

## **Staging the “Forgotten Genocide” in the Aftermath of the Dirty War: *Una bestia en la luna* by Richard Kalinoski**

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The October 2009 signing of protocols for normalizing relations between Armenia and Turkey raised serious questions about the role of memory in the aftermath of human rights violations. As the two countries pledged to open their shared border, many feared that they would do so at the expense of a 95-year struggle to have the mass killings of Ottoman Armenians recognized as genocide—that is, as the intentional annihilation of the Armenian people.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the ensuing breakdown of relations between Yerevan and Ankara over the issue of the 1915 Genocide illustrates the imperative of official recognition for any successful Armenian-Turkish diplomacy, as well as for facilitating the mourning process for the descendants of survivors. The issues of impunity and denial fundamental to the Armenian case evoke as well the legacy of genocide in other contexts and eras, among them the most recent Argentine military dictatorship (1976-1983). Experts posit that the elusive punishment of the former members of the military regime, the vacuum created by the absence of the estimated 30,000 *desaparecidos*, and the ellipses in information about the ultimate fate of the latter have served to re-traumatize survivors, thereby retarding the process of healing (Kordon and Edelman 362; Suárez-Orozco 495).

Argentina, home to a sizeable and active Armenian community, offers a glimpse into the localized and specific intersection of these two collective memories. Armenian Argentines, the majority of whom reside in Buenos Aires, are largely descendants of Genocide survivors who fled the Ottoman Empire during the first several decades of the twentieth century (Boulgourdjian-Toufeksian 13, 47; Hairabedian “Conferencia” 26). As Brisa Varela explains, among the practices and discourses intended to conserve Armenian cultural identity in Argentina, those activities linked

to the remembrance of the Genocide have held special importance for the country's Armenian inhabitants. Indeed, the Armenian population of Buenos Aires has organized educational initiatives in local schools, exhibits, round table discussions, and conferences about the Genocide and its implications for human rights. Furthermore, in 2014 the city's government ceded land for the construction of what will be the first Armenian Genocide museum outside of Armenia ("La cuestión"). Additionally, over the past twenty years the community has articulated the weight of this catastrophic event and its enduring legacy for subsequent generations through a series of plays staged throughout the country. At the same time, the issues of memory, mourning, and denial surrounding the Genocide and treated in such works transcend the Armenian context, invoking as well the painful residue left by the dictatorship. The memorialization of the Armenian Genocide is therefore inscribed within, but also exists in a fluid relationship with Argentina's post-dictatorial memory politics, both borrowing from and helping to shape the articulation of the collective memory of the Dirty War.

Thus, even works treating the Armenian context but devoid of references to Argentina's relatively recent trauma take on special significance for a non-Armenian audience, as in the case of *Beast on the Moon* by the American playwright Richard Kalinoski.<sup>2</sup> Written in 1992 and staged in Argentina as *Una bestia en la luna* in 2000 with resounding success, Kalinoski's work explores the struggle with memory and mourning of two Genocide survivors in the United States.<sup>3</sup> In the play, Aram Tomasian and his mail-order bride, Seta, negotiate a new life as a married couple and as immigrants in Wisconsin after each has been orphaned by the Genocide. In his desperate attempt to forget his traumatic past by replacing the family he has lost, Aram cuts the faces out of the images in his pre-Genocidal family photo, substituting his father's face with his own and eventually filling the hole left by his mother's face with that of his new wife. Additionally, Aram insists on taking a series of portraits of his reluctant bride in which he casts her in the role of traditional wife and mother, thereby affirming familial continuity. However, his efforts to perpetuate his lineage as well as the romance of a cohesive family are doomed to fail, given Seta's infertility and her growing intolerance of his patriarchal behavior.

The use of photography as a framing device is crucial for understanding how this play about a post-Genocide Armenian family speaks to a post-Proceso Argentine nation. Through the framework of the family portrait, Kalinoski's work warns against the pernicious ability of photographs to tap

into or sustain deceptive narratives about the past. Within the context of Argentina following the Dirty War, Aram's attempt to bypass the mourning process recalls Argentina's state-sponsored amnesia under Carlos Menem. By denouncing the illusory representation of the past as a means of eliding traumatic memory, *Una bestia en la luna* echoes a broader insistence on the importance of engaging the past in the post-dictatorial context of the Southern Cone, presumably a source of resonance with its non-Armenian Argentine public. The play, however, not only evokes the parallels between the two historical situations; it delves into the complexities of memory-making itself and the challenges of forging a new future that is faithful to historical memory while reflecting critically on the past.

### **A Shared Heritage of Denial and Impunity**

*Una bestia en la luna* responds to the Argentine public's interest in the Armenian massacres which, similar to the Dirty War, have left survivors and subsequent generations grappling with issues of mourning and collective memory. While the Armenian communities that inhabited the Ottoman Empire had suffered a series of previous massacres at the hands of the government, the convergence of various factors during World War I led to the intentional extermination of approximately 1.5 million Armenians and the worldwide scattering of survivors. 1913 witnessed the rise to power of a nationalistic element within the Young Turk party, whose ideology promoted Panturkism as a means of recuperating the glory of the Ottoman Empire. The prevailing xenophobic mood, together with the unfavorable position of Turkey vis-à-vis its enemy nations, unleashed between 1915 and 1923 what is known today as the first genocide of the twentieth century. Following the murder of Armenian intellectuals, clergy, and other leaders of the community, the Armenian population—among them the elderly, women, and children—was forced to abandon its ancestral home of over 3,000 years under the false pretext of relocation away from the military front. However, the actual purpose of the deportations to the inhabitable desert of Der El Zor was the extermination of these Ottoman subjects, either directly at the hands of the Turkish gendarme or Kurds, or indirectly through hunger, dehydration or disease (Miller *Survivors* 40-41).

Following World War I, the Great Powers tied the terms of the Sèvres Treaty to Turkey's prosecution and punishment of the perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide (Dadrian 422). Indeed, there were multiple arrests and exile to Malta of individuals associated with the Young Turk regime,

though these were later released (Akçam 221, 361). Additionally, several high-ranking officials responsible for massacres in their zones of authority were executed after being found guilty by Turkish military courts (Dadrian 307; Akçam 351). Nevertheless, the top Young Turk leaders, among them the principal authors of the Armenian Genocide, had escaped to Germany upon Turkey's defeat (Dadrian 306). Furthermore, Turkey's assertion of its own national sovereignty when pressured by the Allied Nations to punish suspects, together with the lack of agreement among the Great Powers regarding the punishment of Turkey, eventually led to the abandonment of the so-called "Armenian Question" (Akçam 368-69; Dadrian 303).

As scholars affirm, the Turkish government's refusal to acknowledge the Genocide as such renders the process of mourning eternal and unresolved for the descendants of survivors (Miller *Survivors* 160-61). Richard Hovannisian (112) and Roger Smith (3), among others, have noted that at the time the Armenian massacres and deportations took place, the extensive body of evidence attesting to the systematic nature of the process elicited virtually universal condemnation. Indeed, during and immediately following World War I, when confronted with unequivocal proof of the Genocide, Turkish authorities merely sought to rationalize the mass extermination of Armenians by alleging that the former were guilty of disloyalty and rebellion. Since then, this "mechanism of denial" practiced by the Turkish government has moved through several phases. Following the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 and the creation of the modern Turkish state, the government emphasized the image of a new Turkey and the freedoms it granted to minorities. But beginning with the fiftieth anniversary of the Genocide in 1965 and the increased pressure for recognition by descendants of Genocide survivors, the Turkish government has actively engaged in counterpropaganda while simultaneously pressuring foreign governments to dismiss Armenian claims of genocide (Hovannisian 112-13).

The Argentine nation witnessed a similar reversal of justice following the return to democracy in 1984. President Raúl Alfonsín ordered the military-juntas trial of 1985, resulting in the sentencing to life imprisonment of two of the members of the triumvirate. However, faced with the threat of a military uprising, Alfonsín later issued a statute of limitations on the prosecution of crimes against humanity. Then, through executive pardons, Alfonsín's successor, Carlos Menem, perpetuated the exoneration of military officials responsible for human rights violations by pardoning in 1990 the military leaders who had been sentenced in 1985 (Delicado; Przeworski 14-15).

This state-sanctioned impunity, however, began to unravel in the mid-nineties. In 1995, ex-military officer Adolfo Scilingo confessed to his involvement in the dictatorship's death flights, in which live prisoners were thrown into the Río de la Plata. Soon after, Emilio Mignone, president of the Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales, asserted that the laws guaranteeing the impunity of the perpetrators of human rights violations did not negate the right of the victims' families to the truth, paving the way for an explosion of truth trials throughout the country (Verbitsky 33).

Together with these internal factors, the concept of universal jurisdiction in trying crimes against humanity contributed to the erosion of state-issued amnesties in Argentina. The arrest and extradition of the former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet by the Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón and the trial of Slobodan Milosevic both testify to what Brenda Werth has described as the "reassessment of accountability in a global context" (*Theatre* 15, 95). This globalization of human rights helped lay the basis for the revocation of the statute of limitations issued by Alfonsín and the nullification of the pardons granted by Menem (Verbitsky 37).

Concurrently with the juridical struggle to bring to justice those members of the armed forces guilty of crimes against humanity, there has emerged in Argentina a broader preoccupation with the nature and role of memory in the wake of dictatorship. The explosion of scholarly endeavors within memory studies, the creation of memory "spaces" and museums, and the artistic treatment of the topic of memory in a variety of genres attest to the pervasive and enduring impact of the dictatorship in Argentine cultural production (Hernández 266-67). The theatrical movement Teatroxlaidentidad (TxI) is just one of many examples that illustrate how issues of history, trauma, and memory have spanned postdictatorial Argentine society, from the individual to the collective and from the political to the artistic. Since 2001 and with the sponsorship of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, the TxI movement has embraced the Abuelas' struggle to identify and recover the children born in captivity and raised by families complicit with the regime after the biological parents were disappeared—one of the most sinister campaigns of the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional. And yet, as the opening remarks read at the first TxI cycle in 2001 suggest, the restitution of memory is essential for the identity of the nation as a whole: "Somos todos cautivos de esa mentira. Es la sociedad toda la que debe preguntarse por su verdadera identidad" (Rivera López 9). Werth observes that, "Teatroxlaidentidad masterfully conflates the theatrical horizon of expectations with the national imaginary, and makes

restitution of individual identities an imperative for the healing and reframing of the nation” (“Performing” 26). Furthermore, the group reminds its audience that the traumas of dictatorship have spread not only horizontally to the collective nation, but vertically from generation to generation. TxI, in its organization as a festival of short works treating a common theme, has also inspired similar endeavors originating in the capital’s Armenian theatre Tadrón Teatro, thereby serving to bridge the Argentine context with that of Armenia.

Indeed, alongside the call for truth and justice following the military dictatorship, Argentina’s Armenian community has carried out a similar campaign for Genocide recognition. Although some elements of the community pressed for worldwide recognition of the Genocide prior to the second half of the twentieth century, in general the remembrance of this catastrophe was relegated to tearful religious or commemorative ceremonies that did little to contribute to an organized struggle against denial and impunity (Hairabedian “Conferencia” 26). However, Argentina’s return to democracy and the concomitant demand for reckoning with the past served as a catalyst for a renewed insistence on Genocide recognition through educational, artistic, historical, and legal channels. A paradigmatic example of the latter is the Right to the Truth and Right to Grief case filed in 2000 with an Argentine criminal court on behalf of Gregorio Hairabedian. The claimant, an Argentine citizen born to Genocide survivors, demands that the Turkish government make available to him any documents related to the fate of his extended family, all victims of the Genocide (Hairabedian v. Turkish State). Hairabedian credits the Argentine context of the Trial of the Juntas and the Right to the Truth cases as having inspired his own legal initiative (“Conferencia” 27; “Oyarbide”). Pedro Mouratian emphasizes the importance of this localized framework for advancing the cause of Armenian Genocide recognition:

La derogación de leyes de impunidad, el avance de los juicios por la verdad y una enérgica política de derechos humanos dieron el marco propicio para que la comunidad armenia en nuestro país pudiese imaginar que sus viejos anhelos políticos de reconocimiento del genocidio del que fuera víctima podían encontrar las respuestas favorables que pondrían un manto de justicia ante tantos años de impunidad.

Beyond this Argentine context, Hairabedian views the Armenian demand for Genocide recognition as intertwined with the international struggle to investigate and punish abuses of basic human rights (“Conferencia” 27-28).<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, Hairabedian's case resulted in the first legal ruling in the world in which the concept of universal jurisdiction has been applied to the Armenian Genocide, when in 2011 the federal judge Norberto Oyarbide declared the Turkish state guilty of genocide against the Armenian people ("Oyarbide").<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the abovementioned lawsuit, the multifaceted initiatives of the Fundación Luisa Hairabedian include the design of a secondary school curriculum related to genocide and human rights ("La escuela media..."); the compilation of oral testimonies from Genocide survivors and their children; and the sponsorship of Claudia Piñeiro's play *Un mismo árbol verde*, which explores the parallels between the Armenian Genocide and the Dirty War. Piñeiro's play is one of the most recent works treating the Genocide which have been staged by Armenian theatre practitioners since 1990.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, in 2006, responding to an interest in the Genocide among Argentina's general public, Tadrón Teatro established the movement Teatro x la Justicia. Patterned in part on its precursor TxI, Teatro x la Justicia offers one month of free performances consisting of a series of short works related in some way to the themes of justice and human rights. Since the festival's inception, it has expanded to include a film series, a "cultural vigil" marking the cycle's opening on April 24—official day of remembrance of the Armenian Genocide<sup>7</sup>—, exhibitions of historical material, and year-long panels on human rights. The theme of one of the round table discussions of the 2008 cycle, "Genocidio, desaparición y duelo," underscores how the festival unites the shared legacies of Armenian and Argentine history. Likewise, the panel topics of the 2010 cycle—among them the genocide in Darfur, the situation in Palestine, and the use of terror in social control—illustrate the way in which Teatro x la Justicia clearly moves beyond the particularity of the Armenian case in order to offer a forum for the discussion of human rights in an international context. The growing popularity of the festival's performances, which now play to a packed house, and the conferring on Tadrón Teatro in 2008 of the Premio Teatro del Mundo by the Universidad de Buenos Aires are evidence of the vital role played by Armenian theatre in the country's engagement with issues of truth and justice.<sup>8</sup>

### **Photography and the Politics of Representation**

*Una bestia en la luna* not only shows an Argentine public the parallels between its recent traumatic history and the legacy of the Genocide for Armenians, it does so through the complex framing device of photography. As Marianne Hirsch and other theorists of photography have asserted, pho-

tographs are critical to memory work not only in their capacity to trigger memory, but also as cultural texts around which conflicting narratives about the past struggle to assert themselves (Hughes and Noble 5). In contexts of state-sponsored denial and unresolved mourning, such as that of the Armenian Genocide and post-dictatorial Argentina, photographs therefore become sites of dispute for the control of representation. As Lorne Shirinian affirms, the photographs in survivor memoirs of the Armenian Genocide not only evoke individuals and a way of life which have since been annihilated, but can also incriminate those responsible for such a catastrophe (33, 37), and I would suggest, those who continue to challenge its very existence. Despite the capacity of photographs to indict those guilty of genocidal actions, however, there exist extensive problems inherent in the reliance on photographs related to the Genocide. Earlier massacres were well documented through drawings, sketches, and photographs taken by German relief workers. However, the ban on photographing deportees under pain of death imposed by Ahmed Jemal Pasha<sup>9</sup> during World War I ensured the relative scarcity of photo-documents of the 1915 Genocide. Furthermore, given the unavailability of automatic cameras at the time, the cumbersome process of adjusting photographic plates required in still photography posed yet another obstacle for the visual documentation of Armenian annihilation. The majority of the pictorial material of the deportees that does exist can be attributed to Armin T. Wegner (1886-1978), a German journalist, author, and a soldier in the German-Ottoman Sanitation Mission, and to the private relief organization American Near East Relief. With the exception of Wegner, most Europeans in the Ottoman Empire were too fearful of the epidemics plaguing the makeshift deportee camps to approach the Armenians for the purpose of documenting their suffering (Hofmann, et al. 54-55; Milton 20-21).

In addition to the abovementioned factors, which had the effect of discouraging photographic documentation of the Genocide, much of the extant visual material lacks sufficient contextualization to make it a dependable source of information. Indeed, American Near East Relief deliberately labeled their photographs of Genocide victims with ambiguous captions—substituting “refugees” for “deportees”, for instance—to avoid inciting the ire of the Turkish government and the possible retaliatory prohibition of the committee’s humanitarian efforts in the region (Hofmann, et al. 57).<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, since the negatives or original prints of photographs of the Genocide are rarely available, those images in existence have been reproduced in publications so many times that the source references are difficult to ascertain. This



lack of source information, together with the poor quality of the images as a result of their frequent reproduction, has resulted at times in an erroneous identification of the pictures (56). As Tessa Hofmann and Gerayer Koutcharian emphasize, “Every editor or author does whatever pleases him or her at the time, without knowing or examining the facts, nor having developed a capacity for judging them” (56).

The most extreme example of the dangers inherent in these methodological shortcomings is the recent discovery that one of the photographs appearing in *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* is actually a forgery. The photograph, which carries the caption “A Turkish official taunting starving Armenians with bread,” was not examined closely for authenticity in the publication review process, although it had appeared in a series of previous publications treating the Genocide. Upon learning of the forgery, the publisher destroyed existing copies of the text and re-issued the volume with an explanation of the inauthentic nature of the photo (Krikorian et al.).<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the discovery has been exploited by denialists, who represent it as one in a long series of falsehoods invented by those who seek Genocide recognition. The following blog from a website dedicated to promoting revisionist versions of history illustrates such an argument: “Forgeries have been part of the ‘Armenian question’ since the 1920s, produced with the intention of proving what could not otherwise be proved” (Salt).<sup>12</sup> Regardless of the identity of the perpetrator, which remains unknown, the debate surrounding the picture in question illustrates the way in which photographs become battlegrounds in the politicization of memory.<sup>13</sup>

The potentially multivocal nature of photographic images that has emerged in the context of Armenian Genocide scholarship can be attributed to what Richard Bolton has described as the adaptability of the medium to a variety of uses, some designed to maintain the status quo and others to overturn it. Thus, while it was once speculated that photography would serve a democratizing function as a widely-available means of speech, the photographic medium also represented a potential method for surveillance and control of a population (xi). Indeed, as Nelly Richard elucidates, in Latin America, recognition of photography’s pivotal role in the politics of representation quickly transformed it from a mere technical resource to an ideological strategy (Avelar 261). Thus, in the specific context of military dictatorship, photography has been harnessed to further the control of the state over its citizens, on the one hand, while it has also lent itself to those

who have resisted such authority, on the other (Schwartz, et al 3). The military regimes of the Southern Cone depended in part on the *carnet* or photo-ID card as integral for classifying and tracking their citizens. Through this use of the *carnet* for framing citizens according to certain broad stereotypes, the Pinochet regime converted the one-time photographs of individual subjects into desubjectified images, thereby stripping the represented figures of any individualizing marks (Avelar 266-67).

In publicly protesting the human rights abuses carried out by the military dictatorships in Argentina and Chile, however, the families of detained and disappeared citizens exhibited photographs of their loved ones, thereby reclaiming the individualizing function of these images (Avelar 262-63). Such displays by groups protesting the military government's disappearance of its victims with enlarged photos of the victims' faces relies not only on photography's ability to inscribe the singularity of its subjects, but also on its capacity to superimpose the past onto the present. Richard elaborates:

It [the phantasmic and spectral character of photography] is linked with the temporal paradox of something real and unreal at the same time, present and past, alive and dead. The ambiguities of the *no longer* (disappearance) versus the *still present* (appearing), *consigning* and *not resigning*, inhabit these spectral photographs of the detained and disappeared that have become the densest symbol of the crusade for memory. (Avelar 263, emphasis in the original)

As Werth affirms, the power of the photographic medium to shape collective memory has made the genre central not only to the efforts of human rights groups, but also to artists interrogating memory politics in the wake of dictatorship.<sup>14</sup> In *Una bestia en la luna*, Kalinoski taps into photography's "contradictory impulses and opposing aims," to borrow Bolton's terminology (xi): its capacity to bolster conflictive representations of the past; its ability to visually conflate the past and the present; and its potential for either representing the individuality of its subject or rendering that same subject anonymous. By drawing on these characteristics of the photographic medium already at the heart of postdictatorial memory politics in the Southern Cone, *Una bestia en la luna* interpellates Argentine spectators unfamiliar with the specificities of the Armenian Genocide.

### **Mourning and Memory in the Family Portrait**

The dramatic action of *Una bestia en la luna* unfolds in the couple's sparse living quarters in Milwaukee beginning six years after the Armenian

Genocide, and follows Aram and Seta during the first twelve years of their married life.<sup>15</sup> As the initial stage notes indicate, the realistic scenography and its meager furnishings are dominated by Aram's old-fashioned wooden camera on its tripod and a large framed photograph of an Armenian family circa 1914: a mother, father, two teenage sons, and a young daughter. Gaping holes perch atop the images of the five family members, although Aram's adolescent face from a more recent photograph has since been sutured onto the image of his father's body (1). Indeed, Aram's need to "llenar los agujeros" (49) left by his family's death drives the work's dramatic action, and makes the family portrait and the act of portrait-making pivotal sites of familial negotiation in a post-genocidal context.

As Hirsch explains, the ubiquitous family portrait, far from a transparent register of a family's history, serves as an instrument of familial self-representation inevitably shaped by the dominant image of the ideal family circulating at that moment. In an effort to perpetuate idealized familial narratives, however, the act of portrait making may actually heighten preexisting tensions within real families (*Family Frames* 7). *Una bestia en la luna* brings to the fore this tension between family dynamics and the ideal family, and highlights the ways in which history shapes the very notion of the ideal family. Commenting on the long-standing partnership between photography and writing in Latin America, Marcy E. Schwartz and Mary Beth Tierney-Tello observe that the intersection of these two discursive modes—the visual and the verbal—creates a "disruptive tension" that invites the reader/viewer to ponder the possibilities and limitations of each medium (13). By juxtaposing the static vision of the family in portraits with the bitter struggle for representation that characterizes the play's dramatic action, *Una bestia en la luna* exposes the sinister mechanisms involved in the creation and perpetuation of the family romance. Ultimately, the protagonists must confront the reality of the Genocide before they can break free from both the unattainable myth of the ideal family and the suspended process of mourning set in motion by photographs, in order to finally form a new—albeit untraditional—family unit.

From the beginning of the work, Aram's willful depiction of Seta through photography underscores the intimate links among power, representation, and identity. Upon his bride's arrival in Milwaukee, Aram discovers that his "novia por foto" is in fact not the girl appearing in the photograph sent by the orphanage. Since Seta's face was marred by insect bites, the orphanage's directors substituted her portrait with that of a similar girl. Although Aram has exchanged letters with Seta rather than with her visual stand-in, the

disconnect between the woman he has married and the deceptive image he trustingly attributed to her sends him into an indignant fit. Yet after examining Seta's features, Aram is prepared to forget the erroneous photo, provided he can take a new one.

The confusion over the portrait thus illustrates the crucial role of photography in Aram's aggressive bid to circumscribe Seta within the confines of her new role as his wife and, he hopes, the future mother of his children. Unlike other forms of mimetic representation such as painting, a photographic portrait may create the illusion of innocently capturing its referent rather than interpreting it. However, as Susan Sontag asserts, such a portrait is not exempt from artifice simply by virtue of its medium. In fact, photography's ubiquity and pretension of transparency constitute its very aggressiveness (5-6). In a similar manner, Richard Brilliant emphasizes the complex web of interactions, many of them unspoken, involved in the act of portrait making. While the ostensible purpose of a portrait is to convey the essence of an individual, the end product is the result of a dynamic process of negotiation involving the subject's vision of herself, the artist's concept of the subject, and the broader value systems in which both sitter and artist are enmeshed (11, 31). In the case of photographic family portraits, Hirsch asserts that one such external influence that comes to bear on representation is the culturally-specific idealized vision of the family (*Family Frames* 11).

In *Una bestia en la luna*, the portraits of Seta do not resemble in any way an attempt to capture her individuality on film, but rather implicate her in Aram's project to begin his life anew, as he expresses on the day of her arrival: "[...] Entonces, cuánta suerte, qué gran día. Tengo una mujer, ella está en América conmigo. (*Pausa.*) Mi vida puede comenzar ahora. ¿Sabe? Mi vida puede comenzar ahora. (*Él se quiebra.*) Mi padre no lo hubiera imaginado nunca. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, yo, una esposa" (7). If portrait-making is always undertaken with a specific public in mind, as Brilliant argues (40), then in Kalinoski's work the intended audience of Seta's portrait is Aram, or rather the tyrannical memory of his parent's will as imagined by Aram, with the resulting subordination of Seta's identity. In this way, the play is chillingly evocative of the anonymizing use of the *carnet* by the dictatorships of the Southern Cone.

For Armenian orphan girls, forced marriage was a common practice in the years following the Genocide. The marriages were arranged by the orphanages' directors as a way of freeing space in the institutions for younger girls. The mail-order brides were deemed ready for matrimony by age 14 or

15, and were typically married off to middle-aged Western Armenians. These “customers” regarded their own actions as benevolent, but were primarily interested in acquiring a subservient wife who, having lost her family, would be especially grateful for the supposed refuge offered by her new spouse (Sanasarian 457). Indeed, as Seta in *Una bestia en la luna* struggles to assert her voice in the patriarchal structure of the household, she also repeatedly asks for Aram’s forgiveness and thanks him for having saved her life.

The following scene in the play opens to reveal Aram preparing a second portrait by excitedly adorning a baby stroller with a blue ribbon in anticipation of Seta’s return from a doctor’s appointment. Meanwhile, Seta’s countenance now fills the cavity once occupied by the face of Aram’s mother in the Tomasian family portrait. In fact, the pre-Genocidal photo and the portraits of Seta in Milwaukee are intimately connected, given that together they constitute Aram’s attempt to by-pass the interminable, and thus impossible, process of mourning set off by photographic images.

For Roland Barthes (76) and Sontag (135-36), the photographic medium enjoys a unique authority due to the photograph’s ability to transmit not a mere representation of the referent, as do paintings or texts, but traces or emanations of the referent itself. The two theorists part ways, however, in their respective views of photography’s role in memory work. For Barthes, photographs testify to the existence of the subject with such force that they superimpose the past and present, thereby becoming counter-memories (76-77, 91). For Sontag, however, since the act of taking a photograph involves freezing a moment in time, photographs attest to the inevitability of death, therefore serving as *memento mori* (13-14). Thus, as Hirsch reasons, the act of looking at a photograph consists of the impossible task of reconciling the depicted past with the present of the onlooker. If the photograph’s subject has died since the image was taken, this so-called “retrospective irony” is all the greater, leaving the onlooker suspended between death and life in a perpetual state of mourning (“Nazi Photographs” 25; *Family Frames* 20). In the case of photographic images of Holocaust victims—and I would argue, by extension, of victims of any genocide—Hirsch posits that the very survival of such images despite the attempt to annihilate the culture they represent only serves to accentuate the paradoxical nature of photographs as registers of life, and simultaneously, harbingers of death (*Family Frames* 23).

In Kalinoski’s work, the photograph of Aram’s family, which he is left clutching after the extermination of his parents and siblings, leaves him in an eternal, unresolved state of grief, which he attempts to circumvent by

replacing the images of the absent referents—that is, the deceased—with those of the next generation, as he later explains to Seta:

Una vez pasé la noche solo, sacando una nueva copia de la foto de mi familia y lloré viéndolos volver vivos en el revelado. [...] Estaba solo. Vi la imagen que volvía en el revelador, viva, y salí con un cuchillo. Y corté la cabeza de mi padre, Toros, de mi madre, Vartuhy, de mi pequeña hermana, Karin, de mi hermano, Dickran. Corté las cabezas de mi familia. Pensé que iba a poder reemplazarlas. Realmente pensé que sería así. (*Abraza la foto contra él.*) Yo pensé, una mujer, hijos y después olvidaría, completamente. Pero no olvidé nunca. Nunca. (50-51)

Aram's efforts to eschew memory are therefore intimately caught up with the issue of reproduction, both photographic—through the development of the family photo and his visual representation of Seta as mother—and biological—through his unrelenting drive to procreate. On the very day of Seta's arrival in Milwaukee, Aram presents her with a hand mirror, encouraging her to see in her own reflection the woman he desires her to be; that is, one prepared for the duties of motherhood, as he later expounds while removing his shirt:

Pero casi tenés dieciocho años. Yo veo una mujer. Y vos y yo tenemos una tarea. Tenemos trabajo. [...] Sí, ahora. Y después otra vez hasta que nos duelan las piernas, porque nosotros, porque mi padre y su padre... los veo... están en mí aquí. (*Indica su cabeza.*) Yo los escucho, ahora, ellos forman un coro y ellos lo exigen. La vida, después la vida, después la vida, Seta. Entonces sí, ahora, ahora. (18-19)

As Aram's speech exemplifies, his reproductive campaign is no more than a futile attempt to establish continuity with the pre-Genocidal past while eliding the horrific rupture represented by the Genocide itself, which he refuses to discuss under any circumstances. As he forcefully prepares to consummate his marriage to Seta, she becomes hysterical and claims to see in his face that of the Turkish gendarme who raped her sister, a reaction that underscores the violence of Aram's zealous quest for progeny. Once the marriage is consummated, further efforts to produce offspring fail time and again, a likely result of Seta's near-starvation during the deportations. Seta's infertility thus serves as an insistent reminder of the past and of Aram's impotence in his attempt to both penetrate and control her, whether through the scopic gaze or through the act it represents.

Aram's predatory treatment of Seta can be seen as a continuation of the gendered aspects of the genocidal process carried out by the Ottoman Turkish government in 1915. As Sanasarian argues, the perpetrators targeted for immediate liquidation adolescent and adult Armenian males, excluding the elderly, as a means of halting Armenian patrilineage and stripping Armenian women of those who would protect them. The subsequent deportations away from populated regions facilitated sexual violence against women, who were subjected to murder, rape, mutilation, and abduction (452-53). In *Una bestia en la luna*, Aram's use of coerced intercourse for the purposes of perpetuating the Tomasian stock tragically echoes the sexual violence committed by the gendarme, even if his purported goal of saving the Armenian race from destruction is antithetical to genocidal annihilation.

It is not until twelve years later that Seta, weary of submitting to Aram's tyrannical behavior, finally challenges the dominance of his gaze. Aram notices a thread caught on the frame of his family portrait, and when pressed, Seta admits that she covers the photograph when Aram is absent in order to escape the burning gaze of his family's eyes: "Cada segundo, sus ojos que jamás vi, mi miran fijo, se me clavan. ¿A quién no le pasaría? Los veo ahora. Son ojos de locos terribles y sangrantes delante mío, cada segundo. Detrás de mí, cada segundo ellos esperan" (48). Although Aram has cut the heads off the figures of his parents and siblings in hopes of forgetting their deaths, his photographic decapitation actually foregrounds their tragic destiny at the hands of the Turks. Moreover, removing their features undermines the importance of individuality in the portrait, thus serving to further dehumanize its subjects. Finally, as Seta expresses, the absence of the subjects' eyes only increases the force of their gaze and the perceived expectations assigned to them and enacted through Aram.

Such a confrontational climax finally forces Aram to share his burdensome memories with Seta and relinquish his futile hopes of propagating the Tomasian gene pool. Aram's narration of his own story is therefore a precondition for the creation of a new family with the addition of Vicente, an abandoned twelve year-old of Italian origin whom Seta has taken under her wing. It is worth noting that it is Vicente as an elderly man who serves as intermediary between the dramatic action, set in the 1920s, and the public, for whom he contextualizes the family drama taking place on stage. When he first appears at the beginning of the work, "el señor viejo" offers a brief account of the Armenian Genocide before explaining the place of Aram and Seta's story within this broader context:

[...] Muchos perecieron en el camino, algunos ni siquiera hicieron el viaje, simplemente fueron matados, fusilados o colgados, o liquidados de alguna otra manera. Entre ellos, un pequeño número, por casualidad, por azar, por la fuerza de su voluntad sobrevivió. A mí me gustaría contarles la historia de dos de ellos. El señor y la señora Tomasian, un muchacho y una chica. Yo soy su testigo. (2)

*Una bestia en la luna* thus replaces the elusive pre-Genocidal family with a new grouping whose existence is predicated on memory, even if remembering precludes the possibility of recapturing the past.<sup>16</sup> The reconceptualized family offered in the play—formed by two orphans and an essentially parentless child—is based not on biological ties, patriarchal models, or static images rendered meaningless by the reality of the Genocide, but is one in which Armenian history is nevertheless passed down to the next generation.

In the work's final scene, it is Seta who suggests a family photo. As Aram places himself behind the camera in his traditional role of photographer, Seta invites him to join her and the young Vicente in the portrait. By positioning himself with Seta and Vicente as an object of his own camera's gaze, Aram acknowledges that he can "see himself" as a member of the new, improvised family proposed by the play, and invites the spectators to view him thus as well. In effect, *Una bestia en la luna* itself represents a dynamic family portrait, one that offers a glimpse into the painful process of forging new familial bonds in the wake of genocidal violence.

In its portrayal of a reimagined family in a post-genocidal context, Kalinoski's play echoes one of the tendencies characterizing Argentine theatre in the postdictatorial period. The dictatorship appropriated metaphors of domesticity in its efforts to rationalize its actions, likening the nation to a family ("la gran familia argentina") with a strict but well-meaning father, in the form of the junta, at the helm (Filc 101, 47). Likewise, the regime discursively represented the family as the principal site of moral education and recognized as legitimate only one family model: that based on the Catholic tradition and its strictly-defined gender roles (Filc 44, 47). As Werth affirms, following the violent fragmentation of actual families caused by the dictatorship's flagrant disregard for human rights, postdictatorial theatre and performance offer "intimate portrayals of families in crisis" and suggest alternative family models (*Theatre* 203-204). Although the play's dramatic action is set in twentieth-century Milwaukee, *Una bestia en la luna* enacts this crisis of family already present on the Argentine stage.



In the five years that *Una bestia en la luna* toured Argentina, the work garnered five ACE and three *Estrella de Mar* awards. And while the Armenian presence in Argentina is substantial, with an estimated 100,000 Armenian inhabitants of Buenos Aires alone, it cannot account for the sustained attendance at the work's performances. To what, then, can one attribute the work's popularity? Perhaps the painful yet tender rapprochement of the principal protagonists explains the Argentine public's positive reception of Kalinoski's work. After all, the program cover from the work's production, in addition to featuring the family portrait from the end of the play, touts *Una bestia en la luna* as a love story. Possibly, the play's treatment of the immigrant story so fundamental to Argentine national identity has attracted the country's spectators. Yet while these aspects of Kalinoski's work may certainly appeal to the public, ultimately the play engages Argentine audiences by using the familiar framing device of photography to take up issues central to postdictatorial societies in the Southern Cone.

In *Una bestia en la luna*, Richard Kalinoski draws on the family portrait in order to insist on the necessity of memory for facilitating the mourning process, nevertheless cautioning against the dangers of dwelling in an irretrievable past. By exposing the struggle over representation that ensues in the process of portrait-making, the play renders suspect the romanticized image of the family and the deceptive narratives it upholds. The post-Genocidal conflicts enacted in *Una bestia en la luna* take on local significance within the context of Argentina's relatively recent past. In its treatment of the pernicious effects of silencing memory, *Una bestia en la luna* explores the legacy of human rights violations specific to one historical context yet universal in its implications.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to article II of the United Nations Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (9 December 1948), genocide is defined as the "intentional destruction of a national, ethnic, racial and religious group, in whole or in part" (Schabas) through any of the following acts: "killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group" (United Nations). As A. Dirk Moses elucidates, the origins of this concept of genocide can be found in *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (1944), a study of Nazi imperialism

by the Polish-Jewish jurist Raphael Lemkin, who defined the concept based on his understanding of the Armenian Genocide (535-6, 542).

<sup>2</sup> Known best for *Beast on the Moon*, Kalinoski (b. Racine, Wisconsin) has authored as well the plays: *Between Men and Cattle*; *A Crooked Man* (commissioned by the Armenian community of Buenos Aires and originally staged in that city as *Un hombre torcido*); *My Soldiers*; *The Thousand Pound Marriage*; *Front Room*; and *The Boy Inside*.

<sup>3</sup> *Beast on the Moon* has been staged extensively in the United States and has won numerous awards, among them the Osborne prize, conferred by the American Theatre Critics Association for the best work outside of New York City. In addition to its success in the United States and Argentina, the play has been staged in France, Italy, Spain, England, Russia, and Greece (Program, Argentine production).

<sup>4</sup> Hairabedian emphasizes the intimate link between the Armenian struggle for Genocide recognition and the universal protection of human rights:

Concebir la lucha contra la impunidad, por la Verdad y la Justicia, como parte singular e imprescindible de las que llevan a cabo otros pueblos con los mismos propósitos, inclusive por los genocidios sociales y el efectivo ejercicio universal y cotidiano de los derechos humanos, incorporándose desde la particularidad armenia a la gran empresa humanista y universal que brega, consciente de sus necesidades, por un mundo mejor, justo, solidario, libre y democrático, que es posible construir entre todos. ("Conferencia" 28)

<sup>5</sup> Although the sentence carries no punitive consequences for the Turkish state, it is nevertheless deemed a conviction ("cosa juzgada") and can therefore appear before other courts and international organizations such as the United Nations ("Oyarbide").

<sup>6</sup> In addition to *Una bestia en la luna* and *Un mismo árbol verde*, those plays treating the Armenian Genocide which have been staged in Argentina include: *El gran silencio*; *Un hombre torcido* (a play commissioned by Kalinoski by Armenian-Argentine theatre practitioners subsequent to the success of *Una bestia en la luna*); *Capítulo V: La cuestión armenia*; *Berlin 1921*; *El hombre de las palomas*; and *Son palomas*.

<sup>7</sup> It was on this date in 1915 that 250 intellectuals among them poets Taniel Varuyan and Rupén Sevag-and other leaders of the Armenian community were arrested and summarily executed, as explained above. In 1990, Armenian theatre practitioners of Buenos Aires staged *El gran silencio*, an adaptation of a work by the same name written by Berdj Zeitountzia, which treats this same event. In 2006, in recognition of the Armenian Genocide, Argentina's Congress designated April 24 official day of mutual tolerance and respect: "Declárase el día 24 de abril de todos los años como 'Día de acción por la tolerancia y el respeto entre los pueblos,' en conmemoración del genocidio de que fue víctima el pueblo armenio y con el espíritu de que su memoria sea una lección permanente sobre los pasos del presente y las metas de nuestro futuro" (Argentina; Alcácer).

<sup>8</sup> As explained in the press coverage of the prize ceremony, the Premios Teatro del Mundo, conferred under the auspices of the Jornadas Nacionales de Teatro Comparado, are intended to distinguish those Argentine and foreign theatre practitioners who work to connect theatrical activity in Argentina with that taking place internationally (Soriana).

<sup>9</sup> Commander of the Fourth Ottoman Army in Syria, Jemal Pasha was referred to as "the hangman of Syria" (Hofmann and Koutcharian 54).

<sup>10</sup> In fact, the committee even changed its name twice in order to avoid provoking the Turkish government: from American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (1915), to American Committee for Relief in the Near East (1918), to Near East Relief (1919) (Hofmann and Koutcharian 57).

<sup>11</sup> The amended caption reads as follows: "This photograph purports to be an Ottoman official taunting starving Armenians with bread. It is a fake, combining elements of two (or more) separate photographs: a demonstration were one needed of the propaganda stakes on both sides of the genocide issue with evidence of all sorts manipulated for latterday political purposes. The photograph was also included when the book was first published but then was believed to be genuine. It has previously been used in Gérard Chaliand and Yves Ternon's *Le Genocide des Arméniens* (1980), which shows that prior use is no

substitute for rigorous investigation of a picture's provenance and, in the absence of clear provenance, for a minutely detailed examination of the picture itself. It is a cautionary tale for historians, many of whom are better trained in testing and using written sources than in evaluating photographic evidence. The publishers and author are grateful to have had the forgery drawn to their attention" (qtd. in Krikorian et al).

<sup>12</sup> A detailed examination of the image has revealed that it is actually a composite of other images, is a blatant forgery, and has existed as early as 1919. The aspects of the photo which arouse suspicion are more or less apparent, depending on the level of contrast in any given reproduction of the image. Most obviously, the so-called Turkish official cruelly brandishing a piece of bread is missing one leg or a part of one leg, and one of his arms. His outstretched arm is awkwardly connected to his torso. Meanwhile, the arms of the ostensible "starving Armenians" who are reaching for the bread are impossibly long in anatomical terms. Finally, the wall in the background seems to abruptly change in texture behind the image of the purported Turkish official, suggesting the possibility that his image was pasted from another photograph and subsequently blended in (Krikorian et. al.).

<sup>13</sup> Even Wegner himself, who made it his life's work to denounce the genocidal treatment of Ottoman Armenians, offered in the form of oral presentations two diametrically opposed interpretations of his own photographs. In a slide lecture he presented in 1918 for the German-Turkish Society for the Enlightenment of the People, Wegner displayed photographic images of Armenian deportees. Nevertheless, Wegner simultaneously proffered the official Turkish contextualization of his pictures, claiming that the Armenians were deported after having committed treason against Turkey, and that the deportees' suffering was mitigated by government-organized food distribution. However, in 1919, Wegner presented another lecture in which he referred to the atrocities committed against Armenians and criticized Germany's passive complicity with their annihilation. As Hofmann and Koutcharian affirm, Wegner's 1919 lecture is far more credible given the intervening lifting of German military censorship, which had prohibited circulation in Germany of information about the Armenian Genocide. The Wegner example therefore serves as further evidence that pictorial documents can be manipulated to support opposing views of events (57-58).

<sup>14</sup> In her cogent analysis of the use of the family portrait as a framing device in Marcelo Bertuccio's play *Señora, esposa, niña y joven desde lejos*, Werth offers a detailed contextualization of the central role of photography by human rights groups and artists interrogating the politics of memory in the post-dictatorial Southern Cone.

<sup>15</sup> Significantly, while the Spanish translation of *Beast on the Moon* utilizes the *voseo*, the Argentine production of Kalinoski's work makes no further attempt to tailor the play to an Argentine context, choosing to leave the dramatic action in Wisconsin. As I argue, however, the issues of memory and mourning invoked in the play make *Una bestia en la luna* "translatable" for a post-Proceso Argentine public.

<sup>16</sup> Indeed, as Donald E. and Lorna Touryan Miller discovered while conducting extensive interviews with Genocide survivors, the latter frequently affirmed that the pain of being an orphan actually intensified with time, especially when the adult survivors had their own children ("Women and Children..." 164).

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