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Cover Page Footnote

Argentine leftist guerrilla groups included, the Peronist party and other network of montoneros, such as Las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias, and the Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo, among others.

After years of disputes concerning military repression and social restitution, Nestor Kirchner resurfaced a political discourse about human rights violations to a younger, more eager generation. His goal as Argentina's President-elect was to mobilize political support from a younger generation of individuals who would support their parents' Peronist political efforts from the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. In doing so, Kirchner attempted to engage with those who regarded themselves as the primary victims of the political unrest that took place during Argentina's military dictatorship between 1976–83. At the time, Kirchner's approach, as Cecilia Sosa highlights, was to embrace "the position of the victim" (18), as he cast himself as a member of the "wounded family" (18). In doing so, Kirchner showed that the "lineage of loss was not only restricted to those who had been 'directly affected' by violence but could be inhabited by those who, for some reason, assumed mourning as a personal commitment" (18). In doing so, Kirchner inaugurated a "new era of 'happiness'" (19), which involved a seeking-out of political restitution for victims and their families. The impact of this political rejuvenation project presented the President-elect as a "father figure" to a younger generation of supporters, particularly those who were victims of political unrest as children of leftist guerrilla activists. Kirchner's effort to impart his leftist ideology resulted in a prevalent theme in Argentine literature, namely the stories of children who, like their parents, took part in the armed struggle of the 1970s, an experience that rendered "the figure of the militant the centre of their explorations" (Garibotto 261). The autobiographical narratives of such individuals (re)imagine and (re)think the ways in which the children of the militant left remember their undercover lives during the so-called "Dirty War" (1976–1986). Growing up under Argentina's military dictatorship as children of the persecuted left, these individuals embodied the demand for survival. A central feature in their autobiographical narratives is the recollection of behaviors, performances, acts of resistance and protection, pretending, disguise, and the creation of new identities. Therefore, encapsulated in their narratives is the notion of performing childhood as a political task as a mechanism used for the protection and survival of left-wing activist groups. The execution of these acts of performance resulted in the expectation that the child stays in character at all times in every aspect of his/her life.

In its various manifestations, performance has been studied both in theory and in practice. Yet in a dramaturgical approach, the idea of performance comes from an interdisciplinary field of research that draws on the central element of social interaction that is linked to everyday life and the actors on stage who perform different roles in society. In the late 1950s, Erving Goffman, in his book *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1956), suggested that people presented themselves as actors on a stage. Goffman's approach suggests that individuals maintain a highly encoded "front" or the "appearance and manner" (24) by which a performer conveys a certain message. I use *performance*, in terms of Erving Goffman, to offer a look at the social interaction and the social roles children assumed in everyday situations during Argentina's dictatorship. Their performances can be seen in the way children dressed, in the way they spoke both inside and outside the walls of their own home, by the tone of their voice, and by the demeanor presented to a target audience—the military. By adopting a performative approach to the study of childhood militancy, it is possible to conclude that child survivors attempted to pursue a character assigned to them to act out and perform as a way to deviate from the lurking eye of those persecuting them.

In her work on the spectacle of gender and nationalism in Argentina, Diana Taylor proposes that “people were not only exposed to surveillance by the armed forces, they internalized the surveillance, monitoring themselves to ensure that they were acting correctly [...] Argentineans were assigned to spectatorship—watching themselves, looking up to (or out for) the military scrutinizing others” (94). According to Taylor, the “authentic national being” demanded that people feel “Argentine” by identifying with their performance of national identity (93). This meant that to survive the brutal context of the military dictatorship, the performance of social patriotism for the regime became an essential tool for survival for innocent civilians. This arrangement allowed for subversive behavior to take place in secret. For militant groups, the use of a front was a key element of disguise in preventing the military from uncovering subversive individuals. As such, members of the militant left mocked the systematic abuse of the military regime by forging false identities and continuing to deploy their militant agenda while undercover and in disguise.

In keeping with this approach, the young children of militant parents were taught to camouflage themselves and observe the “other” and his/her surroundings as a means of protection. The rigid control of the authoritarian regime made people feel like strangers in their city, as they had to learn to “read” other’s bodies and became increasingly alert to the danger around them (*Disappearing Acts* 107). Taylor addresses this issue in her theatrical approach, suggesting that

everyone was performing. Everyone was trying to look the part that offered them security and relative invisibility (if they wanted to stay out of the fray) or access and information (if they were somehow involved). Even those who did not participate in the political struggle, but who wanted to affect some kind of social change, found that they too had to dress up. (*Disappearing Acts* 109)

As Diana Taylor argues, everyone had to dress up, including, to some extent, even young and innocent children, who were expected to comply with and meet societal expectations. Children were required to adopt a defensive strategy of self-discipline and proper appearance, while maintaining a sense of normalcy amidst the political front, which included audiences such as soldiers, policemen, the right-wing opposition and those closest to them, including family members, friends, and neighbors.

To understand the characteristics of performance within Alcoba’s autobiographical narrative, it is imperative to first understand that children were placed into a secular and clandestine state where they learned to maneuver in an extensive network of deceit. For children of militant parents, this secular space is known as *la clandestinidad*. In Spanish, the term is used as an action to show a transitional movement from one social status to the next as in *passing* into a clandestine state or *pasar a la clandestinidad*. In a similar vein, the transition into *la clandestinidad* can be described in terms of the *rite of passage* coined by Arnold Van Gennep. Van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage* (1960) has shown that the *rites of transition* are marked by three transitory phases: the separation, the transition (limen), and the incorporation. In the first stage, the subject or individual is “detached” from an earlier fixed state or condition. The passenger then passes over to the second phase—the limen. This phase, according to Victor Turner, is a “sacred space and time [set aside] from profane or secular space and time” (24); it is a moment beyond

normality or, as Turner has noted, “Beyond or outside time.” It is a type of limbo where ritual subjects are detached “from their previous social statuses” (24). For Richard Schechner, the limen is the ‘between and betwixt’ of two successive events. In the third phase, the person is then incorporated or reintegrated back into society, with a different level of understanding of the social order that had been previously turned upside down. The reintegrated state “usually represents an enhanced status, a stage further along life’s culturally prefabricated road” (25). This secular space and time allowed children of militant parents to transition in and out of *la clandestinidad*. Yet it is in this space where the idea of performance takes place because children had the ability to travel to from secrecy performing as though the world underground did not exist.

For children of the militant left, performance became a complex mechanism to ensure their survival. Children were no exception to the military’s disappearance of people, and therefore children had to fight alongside their parents, abiding by the strict demands for behaviors not necessarily natural to their child-like persona. Their highly encoded performances demanded that children assume new names and new identities and frequently alternate between identities in a complex act of pretending. Children thus had to learn to impersonate others and disguise themselves while being hunted down by the military. Their new life undercover demanded that children maintain an innocent stance of “not knowing” what was happening with the world around them and disengaging from activities that would signal that they were the children of subversive parents. They had to live under new and unfamiliar rules and in confined spaces where the rhetoric of enclosure and limitations restricted their every move. This idea of performing both childhood and militancy is evident in the ways in which children interacted with others and displayed an innocent-child persona to those around them. It entailed (re)thinking and (re)constructing behaviors to fit the expectations of active militant members in private life while deceiving others in public life.

In this paper, I focus on the performative behaviors described by Laura Alcoba in her autobiographical memoir *The Rabbit House* (2008). This work belongs to a canon of cultural productions that focus on the lives of child survivors: children of the disappeared, childhood victims, illegally appropriated children, and children forced to live a precarious life of militancy. Included in this body of work are texts such as *Los topos* (2008) by Felix Bruzzone, *Soy un bravo piloto de la nueva China* (2011) by Ernesto Semán, *Diario de una princesa montonera –100% Verdad* (2012) by Mariana Eva Pérez, and Lucila Quieto’s photographic essay entitled “Arqueología de la ausencia de Lucila Quieto” (2001). This body of work also includes numerous films, such as Marcelo Piñeyro’s *Kamchatka* (2002), Gastón Biraben’s *Cautiva* (2003), Julia Solomonoff’s *Hermanas* (2005), and Benjamin Avila’s stunning debut of *Infancia Clandestina* (2011). Undergirding all these works are the first-hand experiences of children who endured the risks of political action on account of their parent’s militancy during the period of the dictatorship. Alcoba’s memoir, like many contemporaneous writings and films, emerged from a younger generation of victims who are now in their mid to late forties. This generation has been excavating and processing painful memories of what it was like to be the child of leftist militants. Many of these children recall being displaced and relocated into the trenches of a “no-man’s land.” And like Alcoba, whose new home “was far from the city centre” (Alcoba 5), and who recalls “going underground,” or, as she states, “we are to live in hiding” (7), this younger generation of victims recalls being removed often from familiar

spaces and taken into hiding as a result of their parents' efforts to combat the Argentine junta.

Prior to Alcoba's memoir, as Jordana Blejmar describes, little was known about "the daily lives of militant families living in clandestine existences, or about how children the age of Alcoba when she went into hiding experienced isolation, persecution and repression, only half understanding what was going on around them" (108). Like many children of persecuted parents, Laura's narrative describes a young seven-year-old child left alone to fend for herself. The young child is placed with strangers who care for the child while her father is a political prisoner and her mother enslaves herself at the clandestine printing press, which was disguised as a breeding house for rabbits, as the title of the memoir suggests. Alcoba's autobiographical work portrays how the child takes upon herself the responsibility of protecting the operative group from the outside world. She, alongside her fellow combatants, is asked to keep herself isolated from the outside world. However, Alcoba's status as a young child allows her to go back and forth as a member of society. She thus continues to go to school and is able to visit her father and other members of her family. Jordana Blejmar's describes this, stating:

The narrator is able to go through one world to the other and come back again. She can go to school and pretend that she is just another little girl among her peers. At the same time, she is asked to perform militant activities such as helping the group package *Evita Montonera* or keep guard in the house. She moves from one reality to the other because her position is different from that of the other members of the house: "no one is searching for me. I just happened to be here, witnessing everything." (98)

Without a doubt, the child's unique experience is also questioned by the young protagonist: "if we are to live in hiding, how will I go to school?" (7). Her status as a child allows her to transition between *la clandestinidad* in the rabbit house and a socially active member of society. She understands that the demands of secrecy entitle a set of performative behaviors. Alcoba not only witnesses the effects of war but also takes part in performative behaviors of militancy, assuming the role of an active character who considers herself a *militante comprometida*—or a *pequeña combatiente* (Blejmar 98). As a child, she must reckon with the clash between her natural innocence as a blameless victim and her desire to pursue adult behaviors.

From the beginning of her journey, Alcoba remembers becoming a valuable commodity of the left-wing party. As the narrative illustrates, the child quickly realizes that, because of the constraints of being underground, she must act differently because things "are very different" with her, as she claims "I am big" and declares,

I may be only seven years old, but everyone says I already talk like a grown-up. It makes them laugh that I know the name of Firmenich, the head of the Montoneros, and even the words of the Peronist Youth Chant off by heart. They have explained to me everything. I have understood and I will obey. I won't say a word. Even if someone hurt me. Even if they twisted my arm or burnt me with an iron. Even if they drove nails into my knees. I have understood how important it is to keep quiet. (10)

This brief introduction alludes to the child's understanding of her role in secrecy. She knows from the beginning that she must take greater risks, and thus adopts an entity constructed on militant-like attributes. She begins to take on behaviors not necessarily genuine to her child-like persona because she knows that "there are some people who have become very dangerous [...] who kidnap militants such as my parents and kill them or make them disappear. So, we have to keep ourselves safe" and essentially to "retaliate" (7). Clearly the child includes herself as part of this massive militant effort to bring down the military regime. Her inclusion as a *compañera* in the operative group is evidence of how the child sees herself and the parameters by which she has "learn[ed] to keep ourselves safe"(7), by learning to impersonate, pretend, and manipulate behaviors that are not genuinely part of her child-like persona but rather those necessary for protection. The child understands that, although she is much younger, she has a different role to play in the war, thus calling attention to her adult-like performance. It is upon these militant behaviors that the young child begins to learn the Peronist Youth Chant and claims to have learned the name of Mario Eduardo Firmenich, the founding father and leader of the guerrilla group in 1970. In fact, like all loyal militants, she has learned to obey blindly. This blind obedience becomes an important aspect of Laura's character, as the child quickly takes upon herself an oath of silence, saying, "I mustn't say a word" (9) if she is ever caught—claiming that she will be able to endure the pains of torture: the twisted arms, the burnt bodies, or even having nails driven into her knees. The child's inability to comprehend the morbid characteristics of surviving as a prisoner in the hands of the military evinces her child-like persona.

The explicit nature of performance in the memoir is also apparent in the child's attempts to hide her secret identity. At one point in the memoir, Alcoba remembers being "on the alert" (16) as she walked to her grandmother's home. She recalls, "We stop several times on the way, to check whether anyone is following us. It's just a matter of habit." She continues, writing, "Often, it's me who checks behind. It's more normal for a child to stop and turn around" (16). Notably, the child's behavior in this scene coincides with her understanding of the political situation. She states, "in an adult, it could be deemed suspicious behavior, proof of nervousness, and might attract action. But I have learnt to make these checks into a game. I do the little hops, clap my hands, and jump right around, both feet at once" (16). In this scene, it is evident that the young protagonist's behaviors depend largely on strategic mechanisms used for survival, as she maneuvers in disguise through the public sphere.

The most intriguing scene in the memoir is the child's first encounter with other children. As the narrative illustrates, Alcoba encounters two young brothers roughly her age. Like her, these young boys are children of militant parents. Notice how Alcoba detaches herself from her innate, child-like persona as she compares her own knowledge and skills to those of the other children:

I play with them a bit, games that are completely new to me. The three of us never talk about what is going on, or about living underground – did someone explain to them, as they did to me? – or about the war that we are immersed in, despite the city being full of people who aren't taking part, and who sometimes don't seem to realize that it's even happening. If they're just pretending not to

realize, they're doing a very good job. We don't talk about the fear, either. They ask no questions – not about what I'm doing here, at their house [...] It's incredibly reassuring that these questions don't exist, that they are tactful enough to spare me (34).

In this scene, it is apparent that Laura is taken away by the children's ability to immerse themselves in the most natural experience of child play. The boys interact with one another, focused on their instinctive child-like roles as they play. Nevertheless, young Alcoba admits that, although the city is not talking about the political turmoil nor what is happening with the crisis itself, there is something ambiguous about the boys' character, even though there is nothing bizarre about the situation.

Alcoba understands that there are roles that need to be played. She is aware of her role as a militant child and is confused by the other children's deep concentration in the game. She questions, claiming that "to tell the truth, I am copying the younger boy, who is doing exactly the same thing as me [...] I don't really understand the point of this game, but I want to show willing, so I apply myself as best I can" (35). Notice how Alcoba is trying to copy what the other boys are doing, but she is unable to apply herself because the conventional behaviors of childhood have become foreign to her. As Victor Turner would say, her social order has "been turned upside down" (Turner 27). Alcoba is caught looking at herself through the mirror image of the other children, who are doing "exactly the same thing" (35). Yet the young protagonist is disoriented by the fact that they are "pretending not to realize" (35) the political distress that is dismantling entire operational groups because of "the war [they] are immersed in" (35). She finds it astonishing that the boys remain outside the liminal space without engaging in political affairs. This, of course, becomes for Alcoba the ludic upside-down world she does not understand. In fact, Jordana Blejmar describes these two parallel worlds as "the ordinary world with streets full of people who 'aren't taking part [in the war], and sometimes don't seem to realize that anything is happening,' and the underground world, where everything takes place in a different time and with a different logic to that ruling the outside world" (98). Alcoba is not like the other children, who "don't seem to realize [what is] happening" (Alcoba 34), she is aware of her circumstances and ability to travel between both worlds.

Alcoba's inability to break the barriers between her innate self and the performances she must execute as a young militant is also evident in the relationship she has with the engineer who comes to the home where young Laura and her mother are staying to "start work on our massive hole" (41). The two form an interesting and non-normative bond together. The child spends a great amount of time observing the older man as he works on this giant hole. Infatuated with the engineer's impressive amount of talent to "dream up the secret room that is being built at the far end of the shed" (45), the young child develops an array of feelings for the man. Laura becomes intrigued by the complexity and hand-craftsmanship of the *embute*, which is "one of the most complex ever built" (45). As the narrator remembers, this "mechanism controls the opening and closing of a large concrete door, giving access to the hidden printing press" (45). The engineer shows the child the details of his masterpiece with an egocentric fascination. Yet, what I find interesting about this relationship is the admiration radiating from a seven-year-old, which seems to have awakened her erotic fascination for the man. Her behaviors around him begin to change: "I was trying to behave like an adult, a

militant, the lady of the house, but I should have known I am young, so young, so incredibly young, and that if the Engineer seemed to have enjoyed our conversations, it was because I was always there" (49). Note the terms that Alcoba uses to describe her performance, writing that as a child she had tried to become "an adult," "a militant," and even "the lady of the house" to impress and relate to the older man. Her erotic interest in the engineer allows her to see herself as a colleague entangled in militant roles. The child feels as though she is part of the world of firearms and secrecy associated with the adults in the house. However, she recognizes that she is incredibly young, as though this was a shortcoming in her inability to fulfill the obligatory roles.

The child's inability to break away from her child-like roles is a prevalent theme throughout Alcoba's memoir, even though the child professes to "have understood" (10), as mentioned above. Her inability to perform adult-like skills of survival is evident in her relationship with the engineer. In a subsequent scene, the child pulls out an old camera, which she claims was a gift from her aunt. Laura uses the camera to place a barrier between her and the older man as she begins to spy on and observe the man. She uses the camera as a shield to protect herself from being caught, stating, "I am glad to have a camera: it will allow me to look at him without staring like an idiot. I feel a bit protected, behind the camera. I would like him to look at me, too, see me differently at last, with my grown-up instrument" (51). Invested in this childlike experience, the child makes a "little noise, a 'click' to attract his attention, flashing him a big smile from behind the black box obscuring my face" (51). The intensification of the scene emerges when the angry engineer bursts furiously into the room and snatches the camera from the child's hands screaming, "this is not funny, not funny at all! You know we can't take photos, for God's sake! This isn't some holiday camp!" (52). He continues to question the child's actions stating, "We are all very keyed up, you do understand that, don't you?" (51). The child's lack of understanding of the military's methods for eradicating subversives, communists, and opposing parties is the result of her innate child innocence. The engineer, however, reacts furiously, regarding the child's game as pueril and immature, even though her actions are in keeping with someone of her age.

Memoirs like *The Rabbit House* transform the image of childhood from one of passivity, docility, submissiveness, and innocence to a more dynamic image in which children act as fellow combatants alongside their parents. Laura Alcoba's memoir exemplifies the traumatic memories of children of left-leaning militant parents in the 1970s and 80s. Attention to the role of performance in the memoir amplifies the intimate and secluded space of the *in-between*, thus illustrating the critical need for survival. Most importantly, the memoir highlights the child's self-defensive militant behaviors, which are forms of discipline necessary for ensuring the survival and protection of operative groups.

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