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## Remembering the Traumatic Past in Postdictatorial Argentina: The Photo Album as Metaphor in Ana María Shua's *El libro de los recuerdos*<sup>1</sup>

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One of the lingering dilemmas that the Southern Cone countries face in the postdictatorial era is how or even whether to confront the traumatic past. On one hand, the victims of political violence, their loved ones, and human rights advocates have struggled to preserve memory as a means of countering the perpetrators' attempt to erase the identities—and thus the very existence—of thousands of the dead and disappeared. For these groups, memory is an impetus for justice as well as a preventative measure so that history does not repeat itself, as expressed in the Argentine motto “Recordar para no repetir.” Nonetheless, other social actors prefer simply to forget the atrocities of the past. Andreas Huyssen identifies three motives behind this desire: fear of punishment, a feeling of guilt on the part of those who benefited from the repression, or the pessimistic belief that remembering cannot change the past nor influence the future (25). Moreover, because memory is selective by nature rather

than absolute, there is always necessarily a tug-of-war between remembering and forgetting.

This dialectic between memory and forgetting lies at the center of Ana María Shua's *El libro de los recuerdos* (1994; *The Book of Memories*, 1998), in which the family photo album serves as metaphor for the struggle in Argentina to construct and maintain a collective memory of the dictatorship that lasted from 1976 to 1983.<sup>2</sup> A few critics have examined the relationship between photography and memory in the novel and studied Shua's depiction of the period referred to by the military as *el Proceso*.<sup>3</sup> This article seeks to situate the novel specifically in terms of the "memory work" undertaken in Argentina and the major debates over memory that have surfaced in the country during the past two and a half decades, many of which are alluded to in some form in *El libro de los recuerdos*: To whom does memory "belong"? What is or is not worthy of remembrance? How should the traces of the past be preserved?

*El libro de los recuerdos* is the story of a fictitious Argentine family of Polish-Jewish immigrants, the Rimetkas.<sup>4</sup> Spanning more than half a century, the novel begins with the departure of Gedalia, the patriarch, from his native Poland, and recounts his life and that of his wife, Babuela, as well as the lives of their four children—Silvestre, Pinche, Clarita, and Judith—and their respective families. In all but one of the chapters, multiple, unidentified voices from the third generation share—or, rather, vie for—the role of narrator, presenting contradictory versions of any given episode. (The other chapter is a first-person monologue by Babuela). Moreover, the bickering narrators constantly defer to the eponymous Book of Memories (henceforth referred to in English to distinguish it from the novel proper) in their search for the truth, and it is not unusual for the different parties to point to the same photograph or document to bolster opposing claims.

The narrators in *El libro de los recuerdos* repeatedly mention the Book of Memories and appeal to its authority as they probe the family lore, but they never explain exactly what it is. Moreover, the statements they do make about the Book are often inconsistent. For instance, one of the narrators declares that "el Libro de los Recuerdos es nuestra única fuente absolutamente confiable" (Shua, *Libro* 109), but also states that "ni siquiera en el Libro se puede confiar del todo: hay quién dice (aunque esta teoría sacrilega jamás ha sido comprobada) que a veces se acuerda de cosas que no pasaron nunca, a veces se ablanda y le

da descanso a la memoria por hacerle un favor a alguna gente" (119). This skepticism regarding the Book's reliability as a source of information is echoed throughout the novel.

Literary critics have proposed different interpretations of the Book of Memories and its role in the novel. As David William Foster explains, the Book is above all a metaphor for "collective memory as constituting a log of shifting entries" (42). Other critics have sought to define the Book in more concrete terms. Rhonda Dahl Buchanan refers to the Book as a "family archive" (86), whereas Patrick O'Connell maintains that it is a photo album. O'Connell even goes as far as to declare that by the end of the novel, "the reader knows for sure that the text of the narrative takes place with the help of the family photo album in its memory-provoking capacity" (80).<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the family photo album is a particularly apt metaphor for collective memory in the context of postdictatorial Argentina. The typical album consists almost exclusively of photographs that capture uplifting moments of commemoration, such as births, birthday parties, graduations, weddings, and vacations. Together, these images form what critic Joan Fontcuberta calls "nuestra mitología personal" (59), in that "seguimos condenados a fotografiar para olvidar[,] resalt[ando] hechos para postergar los intervalos anodinos y tediosos que fatigan el espíritu" (62). One of the narrators in Shua's novel observes this tendency to overlook the unpleasant moments in a commentary that alludes to the military dictatorship: "Si no está en el Libro de los Recuerdos, por algo será" (*Libro* 71, my emphasis). The Book thus discriminates arbitrarily between memories, preserving some and relegating the rest to oblivion. In addition, the phrase "por algo será" is particularly meaningful for those who lived in Argentina during *el Proceso*, having become a kind of mantra to tranquilize the national conscience in the face of institutionalized violence.

In his discussion about personal mythologies, Fontcuberta describes an art exhibit in which photographer Nan Goldin explored the selective nature of the photo album by juxtaposing typical family pictures with images of illnesses, funerals, and other somber scenes (59). Shua employs a similar strategy in *El libro de los recuerdos*. For the most part, the narrators recount the low points in the family history, moments that the preceding generations would most likely prefer to forget: a disheartening loss in an important neighborhood soccer game, Pinche's

disastrous dabbling in the fiberglass business, the suicide of Judith's daughter Liliana. These episodes generate the most debate in the novel among the Rimetka grandchildren as they try to discover "what really happened." On the other hand, at the end of the two chapters that focus on the military dictatorship, one of the narrators remarks that "de la Época del Miedo no se habla más [en el Libro], que es cosa triste" (Shua, *Libro* 133), a clear attempt to forget a painful moment in Argentine history. Nevertheless, the narrators' various quarrels illustrate that it is through heated disputes—and not through avoidance or the imposition of a dominant version—that collective memory draws closer to the truth of the traumatic past.

*El libro de los recuerdos* delineates two ways of dealing with the past: by seeking to reconstruct it from fragmentary recollections or, alternatively, by actively trying to forget. In the final chapter, set thirty-five years later, Silvestre meets with Marita, an old flame who married and later abandoned his brother Pinche. He looks forward to the reunion as an opportunity to talk about old times, and mentally prepares "el repaso o reconstrucción de la historia que no intentaba mejorar o remodelar, en lo que buscaba apenas seleccionar aquellos tramos que podía contarle a Marita con cierta alegría o con una tristeza no exenta de dignidad, o al menos con gracia farsesca" (Shua, *Libro* 192). She, for her part, has no interest in reminiscing. With her face preserved by plastic surgery and her insistence on speaking only of the present, Marita embodies the desire to forget, offering Silvestre a photo of her picture-perfect life back in California. Silvestre and Marita represent two diametrically opposed strategies for constructing one's own personal mythology: he opts for selective memory whereas she chooses to forget through a blanket denial of the past. Moreover, Marita's photo is a trace of the past, but it does not prove the legitimacy of one strategy or the other. As one of the narrator remarks, its only evidentiary value is to confirm that "esta entrevista en verdad se realizó" (204).

The members of the third generation who narrate the family history bear the burden of memory on various levels. As the grandchildren of immigrants, they are presumably monolingual, fully assimilated Argentines with a tenuous grasp on their cultural heritage. From a chronological perspective, they also came of age soon after the fall of the military dictatorship, a period marked by collective amnesia in its institutionalized form,

that of amnesty. They therefore wage their struggle to remember in an overwhelming climate of oblivion, represented by Babuela who declares in her monologue from beyond the grave: "Ves que es porquería acordarse?" (Shua, *Libro* 169).

As they attempt to piece together the past of their parents and grandparents, the narrators depend not on their own memories but rather on those passed down from the preceding generations either verbally or through the Book of Memories. The narrators reconstruct the family history, creating what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory," in reference to how children "remember" and are affected by their parents' experiences, particularly in cases of traumatic events. In *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, Hirsch explains that this kind of memory is mediated more by imagination than by recollection, since the subjects of postmemory typically did not witness the "remembered" events firsthand. *El libro de los recuerdos* dramatizes the construction of postmemory within the microcosm of the Rimetka family. In the mid-1990s when Shua published her novel, a similar process was underway in the country as a new generation of Argentines began to grapple with the legacies of authoritarianism.

This process of intergenerational transmission is an integral part both of the narrative strategy in Shua's novel and of Argentine memory politics in general. In the latter context, at issue is what Elizabeth Jelin and Susana Kaufman refer to as the "ownership" of memory. Who gets to decide what and how a society will remember? The consensus in Argentina is that the authority over memory ideally belongs to those who experienced deep, personal suffering. On the other hand, memory is by nature intersubjective, requiring others to transmit and resignify it if it is to endure. For this reason, Jelin and Kaufman advocate the enlargement of the "we" of collective memory to encompass new generations (106-7). *El libro de los recuerdos* can likewise be read as the story of the broadening of the "we" in the microcosm of the Rimetka family.

In the chapter about the authoritarian period, one of the narrators explains that the only documentation of the political repression in the Book is "un texto literario, un original escrito de puño y letra por algún Rimetka de tercera generación en hojas sin reglones con una birome azul y con letra bastante desprolija." The narrative is dismissed as inauthentic because "no [es] una investigación periodística o un testimonio" (Shua, *Libro*), there-

fore raising the question of who has a legitimate claim to memory. For the narrator, such authority should be granted only to historians and survivors. The anonymous author of the text found in the Book is neither and, from the standpoint of the narrator, has no right to compose a subjective account devoid of supporting evidence even though the observations contained in the text are actually quite accurate. The narrator discredits the account, however, and this reaction illustrates how exclusion in memory politics can pose a major obstacle to collective memory formation. Another intriguing possibility is that the mysterious handwritten pages constitute a *mise-en-abyme* of the novel itself, which is also neither a journalistic account nor a testimonial. In this reading, what is at issue is the possibility and legitimacy of transforming horrific events into art or entertainment, a central concern of trauma studies.

In *El libro de los recuerdos*, only the third generation has the necessary objectivity and reinterpetive ability to reconstruct the family history. The metaphor of the photograph is instrumental in this resignifying process. The reinterpetive character of the photographic image creates the ideal conditions for intergenerational participation in collective memory formation. The photo, Barthes observes, can neither persuade nor contradict; it only has the limited power to confirm (30). For instance, there is a recurring polemic in the Rimetka family as to whether or not Silvestre once made Pinche eat a bar of soap. A picture in the Book only clarifies that the color of the soap in question was blue. In a later chapter, Pinche reveals that while his brother did indeed threaten him, he did not actually carry out the punishment as originally alleged. The fallibility of the photograph as proof demonstrates Barthes's assertion that "all images are polysemous" (38-39). In another instance, a family photo of Silvestre and Fortunée on their honeymoon evokes various interpretations due to its ambiguity: "Se puede mirar la foto durante horas sin llegar a adivinar si los fotografados son felices" (Shua, *Libro* 65). At least one critic has fallen into the temptation of resignifying—or misinterpreting—the picture on the novel's cover, describing it as "a photograph of the author's husband as a young man in what appears to be an immigration office" (O'Connell 80). While this interpretation fits in with the point he is trying to make, it does not coincide with reality. The boy in the photograph is indeed Shua's husband but he is posing

for a picture at a party, not in an immigration office (Shua, personal interview).

The family photo album also exemplifies what Benjamin views as a cult to the human face because looking at the pictures of loved ones, both living and dead, constitutes a kind of ritual in modern societies (225-26). The portrait is different from other types of images because it captures how "the aura emanates [. . .] in the fleeting expression of the human face" (226). *El libro de los recuerdos* is composed of fifteen chapters, each of which focuses on a specific character or defining moment in the Rimetka family history and is thus comparable to a snapshot—autonomous fragments that, taken with the others, form a whole similar to a family photo album or scrapbook. In fact, Shua published the chapter entitled "La tía Judith" as a short story before writing the rest of the novel. Writing specifically about the press photograph, Barthes comments that "the signifier of the connotations is [. . .] no longer to be found at the level of any one of the fragments of the sequence but at that [. . .] of the concatenation" (24). This observation also holds true for the family photo album due to its selectivity and its aim of constructing a personal mythology.

By the time Shua published *El libro de los recuerdos*, the photograph was already an important symbol of memory in Argentina, where the Madres de Plaza de Mayo not only marched with the pictures of their disappeared children but also distributed headshots of alleged torturers and other perpetrators. The former gesture in particular underscores the ability of photography to evoke both presence and absence. Along similar lines, many theorists have compared the photograph with death. Fontcuberta observes, for example, that the snapshot freezes the person photographed forever in "[u]na inmovilización y un imprisonment que nos acercará ineluctablemente a la idea de la muerte" (30). The display or contemplation of the photograph or headshot is therefore a powerful and highly symbolic act in postdictatorial Argentina.

Not all of the images in the Book of Memories are photos of human beings, however. The Book also contains pictures and descriptions of places and inanimate objects. For example, the staircase in the Rimetka home becomes part of a disagreement over whether Judith's siblings helped her to carry her suitcases to the door after Gedalia expelled her from the family residence. One of the narrators describes the stairs and remarks, "Así eran las escaleras, y así son. Pero las escaleras no tienen memoria"

(Shua, *Libro 42*). This comment implies that memory is not stored in places or things, but rather in the individuals who act as witnesses. This argument echoes the current debate in Argentina over how memory should be preserved and, more specifically, over the efficacy of what Pierre Nora designates *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory. Huyssen points out that physical monuments run the risk of becoming invisible over time (28). The Argentine artist Juan Carlos Romero, for his part, contends that spaces such as the Parque de la Memoria in Buenos Aires are tributes more to forgetting than to memory because they foster the illusion of closure.<sup>6</sup> In *El libro de los recuerdos*, the staircase offers no clues as to what really occurred when Judith packed up and left home, and the case remains unresolved. The Rimetka family residence, Casa Vieja, is itself more of a palimpsest than a repository for memory, in that it becomes a brothel and, later, a club for retirees.

Photographs and memory are also similar in that they are both subordinate to language. Barthes explains that in the case of a picture with a caption, the text represses the image because it reflects the morals and ideologies of a society (40). In *El libro de los recuerdos*, photographs are referred to but the reader's only access to them is through the words of the narrators, which serve as extended captions. As Jelin and Kaufman point out, the construction of collective memory necessarily entails a struggle over meaning (107). Shua has described the Book as "la conciencia que distingue los hechos de las palabras con las que es posible relatarlos" (*Clarín* 12). It is impossible to "tell the truth" because language has a corrupting effect. *El libro de los recuerdos* thus exposes the power of the word in the creation of memory. For example, a dispute arises with regard to whether Gedalia was a moneylender or a peddler due to confusion over the correct translation of the word *kuentenik* (Shua, *Libro 18*). One of the most dramatic and purposeful acts of forgetting in the novel is the patriarch's decision to ban the use of the "Otro idioma" in favor of Spanish (25-26).

The very act of naming becomes a power struggle between individual and state in *El libro de los recuerdos*. A name change affects the destiny of the entire Rimetka family, since it is the identification card of a dead soldier named Gedalia Rimetka that allows the character in the novel with that name to emigrate to Argentina. In fact, even that name is incorrect: "El apellido Rimetka fue el producto de una combinación de la fineza auditiva

y la arbitrariedad ortográfica de cierto empleado, sumadas a su particular forma de interpretar un documento escrito en una lengua desconocida, más su concepto personal sobre el apellido que debía llevar en el país un extranjero proveniente de Polonia" (Shua, *Libro 15*). The state likewise imposes an arbitrary name on Silvestre: "De primer nombre [Gedalia] le puso Shloime pero el del Registro Civil no entendió o se hizo el que no entendía" (20, my emphasis).<sup>7</sup> In the epilogue to the English translation of the novel, Shua reveals that her own name is a corruption of the original (*Book* 173).<sup>8</sup>

In addition to exploring the relationship between names and power, Shua invents an entire new lexicon for referring to the dictatorship, creating expressions to replace those coined by the military, such as *La Época del Miedo* instead of *el Proceso* and *señalados* in lieu of *desaparecidos*. In the latter case, one of the narrators insists that the two terms should not be confused: "las desapariciones verdaderas no eran tan arbitrarias, por lo general había algún motivo relacionado con la política [. . .]" (Shua, *Libro 117*). This statement employs—albeit with irony—the logic of "por algo será," in effect urging the reader to reflect critically upon the master discourses that permeate both the novel and Argentine society. Shua also explores the unavoidable connotation of the verb *desaparecer* in the chapter that recounts the episode in which Pinche went missing. The novel includes a footnote clarifying that Pinche "se perdió o se escapó o tuvo la amnesia de las pastillas adelgazantes por no decir que desapareció" (92). By emphasizing that the event in question had nothing to do with the authoritarian period, the author calls attention to the fact that the word *desaparecer* in Argentine Spanish has become permanently linked to the repressive past. The traditional subordination of memory to language is thus inverted. Curiously, this footnote does not appear in the English version. Shua, who actively participated in the translation process, explains that the omission is due to the rendering of the Spanish word *desaparecido* as *missing* in English (Shua, personal interview). This decision effectively precludes any semantic link between Pinche's ordeal and the disappearance of an estimated thirty thousand Argentines during the dictatorship years.

Given all of these points of convergence with recent debates on memory in postdictatorial Argentina, it is curious that Shua herself is adamant that her novel has little to do with the legacy of political repression, pointing out that "solamente un

capítulo del libro es sobre la dictadura militar" (personal interview). Still, *El libro de los recuerdos* can be read as an allegory for the struggle over collective memory in Argentina during the past quarter of a century. The family photo album and the photograph are ideal metaphors for the exploration of memory formation in the microcosm of the Rimetka family. *El libro de los recuerdos* demonstrates that even under the best of circumstances memory is not absolute and involves multiple irreconcilable versions of the past. None of the Rimetka family's disputes over memory is ever resolved in the novel, suggesting that what really matters is the actual process of collective memory formation—as rocky as it may be—and not any idealized outcome, since the truth of "what really happened" is ultimately elusive.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>A draft of this article was written during a University of Wisconsin-Madison research seminar in Buenos Aires led by Professors Ksenija Bilbija and Leigh Payne during the summer of 2002. I would like to thank Ksenija Bilbija for her careful reading of the paper in its early stages.

<sup>2</sup>The political repression in Argentina personally affected Shua, who went into exile shortly after the military regime came into power.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Buchanan, Foster, and O'Connell, whose studies I will examine briefly in this article. Although I share many of the views expressed in O'Connell's perceptive reading in particular and I undertake a similar allegorical reading of photography in the novel, I am less interested in the parodic dimension and how "Argentina's many failed relationships and inability to democratize are metaphorically linked to the many disagreements and failed relationships within the Rimetka family" (O'Connell 79) than in identifying direct connections between the memory-related themes Shua raises in the book and specific polemics and issues that have arisen in Argentina, especially in the 1990s, as a result of the Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, H.I.J.O.S. and intergenerational remembering, the Parque de la Memoria in Buenos Aires, and so forth.

<sup>4</sup>With respect to the relationship between fiction and reality in *El libro de los recuerdos*, Shua explains that "[a] lo largo de cincuenta años de vida nacional, mis [personajes] hacen lo que

pueden, van sorteando golpes de Estado y devaluaciones, suben y bajan en esta lotería de Babilonia que es la historia de nuestro país" (*Clarín* 12).

<sup>5</sup>In a personal interview I conducted with Shua at her home in Buenos Aires on July 30, 2002, the novelist took issue with such interpretations, insisting that the Book of Memories is merely a literary device and that she never conceived of it as a concrete object of any kind.

<sup>6</sup>Romero made this argument during a talk given to students of the University of Wisconsin-Madison in Buenos Aires on July 31, 2002.

<sup>7</sup>Curiously, the name of the other brother, which is *Pinche* in the Spanish original, is changed to *Pucho* in the English translation.

<sup>8</sup>The novelist writes that her real last name is "Shoua."

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## Los territorios liminales en *La multitud errante* de Laura Restrepo

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"se fue al limbo, donde habitan  
los que no están ni vivos ni muertos"  
*La multitud errante*

A lo largo de la ficción latinoamericana el motivo del viaje ha funcionado como metáfora del posible camino hacia una adecuación del sujeto consigo mismo y con sus coordenadas sociohistóricas y culturales. Sin embargo, la redefinición de fronteras nacionales y de lo tradicionalmente asociado al concepto de casa, ha engendrado discursos problemáticos y contradictorios que dificultan el diálogo, la interpretación o el desplazamiento hacia la otredad y el autoconocimiento. *La multitud errante* (2001) de la colombiana Laura Restrepo (Bogotá, 1950) se sitúa como testimonio de esa crisis del viaje en donde se cuestionan los espacios de historia, intercambio y memoria a la par con la reafirmación de la búsqueda ancestral de aquel centro de potencia vital que evoca la casa.

En *La multitud errante*, Restrepo explora la exclusión identitaria y la reubicación geográfica a la que se someten

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