OXFORD

Frontstage and Backstage in Argentina's Transitional Justice Drama: The Niet@s' Reconstruction of Identity on Social Media

Beate Goldschmidt-Gjerløw* and Merel Remkes†

ABSTRACT∞

This article provides new insight into how the 'found grandchildren' of postconflict Argentina are reconstructing their sense of self and identity after having been identified as children of disappeared political activists in the aftermath of the last military regime (1976–1983). We offer tools for understanding how they respond to the context-specific transitional justice measures of identification and restitution, and how this plays out on social media. This online world expands the possibilities to both share and comment on personal and public information. The narrative analysis discusses how our informants influence the Argentine transitional justice process by using social media as a stage for the performance of their life stories. However, their digital presentation of self is constrained to a certain extent by potential social reactions.

KEYWORDS: Argentina, the disappeared, reconstruction of identity, social media, 'found grandchildren'

INTRODUCTION

Each year on her biological mother's birthday, Belinda Rocío[1] publishes a picture of her on Facebook. It is always the same grainy, sepia-colored picture of a dark-haired 20-year-old woman, frozen in time. One year, Belinda Rocío wrote: 'Happy birthday, mom! Always young, always eternal! What I would give to have you here with me,' with a sad emoji. Another year, she wrote: 'Mom, it's your birthday! Your years will be eternal. All I have is some of your pictures and having spent nine months in your

---

* PhD Research Fellow, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Sociology and Social Work, University of Agder, Norway. Email: beate.goldschmidt-gjerlow@uia.no [ID]

† Master in Cultural Anthropology, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Email: post@merelremkes.nl [ID]

1 We have combined the pseudonyms of our informants from previous work. They therefore appear with double names in this article.

---

womb. I love you always.' Every time more than a hundred people respond to these posts, supporting her with likes, sending her love, hugs and kisses, and writing statements about how alike Belinda Rocío and her disappeared mother are. The birthday cards Belinda Rocío posts on her timeline allow her to keep her mother's memory alive, to bring the past into the present and to incorporate her mother's story into her own. Not only is this an expression of how she reconstructs her biological parents' memory and Argentina's memory of the human rights violations committed by the country's last military regime, but it also helps her to understand where she comes from and who she is. She communicates this narrative of the self to her audience through social media, which in turn shapes her social identity through the reactions of her audience.

Where are the stolen babies? Ever since the disclosure that the last Argentine military dictatorship (1976–1983) kidnapped babies from political opponents, this agonizing question has echoed throughout the country, reminding us of the atrocities that started over four decades ago. From 1977, the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*, the grandmothers of the stolen babies, put this question on the political agenda. As of the mid-1990s, the organization *Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio*, consisting of other children from disappeared political activists – in Spanish *desaparecid@s*[2] – became part of the human rights movement in search of their siblings. The search for and recovery of the children of the disappeared characterizes civil society's pursuit of transitional justice in Argentina.[3]

The challenging life experiences of the found grandchildren have been documented by authors such as Analía Argento,[4] Ángela Pradelli[5] and Ari Gandsman.[6] Gandsman argues that the process of identity restitution entails the construction of a new narrative identity that involves recontextualizing social relations and life histories.[7] This article aims to provide new insights into how the found grandchildren's (*niet@s'*) recontextualization of social relations and life stories is incorporated into their digital narratives of the self, and how this in turn influences the Argentine transitional justice process through social media.

The research questions for this article are: In what ways do the *niet@s* use social media in their everyday lives to reconstruct their sense of self and social identity? How do they control their audiences and negotiate the boundaries between private and public, past and future, disclosure and privacy?[8] These issues are interesting to research because

---

2 The @ ending is to avoid exclusionary language. The purpose is to emphasize that we are talking about both females and males. In Spanish, the plural form of the noun is -os, which excludes females. Therefore, the @ ending is a contribution to make females visible.

3 Ari Edward Gandsman, 'Retributive Justice, Public Intimacies and the Micropolitics of the Restitution of Kidnapped Children of the Disappeared in Argentina,' *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 6(3) (2012): 423–443.

4 Analía Argento, *De Vuelta en Casa: Historias de Hijos y Nietos Restituidos* (Buenos Aires: Marea Editorial, 2008).

5 Ángela Pradelli, *En mi nombre. Historias de identidades restituidas* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Paidós, 2014).

6 Gandsman, supra n 3.

7 Ibid.

8 Inspired by Zeynep Tufekci, 'Can You See Me Now? Audience and Disclosure Regulation in Online Social Network Sites,' *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society* 28(1) (2008): 20–36.

The dialectic between 'media' and 'social' has become more urgent to understand in an era when media and information infrastructures have expanded, converged, and become embedded more deeply in the texture of everyday life.[9]

José van Dijck poses an essential question around how to research social media platforms responsibly in a culture of compulsory connectivity.[10] This kind of research must go beyond merely describing how such platforms work, or celebrating their supposedly positive potential as democratic, expressive and socializing sites. Research on social media should look at how these platforms present a certain version of 'the social,' and how users go about *enacting* it.[11] We explore how specific users of social media – the identified children of Argentina's disappeared political activists – present their version of social reality by using these technological infrastructures in their everyday lives, as well as how their use of social media can shed light upon the various ways in which they reconstruct their sense of self and identity. In 2018, approximately 50 percent of the Argentine population had a Facebook account – numbering about 22 million people.[12]

Our empirical material shows that the legal structures of the transitional justice process have conditioned the *niet@s*' development of self and identity, and, to a certain extent, deprived some of them of the ability to exert agency in their own lives. This forms part of the social reality they live in, and influences not only how they present themselves physically in the Argentine society, but also the ways in which they create self-presentations and profile pages on social network sites. Zeynep Tufekci refers to this as 'technologically mediated sociality'[13] and pinpoints how

> the process of seeing and being seen has migrated to digital environments which confound the traditional ways in which we control our audiences and negotiate the boundary between the private and the public, the past and the future, disclosure and privacy.[14]

We categorize how the *niet@s* present themselves, try to reconstruct their identity and create a coherent narrative of the self on social media. The six categorizations, some of which could be perceived as coping strategies, entail how they: 1) reconstruct their own childhood memories and social relations; 2) reconstruct their biological parents' memory; 3) manage the stories of their appropriation and their

---

9   Nick Couldry and José van Dijck, 'Researching Social Media as if the Social Mattered,' *Social Media and Society* (2015): 1.

10 José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

11 Ibid.

12 Statista, 'Number of Facebook Users in Argentina from 2015 to 2022 (in Millions),' https://www.statista.com/statistics/282333/number-of-facebook-users-in-argentina/; Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Concensos República Argentina, 'Base de datos REDATAM del Censo 2010,' https://www.indec.gob.ar/nivel2_default.asp?seccion=P&id_tema=2 (both accessed 5 March 2019).

13 Tufekci, supra n 8 at 31.

14 Ibid., 20.

Table 1: Background information on the four key informants

	Identified as a child	Identified as an adult
Identified through efforts from civil society and the Argentine state	Veronica Gabriela Roberto Rafael	Jennifer Camila*
Identified through their own initiative		Belinda Rocío

Note: * Jennifer Camila's case is unique in that she was identified as both a child and an adult (discussed later).

'upbringing family';[15] 4) manage, adapt or reject adapting to their audience, consisting of members from both families (biological and upbringing) as well as others; 5) promote the human rights narrative in their own narrative of the self; and 6) experience the transgenerational impact of their identity reconstruction. We use the term 'categorizations' instead of 'categories' to highlight that these are ongoing processes of reconstructing the self and identity. The categorizations can be intertwined, for example reconstructing the biological parents' memory has a transgenerational impact. These emotionally charged ways of identity reconstruction were first identified in semi-structured interviews with our informants. They are not the only ways in which the *niet@s* reconstruct their identity, but represent the most essential ones according to our empirical material.

This article focuses on how these various ways of identity reconstruction are epitomized by the narratives of four key informants. They highlight tendencies regarding the challenges and opportunities that several *niet@s* experience in their identity reconstruction both off- and online. We chose these four informants for several reasons: both authors conducted personal interviews with them and have stayed in touch with them on social media over the last eight years (2011–present), thus providing rich data. The key informants also portray different dimensions of personal experiences, with identification, restitution and identity reconstruction depending on essential matters such as when in their lives they were identified and whether or not they actively sought the truth. We also aimed to represent both genders (Table 1).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

What happened in Argentina between 1976 and 1983? The dictatorship started the 'Process of National Reorganization,' which included installing a system of abduction, detention and torture of several thousand political opponents. There is much controversy regarding the exact number of victims of state terrorism. The ex-leader of the guerrilla group *Los Montoneros*, Luis Labraña, has publicly admitted that they invented the number of 30,000 disappeared persons in order to get funding and attention from the world community. According to *El Registro Unificado de Víctimas del Terrorismo de Estado*[16] (the Registry of Victims of State Terrorism, or RUVTE-register), created by the Argentine Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, there were

---

15 Families that raised the babies kidnapped from political opponents during the military dictatorship.
16 See, https://www.argentina.gob.ar/sitiosdememoria/ruvte/informe (accessed 8 April 2019).

7,636 victims of enforced disappearance and assassination between 1976 and 1983. This number is based on cases that were denounced to *La Comisión sobre la Desaparición de Personas* (National Commission on the Disappeared).[17] The victims came to be known as 'the missing' – or *desaparecid@s*.[18] Amongst them were pregnant women, who gave birth in state-created clandestine detention centers. Over 500 babies also became victims of the regime, taken from their biological parents and placed in military families, families empathizing with the regime or innocent civilian families that either did or did not know about the destiny of the babies' parents.[19]

The dictatorship lost power after the failed battle of the Malvinas against Britain in 1982, and the subsequent governments embarked on various transitional justice approaches to deal with the legacy of mass political violence.[20] A 1985 trial convicted military leaders, but because of amnesty laws and pardons in the years that followed, many were released and further prosecutions were prevented, representing a major setback in the Argentine transitional justice process. However, between 1986 and 2003, there were 18 convictions in 13 child theft cases, the highest penalty being 10 years in prison. Some of the found children of the disappeared, who at that time were minors, had to witness their upbringing family being prosecuted. By that point, the children considered their upbringing parents to be their mother and father, with strong emotional bonds tying the family members together.

During the period of impunity in the 1990s, these cases of child theft were basically the only crimes brought to court. In 1992, the National Commission for the Right to Identity was created with the purpose of identifying the children who had been kidnapped during the military dictatorship.[21] Human rights activism prompted Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón to claim international jurisdiction in the 1990s, leading to the reopening of investigations into the military dictatorship. After Néstor Kirchner's presidential election in 2003, the government annulled the amnesties and pardons, enabling trials to restart in 2006.[22]

For decades, the National Bank of Genetic Data has provided the opportunity to store blood samples of disappeared people's relatives, and has been an important platform for tracing disappeared children.[23] In today's Argentina, people who are unsure of their origins can match their blood with these samples.

17 Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, *Nunca Más* (1984).

18 Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

19 Elin Skaar, Siri Gloppen and Astri Suhrke, eds., *Roads to Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005).

20 Ibid.

21 Patricia Tappatá de Valdez, 'El pasado, un tema central del presente. La búsqueda de verdad y justicia como construcción de una lógica democrática,' in *Verdad, justicia y reparación: Desafíos para la democracia y la convivencia social*, ed. Gilda Pacheco Oreamuno, Lorena Acevedo Narea and Guido Galli (Stockholm: Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2005).

22 Gandsman, supra n 3.

23 Alexandra Barahona de Brito, 'Truth, Justice, Memory, and Democratization in the Southern Cone,' in *The Politics of Memory: Transitional Justice in Democratizing Societies*, ed. Alexandra Barahona de Brito, Carmen González-Enríquez and Paloma Aguilar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

CHILDREN OF THE DISAPPEARED

As of March 2019, 128 children of the disappeared had been found, with more than 400 persons still unidentified.[24] The *niet@s* are not a homogenous group: some are open about their biological origins whereas others are not, and some identify strongly with the search of the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*, while others distance themselves.[25] We use the following terms synonymously: '*niet@s*,' '*apropiad@s*,' 'found grandchildren' and 'children of the disappeared.' The Spanish term '*niet@s*' refers to the fact that they are the grandchildren of the searching *Abuelas*. In Argentina, this term is charged with symbolic meaning. If the children of the disappeared use that term about themselves, it means that they acknowledge their biological origin, which some of them do not. The term '*apropiad@s*' stems from the fact that these children were appropriated against the will of their biological parents. The term 'adoptees' or '*adoptiv@s*' is therefore inadequate. However, some also reject the term '*apropiad@s*' because it requires acknowledging that their appropriation was a crime. Some of the found grandchildren discard this, or they do not agree with the legal measures undertaken to restore their identity based on biological origins (discussed later).

APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEXITY OF IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION

To provide a framework for understanding the complexity of the *niet@s*' identity reconstruction and self-presentation in everyday life on social media, we draw upon psychoanalytical perspectives from Jacques Lacan and sociological considerations on reflexivity of the self from Anthony Giddens. Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper's alternative approach to the concept of identity, as well as Erving Goffman's metaphor of social life as a stage, contextualize the *niet@s*' performances both off- and online.

Lacanian philosophers argue that our images of the world and of reality do not match. What we see as objective reality is actually a social construct.[26] This does not necessarily mean there is no objective reality, but that we will never be able to grasp it in its essence.[27] We understand the world and our experiences in frameworks of meaning, like language, in logical stories that make sense to us. At times, events occur that do not fit into our carefully established stories, like the moment you find out your biological parents were murdered and you are not who you think you are. We look for symbolic closure when dealing with these unanticipated experiences, trying to embark on a process of healing by encompassing all aspects of reality in new, meaningful stories. The search for symbolic closure shows the desire for an unproblematic state of being to create a solid ground on which we can build our new stories.[28] These new stories will also only partially include reality; they are fantasy formations fueled by desire, not by reality. For the *niet@s*, two important aspects of identity – who you are and where you belong – turned out to be problematic. The ideas they had about

---

24 Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, 'Casos resueltos,' https://www.abuelas.org.ar/caso/buscar?tipo=3 (accessed 5 March 2019).

25 Email communication with Associate Professor Anne Margrethe Sønneland, VID Specialized University, 5 June 2018.

26 Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1999).

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

themselves and their parents turned out to be false, confronting them with the deficiency of their stories. They had to find new narratives to live by.[29]

The self can be seen as a reflexive project for which the knowledgeable actor is responsible: 'We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves.'[30] Self-identity is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her 'capacity to keep a particular narrative going.'[31] Yet, the *niet@s* who were identified while being minors did not have the opportunity to choose who they wanted to be – the state decided for them in the name of justice by restoring them to their biological family and changing their name according to their biological origin. However, some of our 18 informants kept on living with their upbringing family as a result of negotiations between the upbringing and the biological family, despite what the judge wanted.[32] There are several cases like these beyond our 18 informants in which the *Abuelas* and the biological families recognized the emotional bonds the *niet@s* had with their upbringing family. Yet, this was not so for our key informants Veronica Gabriela and Roberto Rafael, who were identified as offspring of the *desaparecid@s* when they were young children.

In their cases, it can be argued that the Argentine state infringed twice on their right to identity: first, during the dictatorship when they were taken from their biological parents; and second, when they were taken from their upbringing family with little consideration of the trauma this caused them. This can be considered a breach of several articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC): Article 8, which focuses on the child's right to identity based on family relations; Article 3(1), which stresses that in all actions concerning children, their best interests should be a primary consideration; and Article 12, which points out children's right to be heard in matters that affect their lives. In postconflict Argentina, the state and human rights groups have prioritized the right to know the biological aspect of one's identity. The argument is that the found grandchildren's socially constructed identities are based on the illegal act of appropriation. To restore them biologically and persecute their appropriators is the only road to justice. Meanwhile, for many of the found grandchildren, their socially constructed identity is essential to their self-understanding. Justice for them would partly entail both the state and the *Abuelas* taking their emotional ties to their upbringing family into consideration. Unfortunately, the actors who should have safeguarded their fundamental rights did not always do that, treating them as objects to be taken, relocated, thrown back and forth rather than as subjects with their own rights, needs and opinions.

Choosing who you want to be and how you want to present yourself involves having agency. Regarding the *niet@s* in Argentina, Gandsman notes that,

> Since identity forms the basis of agency, the basis of the agency of the children of the disappeared – their ability to make decisions about what they want – is exactly what is in question.[33]

29 Merel Remkes, 'La vida es como un rompecabezas' (MA thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2012).

30 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 75.

31 Ibid., 54.

32 Beate Gjerløw, 'Questioning and Assuming Identities in a Process of Transitional Justice: The Case of Argentina's Found Grandchildren' (MA thesis, University of Tromsø, Norway, 2012).

33 Gandsman, supra n 3 at 441.

This article discusses how the Argentine state's identification of the *niet@s* based on their biological origins does not necessarily converge with their self-identification. This not only affects their offline self-presentation, but also impacts how they present themselves on social media platforms.

Brubaker and Cooper question the utility of the concept of identity, and propose that we rather use the concepts of identification, self-understanding, social location, commonality, connectedness and *zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl* – a feeling of belonging together.[34] These concepts help us to see the various ways in which the *niet@s* reconstruct and develop their identity on social media. These technological infrastructures are part of the specific social structures of our time and shape how we interact socially. This online world expands the possibilities to share and exchange both personal and public information.[35] People use Facebook or Instagram for different levels of emotional exhibitionism, with photos or comments about everything from daily activities to important life-changing events.[36] Social media can provide a *zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl* and connectedness with people you see regularly, only once in a while or are not in contact with offline. It can give social recognition to the self and to one's life situation through feedback on publications with likes, hearts, emojis or comments. Social media can also contribute to self-realization when used to achieve political influence, which is the case for some of the most public *niet@s*.

This article is not meant as an uncritical endorsement of social media and the authors are well aware of the associated challenges, such as increased narcissism, privacy issues, (illegal) storage of personal information, fake news and so on. However, current research affirms that social media makes social interaction with other people easier and gives us a feeling of belonging, which is important for our quality of life.[37] Social media is not a transparent reflection of reality – what the *niet@s* present is only a fraction of their reality. They constrain themselves to a certain extent because of the potential negative reactions of their audience, especially when it comes to showing emotional bonds to their upbringing family. Nonetheless, we see the value of these platforms for allowing them to potentially present their subjective truths about who they are.

Goffman's theoretical considerations about social life are highly relevant for understanding how people manage their performance of self on social media. Different sets of 'audiences' are invited to this performance. People have distinct roles depending on the social context, and we often manage several roles simultaneously.[38] Social life can be seen as a multi-staged drama in which each person performs various roles in different social situations.[39] Being a child of the disappeared entails dealing with contradictory roles, especially in cases where they were raised by the 'enemy' – where the upbringing family played an active role in the military

34   Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, 'Beyond "Identity",' *Theory and Society* 29(1) (2000): 1–47.
35   Ana María Munar, 'Digital Exhibitionism: The Age of Exposure,' *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* 2(23) (2010): 401–422.
36   Ibid.
37   Fulvio Castellacci and Vegard Tveito, 'Internet Use and Well-Being: A Survey and a Theoretical Framework,' *Research Policy* 47(1) (2018): 308–325.
38   Erving Goffman, 'The Self and Social Roles: Role Distance,' in *The Goffman Reader*, ed. C. Lemert and A. Branaman (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007).
39   Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 1956).

regime. Some *niet@s* have both their upbringing family and their biological family as their audience on social media, showing how social media may blur formerly distinct social roles and settings. We adapt our behavior according to our audience, and if two different sets of audience come to our performance, we assume a role and present ourselves in a way that satisfies both groups. Each role discloses different aspects of our identity and what we decide to emphasize depends on our audience. For the *niet@s*, social media creates opportunities and challenges when deciding what they want to show about who they are.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article is based on 31 semi-structured interviews with 18 children of the disappeared conducted by the authors in 2011, 2012 and 2016; digital observation from 2012 to the present; analysis of the content and meaning of our informants' Facebook posts; and communication through Messenger-chat in 2018. Some of our informants were interviewed several times. Our information on Instagram publications is based on what our informants told us they had shared. The first contact we had with the *niet@s* was through writing them personal messages on Facebook in 2011. After befriending several of them, we observed their digital actions on social media, although it was not our initial intention to do so. It gave us the opportunity to reflect on what they shared, why they shared it and what this implied for the reconstruction of their identity. The *niet@s* also saw what we published on Facebook and stayed in touch with likes, hearts and comments, maintaining a friendship that evolved during the interviews. We got to know them personally in the interviews and many shared very private information.

We adhered to ethical requirements concerning anonymity when analyzing what our informants wrote and published on social media. Each informant was given a pseudonym to ensure privacy and anonymity. However, despite our attempts to anonymize our informants, individuals who are friends with them on social media might recognize certain aspects of the pictures we discuss in their presentation of self, which could be considered an ethical drawback. Nevertheless, our informants gave us permission to analyze the content of their Facebook pages. They also read some of the empirical parts of this article before publication. It is important to us that our informants are informed and have the agency to express themselves about how sensitive issues in their lives are portrayed.

ARGENTINIAN TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AS PUBLIC, PERSONAL AND POLARIZED

The concept of transitional justice is both a process and an outcome of measures such as truth commissions, economic reparations and court trials, which postconflict countries draw upon. There is an implicit assumption that measures favor the survivors. However, Hugo van der Merwe and colleagues note that we do not have sufficient information regarding how survivors affected by political violence experience these mechanisms and we need more knowledge about their perspective on the measures undertaken.[40]

40   Hugo van der Merwe, Victoria Baxter and Audrey R. Chapman, eds., *Assessing the Impact of Transitional Justice: Challenges for Empirical Research* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 2009).

The rule of law sometimes fails in transitional situations because the identity of the citizen and the identity of the state – as well as the relationship between the two – are under construction.[41] This is essential in the Argentine case, because the identity restoration of the children of the disappeared has been at the heart of the transitional justice process. The concept of restitution entails being restored to one's biological family and being given legal identity papers based on one's biological origins. Several of the children of the disappeared do not want to incorporate Argentina's national narrative of transitional justice into their own narrative of the self. This rejection should be seen in relation to the concept of identity as a social construct, which challenges the notion of blood being thicker than water.

Argentina is one of only a few postconflict countries that has prosecuted some of the worst human rights violators and followed various institutional paths to confront past repression, which makes this country of high interest in transitional justice literature.[42] However, prosecuting human rights violators or carrying out truth commissions does not necessarily consolidate democracy. A current Argentine debate highlights this: although the last military dictatorship committed grave human rights violations, some political opponents also resorted to violence. Bombs were placed in public spheres, killing and injuring civilians, including children. Family members of the military regime were kidnapped or killed by members of guerrilla groups such as the *Montoneros*.[43] This is often left out when addressing who the political opponents were and what they did. Legal prosecution for these kinds of acts has not occurred. This issue has been put on the political agenda by, among others, lawyers such as Victoria Villarruel. She documents several hundred injured victims and 1,094 deaths attributed to such perpetrators.[44] Achieving Argentine transitional justice would require recognizing that there are victims of terrorism *on both sides*. If we reproduce a discourse – a social construct of reality – that ignores these issues, we put obstacles in the way of achieving a democracy in which all voices are heard and the human rights of all are protected.

That said, in the Argentine democracy there is not necessarily room for all voices. Mass media tend to reproduce the binary notions that you are either against the actions of the military regime or you defend them; you either think the *niet@s* belong with their biological family or you think they belong with their upbringing family. This polarity hinders a democratic dialogue which takes into account several voices. We see this in the controversial Alfredo Casero case from August 2018: the Argentine actor publicly questioned the authenticity of the *niet@s* and the work of the *Abuelas* in the talk show *Animales Sueltos*. His criticism was that the human rights movement had been coopted by the Kirchner government, so insinuating that the *niet@s* had been used to 'do politics' in order to gain popularity and more votes. To make amends, he publicly apologized for what he had said. Some people were outraged, but others supported his comments on social media. This is reflected in a public comment posted on a news channel's Facebook page in August 2018:

41   Ruti Teitel, 'Transitional Justice Genealogy,' *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 16(1) (2003): 69–94.

42   Skaar et al., supra n 19.

43   Carlos A. Manfroni and Victoria E. Villarruel, *Los otros Muertos: Las víctimas civiles del terrorismo guerrillero de los 70* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2014).

44   Ibid.

Regarding this topic [the work of the *Abuelas*], if you have a different opinion than the mainstream version, they crucify you. I don't know if he's [Casero] right or not, but it's a democratic country and one should be able to state one's opinion without anyone bothering you. He got some balls, *el gordo* [affectionate nickname in Spanish for 'fat guy'].[45]

This comment highlights a challenge in today's Argentina: politically incorrect voices are met with strong social sanction. In this world of polarized views, the *niet@s* have to determine their position in Argentine society – whether they adopt, ignore or reject the existing narratives.[46]

VERONICA GABRIELA: 'I ONLY HAVE ONE LIFE, AND EVERYTHING FORMS PART OF IT'

Veronica Gabriela was a little girl at the time she was identified as a child of the disappeared. She knew that she was not her mother's biological child, but was unaware that her adoption had been part of the military regime's systematic kidnapping of children. In the early 1980s, the *Abuelas* received a complaint that she might be a child of *desaparecid@s*. The adoption was based on incorrect information, because the person who had adopted her had falsified her identity. A DNA test confirmed her biological origin. The biological family and the upbringing family were given shared custody, and she started living half a week with one family and half with the other. One family called her by one name, the other by another name. The restitution split her life in two and she felt like she could not do anything about it. As a consequence of traveling back and forth between the two families and their hostility towards each other during court trials, she lost some of her connectedness and *zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl* with her upbringing family and found it difficult to establish ties with her biological family. For a long period of time she felt completely alone in the world.

The interpretation by the Argentine state and the *Abuelas* of the right to identity being merely biological, as per the CRC, and the fact that the court system did not consult her about her wishes and needs, made her restitution a very traumatic event for her. She says that the day she has her own family will be the day she finally belongs somewhere. Looking back on the period of restitution, Veronica Gabriela says:

In the moment, you just have to row, and row, and row forward, because if not, you die. Then, when you finally come to the finish line, you become aware of how difficult it was. At times you run, run, run, and when you stop, everything hurts. When you relax, your whole body hurts. During the years you live it, you can't stop. Really, you say: why did this happen to me?[47]

Years later a new judge reviewed her case and finally asked her a question she had not been asked by anyone throughout this whole period: 'What do you want?' At that

---

45   To preserve anonymity, the news channel is not named.
46   Remkes, supra n 29.
47   Gjerløw, supra n 32 at 47.

point, she did not feel like living with either of the families. When she finally received her ID document, she was already in her 20s and decided to live on her own.[48]

In 2008, Veronica Gabriela published her first pictures on Facebook. They focus on childhood and family, portraying her as a child in the years before the identification and restitution took place. Although sharing childhood photographs is quite common, in Veronica Gabriela's case publishing them can be considered a symbolic act of identity reconstruction. The social ties she made, not only with her upbringing family but also with friends, are important to her when trying to grasp her own biography by creating a coherent narrative of the self. In 2018, Veronica Gabriela said that, 'Thanks to Facebook, I could reencounter people that were part of my childhood and that my [biological] family tried to erase.'[49] This highlights how the technological infrastructures of social media participate in reestablishing and reconstructing the social ties that are valuable to her sense of self and identity. By sharing pictures of childhood memories on Facebook, the site becomes a stage for mending broken ties and undoing what felt traumatizing for her as a child.

The self as a reflexive project helps us to see how the *niet@s* are aware of their own role, what they do and why, of the possibilities and the choices they make in reconstructing their identity. It must be emphasized, however, that many of them have been forced to reconstruct a new identity, which makes their reflexive project unique. It has not been of their own free choice, because they have been externally identified by the state apparatus, which conditions their sense of self and identity. As adults, the *niet@s* have more agency to influence who they want to be and digital actions on social media can play an important role in exerting this agency.

For Veronica Gabriela, deciding what she does and how she wants to portray herself is to a certain extent empowering. Her social media audience includes members from both her upbringing family and her biological family, amongst others. When asked if she worries about what one of the families will say if she posts a picture of the other, she says:

> At this point, nothing worries me. If they have a problem with it, it is their problem. However, I don't share a lot of pictures and I don't tell about my private life in social media.[50]

In this way, she sets boundaries regarding public and private spheres. Furthermore, she manages her audience by having strict privacy boundaries in her digital environment, so regulating what people can see:

> Only my friends from primary school can see pictures from primary school. This way, no one can see all of the pictures I have, and a lot of them are private that only I can see.[51]

---

48   Ibid.
49   Personal communication, Messenger-chat, 18 May 2018.
50   Ibid.
51   Ibid.

She maintains some of the relations and friendships she had prior to her restitution period, which contributes to her creation of a coherent narrative of the self. She stresses that it is impossible to erase the person you were in the first nine years of your life, adding that the restitution 'was like erasing everything and starting over, as if that is possible.'[52] However, although she says, 'I only have one life and everything forms part of it,'[53] she does not let everyone see her complete narrative. Organizing Facebook friends into particular groups is a strategy for establishing distinct digital social settings to avoid having to adapt to a wide range of audiences at once or creating conflict between her different roles as the daughter of her upbringing family and the daughter of her biological family. This could be interpreted as a way of censoring publications related to who she was before the restitution, given that only 'friends from primary school can see [those] pictures,' although keeping her stories and audiences separate feels to her like exerting agency.

ROBERTO RAFAEL: DEALING WITH THE UPBRINGING FAMILY AS *APROPIADORES* ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Roberto Rafael was identified as a young boy by the *Abuelas*, who filed a case against his upbringing family for child theft. His upbringing father told him their accusations were not true: 'They have a grudge against me because of my position during the war; they want to get back at me.'[54] When Roberto Rafael's upbringing parents finally admitted that he was adopted, they insisted they did not know about his background as a child of *desaparecid@s*. He was restituted to one of his biological family members, but had a hard time building a relationship with that person, since he/she wanted him to cut all contact with his upbringing family. He was interested in his biological roots, but also wanted to stay in touch with his previous life. That did not seem to be possible:

> When [person's name] got custody, [he/she] said: 'For me it's like you have just been born.' Well, there I was, a sixteen-year-old child with all his cultural, ideological baggage, however you want to call it. It created conflicts.[55]

Roberto Rafael felt like he had to become 'someone else' and assume an identity based on his biological origin. Even though a judge had ruled that he was not to see anyone from his old life, he stayed in touch with his upbringing family. Although he still has affectionate ties with them, it remains complicated. His upbringing parents have been persecuted, but for Roberto Rafael personally, justice is yet to be achieved. He is missing an important part of understanding his own biography – the truth about the circumstances of his appropriation. He critically questions his upbringing family's version of it:

> She [his upbringing mother] keeps persisting on the fact that they saved me, a premature baby. I tried hard to make her realize what they did was wrong.

52   Gjerløw, supra n 32 at 45.
53   Personal communication, Messenger-chat, 18 May 2018.
54   Personal interview, Buenos Aires, 10 March 2016.
55   Remkes, supra n 29 at 27.

Come on, I am not a kitty you found on the street. You could have at least tried to find out who I was. I don't belong to you, I am not an object to be owned. I keep asking, I have the right to hear the truth. The question whether I could forgive them for what they did I can't even answer. First, they have to tell me the truth, accept they made a mistake. Respect me by acknowledging that.[56]

Not knowing his situation from the day he was born in a clandestine detention center to the day he came to his upbringing family troubles him and prevents him from reaching symbolic closure.[57] Roberto Rafael feels like his needs were not and still are not respected: the Jorge Videla regime and his upbringing family violated him by taking him from his biological family; a judge under the Raúl Alfonsín government took him from his upbringing family and did not allow any contact; his biological family wanted to erase the first 16 years of his life. Today, Roberto Rafael's upbringing family still does not respect him by giving him information about his background, although there is enough evidence to suspect that they were aware of his biological parents' destiny. For both Roberto Rafael and Veronica Gabriela, their traumatic childhood experiences are a result of their biological and upbringing families, the *Abuelas* and the Argentine state not recognizing their rights as enshrined in the CRC. It could be argued that these different actors failed to take into consideration their emotions and needs, treating them as objects instead of subjects with their own opinions.

Roberto Rafael showed his support for the conviction of his upbringing family when he posted a photo on Facebook of *La Casa por La Identidad* (The House of Identity), which, during the dictatorship, was an infamous clandestine detention center. In the photo, he stands beside a large poster containing the words 'Convicted appropriators,' with information about convictions for child theft. Underneath the text is a childhood photo of him and his upbringing family. By posting this photo on Facebook, he shows that he acknowledges the appropriation as a crime, and that he wants to communicate this to his audience. The photo positions him in Argentine society within the human rights narrative of the need to prosecute human rights violators for the sake of truth and justice. When asked about the post, he said: 'It's the summary of the fake ideal world that my appropriators had made. A childhood in which they spoiled me and gave me everything except the truth.'[58] Although his upbringing parents do not consider his appropriation a crime, Roberto Rafael *does*, and he wants to communicate this to his audience.

Nonetheless, he still has affectionate feelings towards them, but seems reluctant to share anything about this as it could be perceived as controversial. These affectionate feelings epitomize the inadequacy of the dichotomization of being either against the 'enemies' or with them, as there is no black and white in this matter. His reality is a messy mix of confusing emotions, with his frontstage performance not coinciding with this emotionally complex backstage.

---

56 Personal interview, Buenos Aires, 10 March 2016.
57 Ibid.
58 Personal communication, Messenger-chat, 9 June 2018.

BELINDA ROCÍO: 'ALWAYS PRESENT IN MY HEART AND THOUGHTS. . .ALWAYS YOUNG'

Belinda Rocío's story differs from the three others in the sense that she actively sought the truth on her own initiative and was an adult at the time of identification. After discovering the truth about her biological origins from a DNA test, she started searching for information about her biological parents. This was a challenging process for her. She contacted Angela, a woman who had been pregnant and at the secret detention center at the same time as her biological mother was about to give birth. Angela told her that her mother had looked so sad when returning from the hospital without her baby daughter, who was ruthlessly taken from her.[59] Belinda Rocío thus reconstructs her parents' memory through the stories of other people, which can be emotionally exhausting. *Niet@s'* search for information about their biological parents includes getting to know who they were, how they thought, what others thought of them and their political involvement. Roberto Rafael tells about how people who knew his biological parents contact him on Facebook to give him pictures and tell him stories about who his mother and father were, which he greatly appreciates. The *niet@s* construct this memory of their parents so they can incorporate the information about their biological origins into their own history. Each individual's path of memory reconstruction also contributes to the *collective memory* of Argentina's *desaparecid@s*, which, according to Maurice Halbwachs, can be understood as the memory of a group that reconstructs the past according to interests and present reference points. The collective memory contributes to ensuring the identity, nature and values of the group.[60] The *niet@s* use social media to share pictures of their biological parents, so keeping their memory alive through telling their life stories. In addition to posting a picture of her biological mother on her mother's birthday, Belinda Rocío also publishes pictures of her parents together, referring to the day in which they were kidnapped and adding, 'Always present in my heart and thoughts. . .always young,' with a heart in the comment. By doing so, she not only incorporates the past into her present, but also presents their stories to her audience worldwide, which is a part of her performance of self and identity reconstruction on social media. She says that her biological parents' ideological seeds have stayed with her:

> I always felt that I was inclined towards socialism. I asked myself why, because my upbringing family and friends had a different discourse. I didn't understand. But after knowing the truth about my origins, I went through a radical change of becoming conscious of politics and wanting to get involved. Now I'm doing human rights activism.[61]

Belinda Rocío now works with the *Abuelas*. She shares videos of interviews with herself and her biological grandmother, making their story known on social media.

---

59 Gjerløw, supra n 32.
60 In Lucila Edelman and Diana Kordon, *Investigación sobre transmisión transgeneracional del Trauma* (Buenos Aires: Libro de las jornadas, 2002).
61 Gjerløw, supra n 32 at 68.

Many *niet@s* participate in their own way in human rights activism by visiting schools and telling their stories, sharing their perspectives with scholars, working for the *Abuelas* and/or state organizations, or through art. Some *niet@s* contribute to the human rights narrative on Facebook. These methods are all ways for traumatized people to recover through a process of truth telling, taking action and fighting back.[62] Brubaker and Cooper consider feelings of communality to be intertwined with identity.[63] Restoring a sense of communality can be a building block for healing. Through participation in human rights activism, the *niet@s* become part of a network of people who share the same interests and contribute to truth, justice and the prevention of human rights violations in the future. Social media can enforce these feelings of communality and give individuals a platform to express their views and goals to a wider audience.

JENNIFER CAMILA: THE TRANSGENERATIONAL IMPACT OF SELF- AND EXTERNAL IDENTIFICATION

Jennifer Camila was accidently restituted to the wrong family when she was three years old and found out about her biological family when she was 18. The restitution process is different for adults compared to those identified at a young age. As adults, the identified individuals decide for themselves if they wish to construct relations with their biological family. This implies greater agency regarding their construction of self and identity. However, the restitution of their legal identity, that is, changing their name to correspond to their biological family, is enforced by the judiciary, whether or not they approve of it.

Jennifer Camila says it was demanding to deal with what she calls 'the name thing.' She said that it was a lot of work to change all the documents in which her upbringing family's name appeared. When called upon to identify herself in formal contexts, she uses the name corresponding to her biological origins. Here we see a clear example of legal structures conditioning her development of a sense of self. Brubaker and Cooper differentiate between self-identification and the identification and categorization of oneself by others. Self-identification takes place in a dialectic interplay with external identification, and the two need not converge.[64] When Jennifer Camila is among friends, she goes by the name given by her upbringing family, which she prefers. By using the name that is right for her and her own self-identification, she asserts agency through choosing who she wants to be. It was challenging for her to decide which name to put on Facebook:

> I didn't know what to put as my name, so I put both names. . .It seems like a stupidity, but then your friends from high school search for you, no one will recognize me if I put [name]. People from work, and fellow students from the university, they know me as Jennifer Camila.[65]

---

62   Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).
63   Brubaker and Cooper, supra n 34.
64   Ibid.
65   Gjerløw, supra n 32 at 57.

In 2012, Jennifer Camila presented herself on Facebook using the names of both her upbringing and her biological family, so managing the conflicting roles in her presentation of self on social media. In 2018, she used an abbreviation similar to 'Jen' to avoid having to deal with both names on Facebook.[66] She chose to use the name she identifies with and not the name given to her by the state apparatus. This indicates some agency in her self-presentation on social media, because she uses her nickname, based on the name her upbringing family gave her, implicitly saying to her audience: 'The state can do whatever, but I'm still Jen.'

The pictures she posts of her own family and of herself being pregnant can be considered a symbolic act of identity reconstruction, portraying her in the role of a mother and a wife. Posting these pictures on Facebook – the frontstage of digital social life – does not mean that she has not faced challenges with unresolved questions about her biological origins *backstage*, as what we present on social media does not reflect everything that is going on in our inner world. When Jennifer Camila's eldest children were born, she started to think about what her biological mother looked like and whether or not her children resemble her mother. Unfortunately, she does not have any pictures of her. Jennifer Camila also started asking herself questions about how her mother had experienced giving birth. She had not thought about these things before, 'because if you don't have children, you just don't think about it. Was my mom similar to them? I started to think about these things.'[67] This highlights the challenges of reaching *symbolic closure*, because she will never be able to talk to her biological mother.

On 24 March, the Day of Remembrance for Truth and Justice in Argentina, social media platforms become an arena for remembering the atrocities committed during the dictatorship through picture sharing of the *desaparecid@s* by some of the *niet@s*, others affected by the regime and/or people involved in human rights activism. On that day in 2018, Jennifer Camila published pictures on Instagram from her story as presented in a book about the grandchildren.[68] Her Instagram audience, consisting of, amongst others, her children's friends and other people she does not know that well, was surprised to hear the truth about her origins.[69] Her children are also a part of her social media audience, giving her digital actions a transgenerational impact. Some of the *niet@s*' children thus witness their parents' change of name and how they relate to the family in which they grew up as well as their biological family, in both the off- and online worlds. These children therefore also go through the process of reconstructing the memory of their biological grandparents. Consequently, the social trauma Argentina has suffered is transgenerational – the parents, children and grandchildren of *desaparecid@s* are all affected by the violence caused by the military regime.[70]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Argentine transitional justice process started in 1977, in the midst of the dictatorship, when the *Abuelas* gathered in front of the government building La Casa

---

66 Personal communication, Messenger-chat, 23 April 2018.
67 Ibid.
68 To ensure anonymity, details of the book are not given.
69 Personal communication, Messenger-chat, 23 April 2018.
70 Edelman and Kordon, supra n 60.

Rosada in Buenos Aires. During the two decades after the fall of the dictatorship (1983–2003), the *niet@s'* voices were only partly heard regarding how they wanted to shape their process of identity reconstruction. From 2003, when the Kirchner government was elected, the *niet@s'* voices increasingly became part of the public debate in terms of the politically correct discourse of the importance of finding more of the kidnapped children in order to restore justice. Not all grandchildren share this discourse and some actively distance themselves from it. The beginning of the 2000s marked the time when the *niet@s* became adults, making them more capable of deciding over their own lives. This is especially so with respect to establishing relations with their biological family, although changing their legal name to correspond to their biological origin is still mandatory. From approximately 2007 onwards, social media became an increasingly important part of people's everyday lives in Argentina, giving the *niet@s* a digital stage from which to use their voice and get an immediate response from their audience. The *niet@s'* use of social media is a compelling example of how the transitional justice process is playing out in different arenas than before. In sum, the Argentine transitional justice process has gone from fighting for truth and justice through the *Abuelas'* demonstrations in person to the *niet@s'* digital contributions through their performance of self and human rights activism on social media.

Social media may offer *niet@s* the opportunity to balance self- and external identification, to reestablish social ties that were broken in childhood, to reconstruct the memory of their biological parents, to manage relations with both their upbringing and biological families and to enhance human rights activism. The *niet@s'* identity reconstruction has a transgenerational impact, influencing their own children's sense of who they are. Through social media, the *niet@s'* psychological needs for social belonging, recognition and self-realization are partly met through receiving comments, likes, hearts and emojis on their publications, but also by commenting on others' personal information and public issues. This ongoing interaction with their audience members, both national and international, is unprecedented. This way of exerting citizenship, contributing to debates and taking part in society shapes one's sense of self and social identity, and might contribute to a feeling of national identity.

Facebook is used as a frontstage for portraying the *niet@s'* life narratives, balancing disclosure and privacy, past and present, public and private. The audience does not get to see everything going on in their inner world, exemplified by Veronica Gabriela's ways of managing her audience and maintaining privacy. In the *niet@s'* backstage, doubts and questions regarding the truth about who they are and who their biological parents were pose agonizing challenges to reaching symbolic closure. We see this in Roberto Rafael's concern about not knowing the truth about his circumstances from the day he was born until the day he first came to his upbringing family. At times, the *niet@s'* backstage blends into their frontstage when they share the pain they deal with, as seen in publications such as Belinda Rocío's emotional birthday cards for her biological mother. Their narratives of the self reflect only part of the story of who they are, because many are still missing important pieces of the puzzle regarding their biological parents, the circumstances surrounding their appropriation and their upbringing family's involvement in it. Constructing their narrative of the self involves a constant struggle to find symbolic closure, which *is* found at

times. Yet, life can unexpectedly throw them curveballs, as when Jennifer Camila realized that she will never know how her biological mother experienced giving birth or whether her daughters resemble her – issues which challenge the 'wholeness' of her life story.

On their own Facebook profiles, the *niet@s* are the directors of their performance, writing about themselves and not just being written about by someone else. However, their performance is somewhat constrained by a degree of political and social correctness, since it is complicated for some of them to portray their connectedness to their upbringing family on social media. Publicizing such feelings would nuance the Argentine traditional media's dichotomy of being either for or against the dictatorship's actions. It is entirely possible for a found grandchild to have affectionate ties to the upbringing family and still support taking them to court. What is not possible, however, is to erase the years the *niet@s* lived with them – that period also forms part of their life story. Since publicly expressing these contradictory feelings might invoke criticism, the *niet@s* partially censor their stories on social media. It is one thing to mourn the loss of your murdered biological parents and to be open about that, but another thing to portray that you love the people that might have been involved in that crime.[71] As a consequence, the *niet@s* tend to perform a story that fits into one of the existing narratives that you are on either one side or the other. That does not show the complicated picture of what goes on backstage, of how both worlds, the connection to the biological family and to the upbringing family, blend into each other.

The grandmothers' perspective that justice can only be restored by restituting the grandchildren's identity based on their biological origins has been the privileged discourse in Argentina, whereas the voices of the grandchildren themselves have been somewhat marginalized. This is especially the case when they were identified as minors. The restitutions did not prioritize their best interests and infringed both their fundamental right to be heard in matters that affect their lives and their right to identity.

Today, the *niet@s* are the leading protagonists of Argentina's postconflict transitional justice process. Learning from their traumatic experiences with identification and restitution requires listening and respecting the subjective truths of all parties involved. This entails not only taking into consideration the found grandchildren's views on who they are and what is just for them, but also listening to the families of the 1,094 people who were killed during the dictatorship by guerrillas such as the *Montoneros*. If we do not include the voices of all parties in postconflict settings, we do not achieve a democracy and rule of law that safeguards the equal rights of all citizens. This applies not only to the transitional justice processes in Argentina, but to societies emerging from mass violence worldwide.

---

71   It must be noted, however, that many of the upbringing families were not part of the military regime. Some families were civilians, who either did or did not know about the babies' origins.