, literary representations of children as vessels filled with a unique and "essential innocence" can entrap them in passive ignorance that prevents them from making an informed choice based on knowledge of some object, activity, or event.<sup>3</sup> Archard, in his analysis of John Locke, comments "it is not just that children broaden the range of their experiences and thus have more to reason about; it is that their abilities to reason grow as they mature" (5). Alicia's movement between understanding and not understanding could be tied simultaneously to competence related to age, her mother's withholding of the painful knowledge of her father's true fate (hence her lack of full knowledge), and/or the belatedness of traumatic memory (demonstrated in her knowing/not knowing, also a present lack of full knowledge).

I want to focus on a trauma studies reading of the child protagonist's lack of knowledge and experience, which could explain why she denies the old woman's claim of a "war" yet fights to remain awake and alert throughout the night. The following textual examples of her battle against sleep demonstrate *a child on the verge of a traumatic awakening*.

"Será mejor que duermas" [dijo la vieja]. "Ya no tengo sueño" dijo la niña . . . [. . .] La niña empezaba a relajarse.

Bostezó largamente y se estiró con un suave ronroneo de gato. La vieja aprovechó para decirle: “Creo que deberías dormir.” “No, no voy a dormir nunca más en la vida” contestó muy resuelta y volvió a simular que leía el diario. [. . .] “¿Estás intranquila?” [dijo la vieja]. “Un poquito, un poquito bastante” [dice Alicia]. [. . .] “Yo no voy a dormir nunca más en la vida” contestó Alicia con un hilo de voz. Se había recostado envuelta en la manta y luchaba por mantener los ojos abiertos [. . .] “Dormí, Alicia, descansa.” Pero Alicia, desoyéndola, continuó: . . . (18-24).

Based on these instances, I would argue Alicia is demonstrably intuitive emotionally, disturbed and unwilling to sleep, yet on the cusp of some tremendous realization that has not yet come. In choosing to describe Alicia as innocent or ignorant, I am thus referring not to the idea of an untarnished or exquisite quality inherent in her as a child but rather, as mentioned above, to her initial ignorance of the traumatic moment when violent men come to take her mother away (especially in contrast to the old woman’s knowing talk of wars). As such, Alicia’s character represents an *innocent child*, thus far protected by her status as a child, presently innocent in that she is still processing her mother’s sudden departure and is still unaware of the full significance of her father’s disappearance years earlier, evident in her description of the circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

The young girl and her mother returned, after years away, to the city, believing it safe, but not without drastic consequences. The narrator reveals that the men Alicia’s mother saw arrive were unmistakable: “Del coche bajaron dos hombres, eran inconfundibles” (17). Although the mother recognizes the men coming for her due to her prior experience—and full knowledge of—her husband’s disappearance, the child quietly sleeps. At the outset of the story, the girl is depicted as lacking the alertness of one anticipating disaster, unlike her mother who possibly never shared the terrible reality of forced disappearances with Alicia, instead keeping her daughter safely entrenched within the protected realm of childhood (knowing her father was gone yet not knowing his absence was the result of forced disappearance). Alicia now waits in Apt. B with the old woman who, like her mother, realizes precisely what is taking place outside her door. The old woman’s thoughts reveal her understanding of the risk, while Alicia’s present

innocence/ignorance of the violent practices surrounding her tragically represents a delayed knowledge regarding her parents, one with the potential to later haunt her.<sup>5</sup> It also makes the story an indispensable case study in the *belated arrival of trauma*, a belatedness further magnified by the old woman's traumatic memory of a past violence that continues to haunt her.

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth's analyses of Sigmund Freud's works on trauma speak of the actual moment of trauma as being missed, and it is only in its "belated" arrival that one realizes that one saw too late: the post-realization of the now unavoidable tragedy (3-4).<sup>6</sup> In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth defines trauma and traumatic experience as follows:

In its general definition, trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena. Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing, of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness. (91-92)

In this way, the belatedness of trauma refers to a delayed knowledge of the traumatic event, one that arrives *post-factum*. I believe Alicia demonstrates a delayed knowledge of the traumatic in her *not knowing* what has happened. She first wonders this aloud, then remains awake until sleep overpowers her. Regarding the old woman's memories of a war, Caruth describes the surviving of trauma or the aftereffects of it—*living after something horrible yet fully unknown at the moment of its occurrence*—as unbearable. I view the old woman's knowledge of war and suffering (seen as an "unbearable" survival in her later comments) as evidence of her understanding of the violence that befalls Alicia's mother directly and the potential for it to befall herself and Alicia: "[f]ue un error, un exceso de confianza arriesgarse así, poner en peligro a la pequeña y comprometerla a ella . . ." (23).

I would argue that the old woman's knowledge could help shelter Alicia from (or educate her in the workings of) an external world

fraught with dangers: “[l]o sabía, lo había vivido primero con sus padres, luego con los hombres que fueron sus amantes y también en la rue des Saussaies [the street where the old woman was taken to be interrogated and tortured]” (22). Yet will she do so? Roffé may be indirectly implicating bystanders and other civilians as necessary good Samaritans who are left without excuse. This call to assist others is given added weight by the proximity of apartments A and B. In a large urban center, two victims of a similar violence are literally next door to each other, and in the middle of an extraordinary night, the woman from Apt. A reaches out and leaves her child with the stranger in Apt. B in the desperate attempt to save her—yet she, herself, does not ask to stay.

Roffé uses space, both physical (two apartments on the same passageway) and metaphorical (the traumatic/emotional histories of Apt. A & B), to converge two distant periods of violence in the night. Yet, it is unclear whether the old woman will answer the long-term call for responsibility for the “Other.” Lethally efficient “men” drastically alter the course of Alicia’s and her mother’s lives in much the same way the old woman’s life was once radically redirected with the appearance of other “men” smelling of English tobacco: “casi cuarenta años atrás, cuando llegaron con su blanca, impoluta piel quienes la fueran a buscar, allá, en la France de la France, en París” (20). She remembers the other “men,” the Gestapo, and the deadly consequences of their arrival: “¿Dónde la habían llevado primero? Tenía los recuerdos superpuestos. Quizás a la rue des Saussaies, allí interrogaban, allí la Gestapo sumergía a las mujeres en una bañera, antes y después de las preguntas, eran tan pulcros” (20). Alicia and her mother’s present circumstances trigger a series of flashbacks for the old woman. She once had children of her own and a partner, all deceased. She understands the violence directed against Alicia’s mother and could choose to take the child under her wing, permanently if necessary. The War claimed her family, leaving her alone with a gaping wound in her heart, which she unsuccessfully attempted to cover up with whirlwind romances, travel, and over-consumption of cigarettes and liquor. She recalls never regaining the weight she lost during the War and in the German concentration camp (“Su piel se le pegaba a los huesos”) because she was too consumed by her frenetic escape from the traumas of her past (21). Her rail-thin body, dependent on alcohol and cigarettes, and diminished appearance attest to the toll her past has taken over time.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, her efforts to escape the past only led her back to the distinctly terrible and all too familiar violence of state-sponsored terror in a Paris-like city. On a symbolic level (the metaphorical use of space), the old woman's memories expose similar traumatic histories among herself, Alicia, and Alicia's mother. These histories of radical violence increase the women's proximity (more than physical now). The circularity of forced disappearance and torture is again unearthed, again touches former victims even forty years later, again harms the most vulnerable: mothers (separated from their young by illness, hunger, and forced disappearance), the elderly, and children, including orphans-in-the-making like Alicia. In the old woman's flashback to her past encounter with the Germans in Vichy France, the reader witnesses the repetition over time of a horrible violence: Nazi methods of terror resurrected by other "men" in Argentina, also public agents of a national "reorganization" process who likewise invade the micro-sphere of a private residence with violence and impunity.

#### THE MICRO-SPHERE OF THE PRIVATE AS A REFLECTION OF THE MACRO-SPHERE OF THE PUBLIC

The old woman's traumatic memories travel with her to another country and time and testify to the reoccurrence of an analogous violence. Due to this repetition of traumatic memories and violent methods, it becomes evident that the so-called national processes of "reorganization" experienced by the old woman, first in France and later in Argentina, birthed vicious, self-propagating methods of terror. The frightening aspect of these processes lies in an organized violence (whether legalized or extrajudicial) that eventually transcends the State itself: political borders neither limit nor halt extreme violence. The old woman's experiences show that effective, violent methods are recycled. The drastic consequences of enforced "reorganizations" of society are made visible by the horrific systems and practices they spawn: concentration camps, secret detention centers, and forced disappearance for those deemed beyond reform or outside of the sphere of the model citizen body. These policies are even painfully evident in the smallest of private spaces, ones supposedly safe from the controlling reach of institutional power: the old woman's apartment and internal musings, both of which reflect the long-term effects of state-sponsored violence on private lives.

The practices of the Argentine military dictatorship come into sharp focus through the old woman's memories of the Germans in Paris because her violent past illuminates the increasingly sinister portrait of Alicia's present world, including parallel histories of soldiers/men arriving unannounced in the night, the torture and/or forced disappearance of undesirable members of society (militants like the old woman and possibly Alicia's mother), extrajudicial killings or operations, and concentration camps/detention centers. For example, the operation to "kidnap" Alicia's mother is reminiscent of the German's *Nacht und Nebel* in that she is made to vanish into the night, facilitated by the lack of concrete information or "fog" surrounding her disappearance (people knew and yet did not know).<sup>8</sup> Although the story, with the exception of the first half a page, consists of a conversation between an elderly woman and a young girl, the narrative contains many words loaded with significations and either directly or indirectly alluding to violent events: *interrogation(s)*, *operation*, *real war*, *Gestapo*, *questioning*, *concentration camp*, *military gangs over Paris*, *the Resistance*, *the Second World War*, *disappear(ed)*, *torture*, *persecution*, *genocide*, *fanaticism*, *dictators and their assassins* along with many other references to traumatic events and death.

Prior to this night, the old woman's life in Buenos Aires had revolved around her own needs and wants, hidden and seemingly safe from the terrors of the outside world: "[a]hora se hallaba consumiéndose serenamente, sin tiempos, sin fugas, de esa vida íntima construida entre las cuatro paredes de su apartamento que contenían la medida exacta de su deseo: cigarrillos negros, brandy, buena lectura . . ." (21). Safe, that is, until the world found its way into her refuge in the form of a young girl and her endangered mother. Despite her seclusion, the old woman is cognizant of the lessons of the past; she remembers the methods employed in Vichy France, which could be said to have experienced a state of internal siege in that the Vichy government collaborated with the Germans and created its own national process of "regeneration," akin to a "reorganization." Historically, France was occupied by Germany in mid-1940 and divided in two: Vichy France and German-Occupied France (with a small section annexed by the Greater Reich).<sup>9</sup> Although Paris was in the German-Occupied zone, its government was in the town of Vichy, and it was also referred to as Vichy France. Initially, Vichy France was a free zone, a status aided by its collaboration with the Germans. The French administration

headed by Marshal Pétain, who was granted full power of governance, oversaw much of France. He converted the French Republic into an authoritarian regime that stressed “National Regeneration,” terminology strikingly similar to Argentina’s “National Reorganization Process” or *El Proceso* under the military dictatorship. According to Havi Dreifuss, France’s national slogan of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* [Liberty, Equality, Fraternity] was converted into *Travail, Famille, Patrie* [Work, Family, Country] in Vichy France.<sup>10</sup> Dreifuss states that anti-Semitism and other racially (and politically) charged policies were quickly implemented so that in France, and Western Europe in general, positive law became a tool for the Authoritarian State. Legislation was passed to facilitate practice, i.e. as a complement to Germany’s wide-spread practices of deportation to concentration camps, forced disappearances, torture, experimentation, and systematic mass murder.<sup>11</sup> The old woman’s memories, although fictional, represent the painful realities of those denied humane treatment in Occupied and Vichy France.

In Roffé’s short story, the collocation of the old woman’s memories with the behind-the-scenes forced disappearance of Alicia’s mother is yet another instance in which there is opportunity to consider the informative potential of the multidirectional aspects of traumatic memory or, otherwise stated, “. . . collective memory beyond a competitive, zero-sum logic” (Rothberg 178-179). Michael Rothberg’s analysis of a French documentary film from 1961 that addressed both the Nazi genocide and decolonization is demonstrative of the possibilities for one traumatic period to illuminate another.<sup>12</sup> In other words, one traumatic memory has the potential to serve as a catalyst for another memory. In lieu of a competition where there are winners and losers, there are instead collective experiences. “Recognizing the multidirectionality of memory encourages us to pay close attention to the circulation of historical memories in encounters whose meanings are complex and overdetermined, instead of proceeding from the assumption that the presence of one history in collective memory entails the erasure or dilution of all others” (179). In line with Rothberg’s reasoning, I propose that placing traumatic memories of violent practices from the Holocaust alongside the Argentine military dictatorship’s tragic reuse of these same practices (and creation of new traumatic memories) does not have to result in competing histories. It can instead illuminate the shared diegetic experiences of the old

woman and Alicia's mother and lend weight to the ethical imperative of the Good Samaritan to care for Alicia: the obligation (or Biblical injunction) to assist neighbors in need, whether known or unknown.

In *Poder y desaparición: Los campos de concentración en Argentina*, Pilar Calveiro mentions the societal tendency to not want to see, to choose not to see: "No obstante, una buena parte de la sociedad optó por no saber, no querer ver, apartarse de los sucesos, desapareciéndolos en un acto de voluntad" (151).<sup>13</sup> Roffé's text also broaches this rejection of the ethical imperative to assist the other in need: "Sólo aquellos que eran buscados, a veces los veían llegar; los demás no querían ver ni oír nada" (Roffé 17). Calveiro's analysis of a communal state of schizophrenia during the dictatorship (in secret detention centers and in society) manifests how contradictory beliefs and modes of being and doing could co-exist (151). She partly attributes the lack of civilian aid for victims of state terror to a normalization of the repressive apparatus.<sup>14</sup>

La normalización de la tortura en relación con los presos comunes primero y los políticos después permitió que nadie se escandalizara por algo que ya era, aunque desagradable, moneda corriente. La necesidad de exterminar a la subversión, que se inscribía en una lógica guerrera bastante difundida, también era una verdad admitida en amplios sectores de la sociedad. (153)

Immersed within the pervasive logic of the dictatorship, many bystanders felt the forcibly disappeared person must have committed some crime to deserve the violence befalling them (154). In Roffé's story, however, the old woman knows state violence is arbitrary. She realizes Alicia's mother will be gone for more than one night, if she returns at all. Historically, the Nazis and the Argentine dictatorship did more than kidnap or murder; they attempted to wipe out the existence of the "Other."<sup>15</sup> The goal of the obliteration of "offending" members from society was connected to the official state "process of reorganization" per Calveiro, "un proyecto que pretendía desaparecer de una vez y para siempre lo disfuncional, lo desestabilizador, lo diverso" (154). As terrorized bystanders, Calveiro calls society the first prisoner: "A ella [la sociedad] se dirigía en primer lugar el mensaje de terror; ella era la primera prisionera" (154). She allows

for the wide-spread application of terror's consequent effects of self-preservation and assignment of blame to its "victims" because the schizophrenic mechanism of the camp also functioned outside of it (156). Although fear-based paralysis may be understandable and is a medically diagnosable reaction, I would nevertheless argue that it does not negate the ethical responsibility of an entire population, whether terrorized or not, and it does not silence the imperative to assist. Fear and terror certainly complicate the ability to assist, but I do not believe it dissipates. In Roffé's short story, the old woman still opens the door into her private space, even knowing the implications of assisting an outsider. The old woman tells Alicia, "[s]i te dejó [la madre de Alicia] acá es porque confía en mí" (Roffé 22). The question is thus not whether the door opens when it could have remained closed but rather how long the old woman will choose to assist: for one night as agreed, or for a lifetime if necessary. The answer remains ambiguous. In addition to calling for empathy and aid from bystanders, the comparative nature of Roffé's story raises other questions of traumatic representability.

#### QUESTIONS OF REPRESENTABILITY

If Rothberg's stance on multidirectional memory is applied to Roffé's short story, is the violence of the Argentine military dictatorship swallowed up by the long shadow of the Holocaust, an event that is often viewed as unique and unparalleled in time? What is gained in terms of representability when points of interconnectivity and interrelatedness are stressed over traumatic differences? Does Roffé's work, in its demonstrable use of multidirectional strategies, enhance the representation of the traumatic? Although I have proposed that distinct, traumatic memories can be illuminating in a text like Roffé's, it is still important to address the unique place the Holocaust has come to hold in traumatic discourses.

In "La noche en blanco," the old woman is herself a survivor of torture and concentration camps who recognizes the congruence between the past and present. As a survivor and victim of the Holocaust, she can feasibly form connections between her past experiences and her present circumstances. Her internal monologue primarily concerns Paris, not the camps themselves—although she mentions the hunger, her loss, and a period of torture by the Gestapo in Paris. The old woman's traumatic memories of detention and

torture are composed of sensations or corporal memories. These sensorial representations of an *unrepresentable* and unspeakable terror fall in line with the fragmentation associated with traumatic memories. The old woman's internal monologue reveals, "De los detalles no guardaba memoria, sólo sensaciones: la escandalosa galería de ecos, la visión arrebatadora de los subsuelos percutidos de sangre, un ritmo vertiginoso de cascada, cayendo, retornando, y la clausura de sus labios hinchados de apretarlos" (22). These corporal memories arise upon the old woman's encounter with the recycled violence of forced disappearance. This familiar violence is more than a personal haunting of past traumas; it becomes real again with the presence of Alicia in her apartment. It reminds her (of her own), "Sesenta y dos años de un siglo que sumaba hambrunas, persecuciones, genocidio, fanatismo, necedad, delirio. El mundo era eso: una factoría incesante de estupidez y horror" (22-23). The old woman's traumatic experience spans from the Holocaust to the Argentine military dictatorship revealing a trajectory of violence that highlights the world's continued production of stupidity and horror—a like terror providing common ground. Regardless of the commonalities of violent methods and traumatic memories, the representability of the Holocaust and other traumatic events, which are often tied to the Holocaust as the exemplum of the unspeakable, continues to be problematic for many theorists and historians.

Joshua Hirsch explores problems and opportunities created by representations of the Holocaust (as historical, individual, and familial trauma) in cinema. Although his study focuses on film, I would extend his concepts to other literary or pictorial representations. In his introduction to *Afterimage*, Hirsch recalls that "debates among philosophers and critics on the limits of Holocaust representation date most notably to 1949, when Theodor Adorno wrote his now famous dictum, 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'" (4). These debates are far from closed cases; they still provoke contention and further debate, evinced by a return in contemporary literature and film to the Holocaust as a cultural/historical referent. I would argue this return to the Holocaust, which resounds in and informs the diegetic present of "La noche en blanco," is yet another example of a reopening of the debates on the representability of traumatic events.

Hirsch explores the various limitations of key debates on representability by addressing the implications of the Holocaust as "the

exception” and the idea that witnesses’ memories are connected to essential truth.<sup>16</sup> He discounts the ability to access essential truth through the discourse of the witness as it is utilized in historical representations and further emphasizes the limitations of historical representation by invoking semiotic laws of representation.<sup>17</sup> “All historical representation is, rather, limited in at least three ways: by signification (the ontological difference between the reality and the sign, including the memory-sign), by documentation (limited documentation of the past), and by discourse (limited framing of documents by the conventions of discourse)” (5). And, I would argue that the limitations mentioned by Hirsch also apply to literary representations because they too may be shaped by signification, documentation, and discourse. In my opinion, there is a great difference in viewing the two parallel diegetic stories in Roffé’s text in light of Hirsch’s statements regarding the limitations of historical representation versus other Holocaust theorists like Elie Wiesel, known for his claim that the Holocaust is unique and unrepresentable. If one follows Wiesel’s line of thought, then the old woman’s trauma in “La noche en blanco” could be considered unique in a way that the young girl’s trauma-in-the-making could not be, i.e. its authenticity could not be validated by the same criteria. A claim of uniqueness and unrepresentability would situate the Holocaust and the Argentine military dictatorship in a position of competition that might privilege one over the other. If, however, we adhere to Hirsch’s line of reasoning, then the two parallel histories of trauma may be historical or literary representations limited in many of the same respects yet flexible in their interactions, more in line with Michael Rothberg’s multidirectional memory.<sup>18</sup>

In cases like Roffé’s short story, as previously stated, defining memory in this way facilitates equative comparisons between devastating events. Although multidirectional memory can provide room for new perspectives vis-à-vis traumatic experiences, there are no easy answers to questions regarding the representability of trauma or the comparison of the Holocaust with other mass traumas. Many scholars in Holocaust Studies, Genocide Studies, and Witness Film/Literature have attempted to think through such issues; yet, regardless of the answerability of these philosophical quandaries, intellectuals like Michael Lazzara strongly support the attempt to represent and testify of the seemingly unrepresentable and non-addressable natures of private and mass historical traumas.<sup>19</sup> I propose that Roffé’s text,

whether intentionally or not, does just this. Through an old woman's traumatic memories, her interactions with a young girl and her endangered mother, and the juxtaposition of two historically violent periods of time, the text addresses the intersectionality and the multidirectionality of private and mass historical traumas. This multifaceted approach permits a more in-depth analysis of traumatic experiences that would otherwise appear distant in time and space.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Calveiro's work on *el dispositivo concentracionario* and the rationalization of kidnappers and torturers during the Argentine military dictatorship also examines the process of victimization. Once a person was labeled subversive, this categorization covered over all manner of sins committed in the name of saving the nation. Reiterating Calveiro's statement, "El Otro que construyeron los militares argentinos, que era preciso encerrar en los campos de concentración y luego eliminar, era *el subversivo*. Subversivo era una categoría verdaderamente incierta" (90). In Roffé's text, because the State deems it necessary to conduct an operation to "take" Alicia's mother, her child is exposed to radical violence within her private sphere. Being a child will not protect her from societal "reorganizations" or classifications, not when exceptions and emergencies are justified and naturalized daily. Violence spider webs out, and there is nothing but uncertainty when impunity reigns. One day, the child may know this, but knowing will not change a thing: traumatic knowledge cannot change the past.

The consequences of Alicia's belated knowledge have yet to be determined, but perhaps that lack is also the point. The unknown and untold aspects of the story are the necessary absence that point the reader to present absences or *forcibly disappeared people* in Argentina and a continuity with the violent practices of the past.<sup>20</sup> The cyclical nature of trauma and violence, as they resurface in the old woman's memories of the Holocaust and Vichy France—traumas not safely buried in the past or diminished by the passing of time—demonstrate that the unknown, belated, and failed aspects of the young girl's present witnessing will likely resound in the future memory-scape of someone else's "missed" moment. When violence is again recycled, this process has the potential to repeat itself *ad infinitum*.

The reader does not know if Alicia will be appropriated by citizens loyal to Videla's brutal dictatorship, if she will be abandoned by

the old woman, or if she will survive to grow up as another victim of state terrorism, as reclusive as the old woman after the loss of her loved ones. Whatever the circumstances (in the hypothetical diegetic future), I propose that on a symbolic level the young girl represents the *hidden costs* of violent societal “reorganizations” and the unique perspective of the child witness, of the innocence/ignorance that is somehow tied to the belated arrival of trauma. In line with traumatic belatedness, the naivety of the moment when violence strikes is potentially what leaves a deep and lasting impression on the mind—hence the persistence of traumatic memory. The perforation/trauma is such that it remains hidden until some also unknown time when it makes its presence known for certain, and this knowing after the fact is terrible, haunting, like the memories of the old woman’s children who she thinks are perhaps better off dead than living to know. Alicia, unlike the old woman’s children, may live to experience the belated arrival of the traumatic disappearance of her parents, but the reader can only hypothesize about her future memories and actions. For the duration of one sleepless night, she senses, through her puzzled questions and without realizing it, the workings of a recycled violence. Alicia, as the third generation, is vicariously exposed, in a different location and time than the old woman, but it is, nevertheless, the same scene and victimization: Men who arrive in the darkness of night, their peculiar smells, the fear and desire “not to know” in the air, the efficiency of violence preceding forced disappearances. The repetition of violence across generations—through the old woman, Alicia’s mother, and Alicia—takes on a necessary and unexpected complexity in Roffé’s text as paths converge on a night in which a former and a very present trauma are concurrently remembered, experienced, and not known.

Graciela Ravetti envisions a much happier ending for both the old woman and young girl in her analysis of childhood and travelling as critical metaphors at work in Roffé’s collection of short stories. She posits that the old woman saves Alicia by taking her to France: “. . . atravesar el océano para que la niña quede fuera del alcance de los brazos de hierro de la dictadura y para que la anciana vuelva a su lugar de origen, aquel donde se inició su odisea, el puerto seguro donde podrá, nuevamente, ejercer el papel de madre dadora, de benefactora” (70). However, I have argued that opposing forces are at work, ones that expose a rupture or trauma-in-the-making, and in lieu of a scenario of post-traumatic growth as the night unfolds, an

ancient pain or surplus of traumatic memory for the old woman is unveiled that may prevent Ravetti's positive resolution from coming to be. Regardless of the hypothetical final resolution of the story, I believe it provides an effective example of the ways in which the interconnectivity and interrelatedness of traumatic experiences can enhance representability. The story also provides a compelling reason for the use of child protagonists in reconstructing past stories of violence: their actual or assumed lack of experience neatly highlights the shadowy passing of a traumatic moment known too late.

## Notes

1. On a structural level, Buenos Aires is often compared to Paris because of its streets and buildings constructed by the *Generación del Ochenta* (1880) and the *Generación del Centenario* (1910). Many areas were modeled after Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann's architectural designs in Paris.

2. The English translation of the old woman's remark is more emphatic. She states, "This is a real war" (Roffé "Sleepless Night" 112).

3. Archard discusses John Locke's views on the child as a *tabula rasa* or blank slate, i.e. the human mind at birth is free of innate ideas, viewpoints, etc. Locke, if he did indeed mean to frame knowledge and rationality as incremental (Archard's interpretation), would fall in line with contemporary restrictions for children and Children's Rights based on age, competence, and the like (3). This proposition is supported by Archard's discussion of Locke's *Thoughts* where capacities are tied to age.

4. When the old woman questions Alicia regarding her father—"¿Cuánto hace que desapareció?"—Alicia explains, "Mamá y yo estábamos en la playa, cuando volvimos papá se había ido. Yo era chiquita, pero me acuerdo. Había un despelote en la casa, todo tirado. Entonces, regresamos a la playa, pero no a la misma, sino a otra, y después nos fuimos a las sierras" (Roffé 22).

5. The old woman internally criticizes Alicia's mother, "Ya se habían cobrado una víctima de la familia, el padre de la niña, para qué iban a querer otra. Fue un error, un exceso de confianza arriesgarse así, poner en peligro a la pequeña y comprometerla a ella, que no quería saber nada más de batallitas" (23).

6. Otherwise stated, ". . . trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 3-4).

7. The old woman remembers, “Había viajado de un país a otro, había saltado de una cama a otra, había hecho el amor hasta el desvanecimiento, había huido con el cuerpo, con la mente, siguiendo a sus amantes a cualquier sitio sin ninguna convicción mas [sic] que la de dejarse ir. . . . Sólo por cansancio, por pereza, por el ancho océano entre una orilla y otra, se afincó donde estaba, en esa ciudad del cono sur que se parecía a París, que empezaba a dolerle como París en guerra” (my emphasis) (21).

8. The men’s unannounced arrival also employs elements of surprise and disorientation, both methods honed during the German’s earlier success with the *Blitzkrieg* or Lightning War.

9. For a mapping of Vichy France, see “The Holocaust: The French Vichy Regime,” a map provided in the *Jewish Virtual Library*.

10. Information obtained from “The Holocaust – An Introduction (I): Nazi Germany: Ideology, the Jews, and the World,” an educational module or course created by Tel Aviv University and Yad Vashem (established 1953), Israel’s official memorial/museum for the victims of the Holocaust.

11. Before genocide was legally defined, the term *mass murder* was often employed. The word “genocide” was not coined until 1944 by Raphael Lemkin who strove to define it in legal terms. His quest was finally fulfilled when the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in December of 1948. When it took effect in January of 1951, the Nuremberg Trials had already concluded.

12. Rothberg postulates, “The juxtaposition in *Chronicle of a Summer* [French documentary film] of the memory of the Nazi genocide and the history of decolonization provides an opportunity to *rethink the ‘unique’ place that the Holocaust has come to hold in discourses on extreme violence*” (my emphasis) (178-179).

13. Calveiro is a scholar, Argentine concentration camp survivor, and human rights activist.

14. The normalization of violence and the bureaucratic routinization of the methods that facilitate this violence was initially discussed by Hannah Arendt.

15. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt states, “The Nazis, with the precision peculiar to them, used to register their operations in the concentration camps under the heading ‘under cover of the night (*Nacht und Nebel*).’ The radicalism of measures to treat people as if they had never existed and to make them disappear in the literal sense of the word is frequently not apparent at first glance, because both the German and the Russian system are not uniform but consist of a series of categories in which people are treated very differently” (442).

16. “The assertion of absolute unrepresentability, while appealing as a response to the terrible sense of otherness that seems to characterize the

Holocaust, implies both a rule of representational transparency to which the Holocaust is the exception, and an assertion of an essential truth of the Holocaust known only to witnesses” (Hirsch 5).

17. Hirsch declares, “Following Hayden White and others, on the other hand, I would argue that no historical representation gives access to essential truth, not even the memories of witnesses” (5).

18. Rothberg, in addressing what he deems a flawed conceptual framework for analyzing the relationships among memory, identity, and violence, demonstrates the difference between *competitive memories* and *multidirectional memories*: “Against the framework that understands collective memory as *competitive* memory—as a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources—I suggest that we consider memory as *multidirectional*: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not private” (3).

19. In *Prismas de la Memoria: narración y trauma en la transición chilena*, Michael Lazzara argues, “Yo avanzaría la hipótesis de que el reconocer las imposibilidades del testimonio no debe ser considerado como una derrota sino como un desafío; no como un llamado al silencio, sino como un llamado a las armas, un punto de arranque para realizar actos de revisionismo histórico (si tomamos este término en su sentido más positivo). La noción de lo imposible pone en primer plano, a la fuerza, la urgente necesidad en las sociedades post traumáticas de dar testimonio de manera insistente e incesante, debido a la magnitud y el carácter inagotable del desastre” (240).

20. According to Caruth, in medical terminology, trauma is also a physical wound, e.g. an open flesh wound—a meaning that stems from the Greek definition of trauma (on which the English and the German versions are based), which originally referred to an injury inflicted on a body. It later came to also signify “a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (3). This association with wounds—as well as missed moments in time (due to trauma’s belatedness)—ties trauma to “absence” (*a still unknown trauma is unknowingly present*).

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