

The Melancholy of Bones: Forensic Exhumation as an Elegiac Transformative Experience

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Abstract Since the early 1990s, forensic exhumation of mass graves in the wake of violent conflict has become an increasingly important humanitarian intervention. Exhumation has two stated aims: to document evidence of atrocity for judicial proceedings and to return bodies to families to bring psychological closure. Exhumation is premised on the idea that opening graves bring mourners' closure, but little research has been done to examine how humanitarian exhumation affects the families of the missing. In this article, I consider the return of the exhumed remains to families and reflect on the relationship between mourning, violence, and transformation. I argue that humanitarian forensic exhumation is underwritten by a model of grief derived from Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholy. Drawing on fieldwork in Argentina, I claim that this model ultimately proves inadequate to capture the varieties of experience described by families of the missing. I develop "elegiac transformation" as a theoretical lens to explore experiences of exhumation. While forensic discourse emphasizes "closure," the return of bodies to families may be more generatively conceived as opening memories, old wounds, and new possibilities for healing, transforming its participants. [death forced disappearance mourning forensic exhumation and transformative experience]

Résumé Desde la década de 1990, la exhumación forense de fosas comunes después de conflictos violentos se ha convertido en una intervención humanitaria de creciente importancia. La exhumación tiene dos objetivos explícitos: documentar evidencia de atrocidades para los procedimientos judiciales y devolver los cuerpos a las familias para lograr un cierre psicológico. La exhumación se basa en la idea de que la apertura de las fosas produce un cierre psicológico para los dolientes, pero se han realizado pocas investigaciones para examinar cómo afecta la exhumación humanitaria a las familias de los desaparecidos. En este artículo, abordo el tema de la devolución de los restos exhumados a las familias y reflejo la relación entre el duelo, la violencia y la transformación. Sostengo que la exhumación forense humanitaria está suscrita por un modelo de duelo derivado de la distinción de Freud entre el duelo y la melancolía. Basándome en el trabajo de campo en Argentina, afirmo que este modelo finalmente resulta inadecuado para aprehender las variedades de experiencias descritas por las familias de los desaparecidos. Elaboro la "transformación elegíaca" como una lente teórica para explorar las experiencias de la exhumación. Mientras que el discurso forense hace énfasis en el "cierre", el retorno de los cuerpos a las familias puede ser conceptualizado de manera más generativa como la apertura de recuerdos, antiguas heridas y nuevas posibilidades de sanación, transformando a sus participantes. [Muerte, desaparición forzada, duelo, exhumación forense, and experiencia transformadora]

Introduction

At a café on a busy road, Fernando told me about his father's bones. His father, a charismatic leader in a leftist movement, disappeared in 1977 amid the political violence of

Argentina's military dictatorship. His father's remains had been recently discovered during an exhumation of a clandestine mass grave. Fernando said the exhumation and identification had brought him closure: "It closes the story; it ends the grief." Then he lit a cigarette and said, "Yeah, it's true that it closes things, but in reality, it *opens*... Really, finding *mi viejo* wasn't the end; it was the beginning. The question is—the beginning of what?"

This article examines Fernando's question. What does exhumation end and what does it begin? What does it close, and what does it open? What sort of transformative experience does it offer mourners?

In the past 30 years, forensic exhumation of the dead has become a normative human rights practice (Gessat-Anstett and Dreyfus 2015; Renshaw 2013; Rosenblatt 2015). Exhumation in the wake of political violence has two aims: to provide legal evidence of human rights abuses that can be used in judicial processes and to bring closure to families of the missing by allowing the proper burial of the dead. Even where there is little or no hope of judicial recourse, exhumations may be carried out solely to return remains to families; this practice is known as "humanitarian exhumation" and is the focus of my research.

Exhumation is premised on the idea that opening graves bring mourners closure, but despite the clear intention of service, little research has been done to examine how humanitarian exhumation affects families of the missing (Blaauw and Lähteenmäki 2002; Preitler 2015; Robins 2013; Viaene 2009). Here, I consider the return of the exhumed remains of loved ones to their families and reflect on the relationship between mourning, violence, and transformation. I analyze how a model of grief derived from Sigmund Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholy underwrites humanitarian forensic exhumation. Yet this model ultimately proves inadequate to capture the varieties of experience described by families of the missing. "Elegiac transformation," as I develop it here, offers a richer paradigm to explore experiences of exhumation.

This article draws on 18 months of fieldwork in Argentina and Guatemala where my research centered on participant observation at active exhumation sites and forensic labs, as well as semi-structured interviews of families of the missing, human rights activists, and forensic practitioners. My research was carried out in 2016 and 2017, and my fieldwork in Argentina closely coincided with the 40th anniversary of the coup d'état that brought the military dictatorship into power on March 24, 1976. The country commemorated the anniversary during the year with memorials, academic conferences, media coverage, theatre, art, and protests and prompted self-reflection, soul-searching, and debate at a national and personal scale. People were thinking about violence, disappearance, and mourning, and they were keen to talk about it.

The Closure Model

The concept of “closure” is at the heart of humanitarian exhumations. As archeologist Layla Renshaw writes, an exhumation “satisfies the widely held belief that the recovery of human remains is indispensable in order to enact death rituals, enable healthy mourning, and achieve psychological closure” (2011, 11). The assumptions about the possibility and necessity of closure that inform forensic exhumation can be traced to a Freudian view of grief. The deeply influential 1917 essay, *Mourning and Melancholia*, presents Freud’s theory of grief work (*Trauerarbeit*). He argues that while mourning is worked through in time, melancholy persists and “behaves like an open wound” (1968, 253). For Freud, healthy mourning demands the surrender of the attachment to the loved object. In melancholy, the mourner never fully accepts the loss as real. In other words, mourning ends, but melancholy is endless.

Freud’s notion of grief work and his distinction between mourning and melancholy has deeply shaped understandings of grief in the West (Neimeyer et al. 2011; Radden 2000; Stroebe et al. 2013; Walter 1999). Even as contemporary theories expand, amend, contest, or strive to replace the Freudian model (Bonanno 2009; Boss 2006; Butler 2003; Cheng 2001; Eng and Kazanjian 2003; Valentine 2008), it obdurately influences our common-sense understanding of grief as a linear process of “working through” to reach “closure.”

A second, related, common-sense understanding undergirding humanitarian exhumation is that closure requires the presence of the dead body. Scholars across fields make expansive claims about the role of human remains in mortuary ritual and grief. In *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains*, historian Thomas Laqueur calls the requirement to bury the dead with ceremony a “universally shared feeling” (2015, 8) and locates its origins in deep history: “we care for the dead because humans have always cared for our dead” (2015, 5). Anthropologist Antonius C. G. M. Robben, in the introduction to the edited volume *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader*, writes: “mortuary rituals are a true cultural universal” (2009, 18). Psychologist and grief researcher Pauline Boss writes that “there appears to be a universal human need to bury one’s dead” and that people seem “to need a body to bury even when common sense suggested that the missing person was dead” (2004, 561). While disciplines stress different aspects, they converge on an understanding of the crucial importance of the presence of the dead body in mourning and funeral rites.

Psychology has long posited that absent a corpse, grief is inevitably rendered pathologically “complicated,” “impeded,” or “frozen” (Boss 2009; Rothaupt and Becker 2007; Valentine 2008). Pauline Boss, cited above, has offered an influential examination of missing people in her work on “ambiguous loss” (2009). Boss identifies two kinds of ambiguous loss: one in which the person is present but missing (as in dementia) and one in which the person is missing yet present (as in cases of forced disappearance like those in Argentina). In her book on the subject, first published in 2000, she concludes that for families of the disappeared, grief “defies closure” (6); without a body, mourners cannot resolve their grief.

Anthropology emphasizes the key role played by the corpse in mortuary ritual, a theoretical tradition drawing strongly on Robert Hertz's foundational work (Davies 2000; Engelke 2019; Hertz 1960). In his 1907 essay, *A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death*, Hertz, a protégé of Emile Durkheim, theorizes death as a threat to social structure, addressed by funeral ritual, which transitions the dead to the status of an ancestor (Hertz 1960). Violent and untimely deaths are especially traumatic and socially disordering. In such “bad deaths,” the “transitional period is indefinitely prolonged, and death is without end,” leaving mourners in pain and the dead unsettled and potentially dangerous (Hertz 1960, 144). Mortuary ritual, marked by the care of the corpse, repairs the social fabric “by putting an end to the troubles of the soul” (1960, 61) and working to “end the mourning” of relatives—bringing peace to the dead and to the mourners (1960, 54).

The imprint of Hertz's work marks anthropological considerations of death, including exhumation (Bloch and Parry 1982; Metcalf and Huntington 1991). This influence may be explicit, as in Katherine Verdery's investigation of the “political lives of dead bodies” in which she references Hertz to argue that the exhumation and reburial of political figures in the post-Yugoslav context reaffirmed political communities (1999, 108). Or it may be implicit, as when Antonius C. G. M. Robben writes of exhumation in the Argentine context that “the identified dead could be then be restored to their proper place in society through mortuary rituals and memorials,” a distinctly Hertzian claim (2018, 137).

Twin common-sense understandings structure humanitarian forensic practice: The presence of the body is necessary for healthy grief, and healthy grief depends on closure. Forensic teams and sponsoring agencies like the Red Cross and United Nations explicitly reference these understandings, which I will call “the closure model,” when describing their aims and commitments. An International Center for Transitional Justice report lists “closure through a traditional funeral” as one of the primary objectives of exhumation (Bickford et al. 2009, 29). In 2014, the director of the Guatemalan anthropology team, Fredy Percelli, gave a TED talk entitled *A forensic anthropologist who brings closure for the disappeared*. The International Commission on Missing Persons continues to seek forensic identification of human remains from the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina; their head of the program said of these efforts that they promise to “bring closure to a substantial number of families” whose relatives went missing during the conflict (ICMP 2018).

The concept of closure pervades forensic discourse, operating as a common-sense justification. A commitment to closure is not confined to mission statements and media blurbs. In my fieldwork, I found that for members of forensic teams, providing closure for families of the missing is a deeply held value and provides powerful personal motivation for the difficult work of exhumation (Hagerty 2018).

Yet a difficult truth of exhumation is that many bodies will never be found. The cruel logic of disappearance and clandestine mass graves rests on hiding bodies. Despite enormous effort and rapid advances in technology, most excavations have only modest rates of identification,

and many sites of violence will never be explored due to lack of political will or funding and other constraints (Crossland and Joyce 2015; Ferrándiz and Robben 2015; Gessat-Anstett and Dreyfus 2015). According to the closure model, this necessarily means that many families can never have the chance to properly mourn because they will never recover the body of their missing loved one.

Mothers and Scientists

To understand humanitarian exhumation and its commitment to the closure model, it is useful to consider the origin of the modern forensic practice, which emerged in Argentina in the immediate aftermath of the military dictatorship of 1976–1983. During the dictatorship, the military relied extensively on the practice of disappearance to terrorize the population. Tens of thousands of people, as many as 30,000, were abducted, tortured in secret prisons, and murdered. Their fate was unknown; bodies were hidden, most often buried in clandestine mass graves.¹ Leftist activists, students, journalists, public intellectuals, and labor leaders were primary targets (*Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas* 1984; Romero 2013).

The disappearances gave rise to one of the most effective and globally influential protest movements of the 20th century—the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*. In 1977, mothers of the *desaparecidos* began gathering in public, marching in silent circles with white kerchiefs made of baby diapers tied under their chins and photographs of their missing sons and daughters pinned to their clothes, demanding to know the whereabouts of their children. Their efforts proved central to ending military rule (Romero and Brennan 2013).

In the first months following the collapse of the dictatorship, the Argentine forensic team, Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, or EAAF, formed to search for the bodies of the disappeared. What began as a group of graduate students motivated by activism at a moment when Argentina's return to democracy was in no way certain, rapidly became an enduring international force. Pioneering the application of forensic and archeological methods to the investigation of human rights abuses, EAAF established itself as the “world's first professional war crimes exhumation team” (Keenan and Weizman 2011), spearheading the theory and practice of modern exhumation.

The EAAF's early search for the *desaparecidos* formed an important aspect of Argentina's attempt to grapple with the violent legacy of dictatorship, but it also had much wider implications. The Argentine case has played a significant role forging practices of transitional justice on an international scale. Argentina's early truth commission, *Comisión nacional sobre la desaparición de personas* formed in 1984, its public trials of high-ranking military, its use of scientific forensic evidence to prove human rights abuses, and the organization of mothers as a powerful political force have influenced other countries' procedures. Argentina was key in the dramatic, widespread, and sustained legal shift to hold political leaders criminally accountable for human rights abuses and helped trigger what Kathryn Sikkink (2011) has influentially theorized as the “justice cascade” of the late 20th century. In the

words of political scientist Josef Kovras, Argentina was the “Big Bang” of transitional justice (Kovras 2017).

From its inception, the EAAF has shaped international forensic practice and played a decisive role in initiating what scholars term the “forensic turn” in human rights (Gessat-Anstett and Dreyfus 2015). Drawing on the concept of “epistemic community” (Adler and Haas 1992), meaning an informal network of experts whose shared knowledge and values influence policy decisions, Kovras (2017) argues that the EAAF is at the heart of the “forensic epistemic community.” According to Kovras, the Argentine team has played a crucial role in developing and diffusing forensic norms of practice on an international scale.

By the mid-1990s, the EAAF had worked in over 40 countries and on the most well-publicized cases of political violence of the era, including Iraq, Cyprus, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the former Yugoslavia. The EAAF has helped to establish other forensic teams, including the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation, the Chilean Forensic Anthropology Team, and the African School of Forensic Sciences and Human Rights, and it continues to provide forensic training and capacity-building around the world (Fondebrider and Bosio 2014).

The hallmark of EAAF’s forensic practice is its “family-centered” approach, which has been widely diffused due to EAAF’s influential position in the forensic epistemic community. The EAAF’s emphasis on the needs of families is deeply rooted in the Argentine political experience and can be understood as a permutation and continuation of the political force of the families of the missing, particularly the Madres, in resisting the dictatorship.

As a founding member and current director of the team, Luis Fondebrider describes its genesis: “The reason we talk today about forensic science is because many families and human rights organizations without any knowledge about science and mainly women desperate to know what happened to their loved ones began to ask for help.... It was the initiative of the families and Mothers in Argentina” (quoted in Kovras 2017, 96). Recent scholarship has traced the forensic practices of EAAF, notably its emphasis on the family’s experiences of grief, which springs directly from the Argentine political experience (Kovras 2017; Rosenblatt 2015). What has been missing from these accounts, and what I address here, is the role of Argentina’s deep commitment to psychoanalytic thought in shaping international humanitarian exhumation practice.

El Mundo Psi

Argentina is a society deeply steeped in psychoanalytic thought (Balán 1991; Dagfal 2009; Lakoff 2003; Plotkin 2003; Robben 2005). Psychoanalysis rose to popularity in the 1930s and has dominated psychotherapeutic practice ever since. According to the World Health Organization (2005), Argentina has the most psychologists per capita of any country in the world (154 psychologists for every 100,000 inhabitants); the runner-up, Denmark, has half

the number. Astonishingly, the city of Buenos Aires has over 1200 psychologists for every 100,000 inhabitants (Alonso and Kliner 2015). While not every psychologist in Argentina practices psychoanalysis, the influence of psychoanalysis is widely felt. Anthropologist Sean P. Brotherton writes, “the practice of psychoanalysis is almost ubiquitous in contemporary Argentina” (Brotherton 2016), a proliferation often referred to as “el mundo psi.”

Scholars have pointed to a variety of factors contributing to the predominance of psychoanalytic thought in Argentina, including the role of large-scale immigration (Plotkin 2003), preoccupation with national identity (Bass 2006), marking social status (Hollander 1990 and 1992), intellectual orientation toward Europe (Dagfel 2009), and political and economic instability (Bass 2006; Hollander 1992; Plotkin 2003).

Although Argentina has produced no clear national psychoanalytic school, psychoanalytic thought pervades society, from newspaper columns to television talk shows, podcasts, jokes, and memes (Marsilli-Vargas 2016). A neighborhood in Buenos Aires is known as “Villa Freud” because it is so densely packed with psychoanalysts’ offices. The World Association of Psychoanalysis, the pre-eminent international Lacanian association, was inaugurated in Argentina in 1992 with meetings alternating between Buenos Aires and Paris (WAPOL 2019). The Argentine Psychiatric Association embraces psychoanalytic approaches (Brotherton 2016; Damousi and Plotkin 2012). Argentine public hospitals regularly use psychoanalysis (Bonnin 2018), and while the rest of the world abandoned talk therapy in favor of biomedical approaches in the 1990s, Argentina staunchly clung to psychoanalysis (Dagfal 2009; Lakoff 2003).

In the aftermath of the dictatorship, Argentine psychological research has addressed questions of grief and mourning posed by political violence, disappearance, and death. Given the predominance of psychoanalytic thought in the country, this theorization hews closely to the theories of mourning and melancholia proposed by Freud and elaborated by Melanie Klein and Jacques Lacan. Family members of the disappeared are largely seen as suffering from melancholia, the “open wound” described by Freud. An emblematic passage reads, “survivors of the disappeared face endless melancholia” (Taiana 2014, 95). Although theorization of grief and mourning cleaves closely to classic psychoanalytic convention, some Argentine psychologists have proposed unique features of the grieving process with the disappearance. Psychoanalysts María Pelento has developed the theory of “special mourning” (*duelos especiales*) that centers on the “absent presence” (*la presencia ausente*) of the body and contains aspects of both mourning and melancholia as described by Freud (Braun and Pelento 2006; Kijak and Pelento 1985).

The Argentine dictatorship targeted leftist activists, students, journalists, public intellectuals, and labor leaders for the disappearance. The desaparecidos were largely members of well-educated, urban, middle-class families with left-leaning politics. Founding members of the EAAF, who were university students when they formed the team, are also part of this demographic.² Families of the missing and founding members of EAAF largely belong to the social groups most influenced by psychoanalytic thought and “el mundo psi.”

As previous research has suggested, psychoanalytic frameworks play an important role for families of the disappeared as they grapple with their experiences (Corti 2010; Robben 2005; Taiana 2014). Likewise, my research suggests that psychoanalytic frameworks deeply inform how individual forensic team members make sense of their experiences (Hagerty 2018). Argentine psychoanalytic frames of reference inform the “family-centered” model pioneered by the EAAF, and the closure model of grief consequently is diffused through the epistemic community of forensics. Through this inscription, the EAAF has propagated, not only technical practices, but also affective practices—exhumation’s emergent “orders of feeling” (Stodulka 2019), which shape how grief is appraised, experienced, and displayed.

Antigone

Fernando was 18 months old when his parents were kidnapped and taken to secret prisons. Like many children of the disappeared, Fernando cannot remember his father, “at least not on a conscious level,” as he puts it. He peppers his conversation with references to Freud and Lacan and to conversations he’s had with his analyst. He tells me that to grieve, and to emerge from that grief, “I had to kill my father.”

After our conversation, I tracked down a passage I had half-remembered: “The work of mourning involves killing the dead. The mourner has the choice of killing the dead or dying with them” (Leader 2009, 172). In this Lacanian-influenced text, “killing the dead” refers to the process of shifting the lost person to a new symbolic space (*ibid.*).

Lacan developed his thoughts on mourning by engaging with the Greek tragedy *Antigone*. In its barest outline, the tragedy tells the story of Antigone whose brother Polynices dies attacking Thebes. Creon, the ascendant king, declares that Polynices shall not be buried or mourned, on pain of death. The grieving Antigone defies this royal decree, and in punishment, Creon shuts her alive in a cave. Creon changes his mind, but too late, Antigone has already hung herself.

Lacan reads Antigone as caught between two deaths: actual and symbolic. Her single-minded quest to bury her brother costs her life. For Lacan, suspended between deaths, Antigone represents pure desire. She radiates an “unbearable splendor” (Lacan and Miller 2013, 243). For Slavoj Žižek, her single-minded desire is her “monstrosity” (2000, 669). Her refusal to loosen her bonds to her brother and situate him in a new symbolic space—to “kill the dead”—is fatal but heroic.

There is a trace of Antigone’s splendor and monstrosity in something the son of a disappeared father once told me. He said that if he could have one thing in life, a single wish fulfilled, he would wish to know where his father lies. A father himself, he felt guilty about this desire: “I know I should wish something for my son, wish for his success.” But his deepest desire was to find his father’s body. The dead father eclipsed the living son.

Fernando grew up worshipful of his revolutionary father, a charismatic leader in a popular leftist organization. “But that’s not the whole story.” His father, as Fernando sees it now, was reckless in his commitment to his cause. When Fernando’s mother discovered she was pregnant, she asked him to stop. He refused, and they separated. When his brother, a leader in the same political faction, was disappeared, he continued. “He was courageous, but he was also crazy. His parents begged him to go to Brazil. Everyone knew what would happen. And it did.” For Fernando, to kill the father is to dismantle and abandon the heroic figure he had imagined as a child and to recognize in fragments of stories, photos, and bones, a human being—brave, flawed, mysterious. Like Antigone, Fernando’s father was single-minded in his desire. “He chose the revolution over everything else.” Fernando pauses. “Over me.”

Webs of Transformation

Humanitarian exhumation is inextricably linked to other transformative experiences, to disappearance and its traumatic uncertainties. It is tied to experiences of political violence and oppression and loss of trust in social institutions (Robben 2000). For Fernando and other sons and daughters of the disappeared, it is connected to a radically altered childhood—being raised by grandparents, moving to a new city, or perhaps fleeing the country. In cases of illegal adoption, in which the junta kidnapped pregnant women and secretly gave their infants to families loyal to the regime, it is bound to the most intimate forms of self-knowledge and identity.

Each of these experiences is transformative in its own right. Under any circumstances, death profoundly alters the lives of survivors, transforming a child into an orphan, a husband into a widower, a mother into a grieving mother. Exhumation cannot be isolated from these other transformative experiences. Inseparable from this web, yet exhumation is a thread that carries its own power, does its own transformative work.

Fernando tells me he and his partner are trying to have a child, something she has wanted for a long time: “I wasn’t ready until now.” He says that finding his father’s body has made him ready for fatherhood: “I told you before that it ended grief, but what it really did was unlock me emotionally. So that now I think, yes, I can make myself emotionally available and create a family.” Exhumation, in Fernando’s case, transforms a son into a father.

Making Bones Real

As part of its family-centered model, the EAAF invites families to the forensic lab, where a team member will answer technical questions, and if the family wishes, articulate whatever remains of the skeleton. Fernando went to the lab. He did not really want to go, but he did out of a sense of obligation and a worry that if he skipped it, he might someday wish he had gone. Fernando and other members of his family gathered around as a team member laid his father’s bones on a table and pointed out the salient forensic features. Fernando says, “Of

course, I *believed* it was him, but I didn't *feel* it was him. Not when I saw him in the lab, and not when they gave me the urn."

Fernando kept the urn with his father's remains with him constantly in the days before the funeral. He even slept with it by his side. He tells the story in comic terms. "My girlfriend wouldn't share the bed; she thought it was creepy as hell!" he says, laughing. But then his tone turns serious: "I wanted to feel something, but I didn't. I kept trying, but it didn't happen."

Imagining bones as people is hard. Many remains are found incomplete, and a family often receives only a few bones or even a fragment of bone (Crossland and Joyce 2015; Renshaw 2011; Wagner 2008). To link a bone fragment to a person is a difficult act of imagination. The work of making the translation involved in imagining a skeleton, a fragment of bone or a DNA match as the missing person is significant—and that work is largely left to the family to figure out for themselves.

The difficulty families face when presented with a fragment of a bone and a scientifically positive identification became clear when I spent a rainy winter morning with Dulce, whose brother had been found in *Pozo de Vargas*, an industrial well used to hide bodies during the dictatorship. The forensic team had recovered only part of his pelvis, from which a DNA match had been made. Dulce said, "It is good to find even a piece of bone. It gives you something to write your grief on." But she was also disturbed by this fragment and remarked several times, "Is this really him?" and "What happened to the rest of him?"

Dulce spoke with such immediacy that I felt the bone fragment was present, that it must be somewhere in the small apartment. I knew this was impossible. It would not be allowed, and anyway, Dulce had said on the phone that her family held a funeral service and buried the fragment, after some debate about what was to be done if more pieces were later identified. Still, I searched the windowsill with its seashells and chunks of driftwood faded white, which looked like bones.

The immediacy of Dulce's preoccupation may have been a sign of trauma, with its hallmark temporal disturbances in which the event that could not be integrated into an experience at the moment of rupture in the past continues to surface, vital and electric, butting into the present (Ehlers and Steil 1995). Her narrative felt loosened from structures of time, place, and even the boundaries between people. She described learning that her brother had been found: "*Hubo tres días que no salí de acá, tenía una cara desfigurada, pero mi hermano era un tipo muy lindo, muy bello como persona, es un poeta.*" (I didn't leave [the house] for 3 days. My face [which in Spanish can also be understood as "his face"] was disfigured, but my brother was a handsome guy, a beautiful person. He is a poet.)

The way that Dulce's narrative shifted in time calls to mind what Charles Briggs writes about lament: "The presents that each performer constructed were not bounded points in a linear trajectory but sites in which shifting, violent, and unavoidable juxtapositions of multiple temporalities emerged" (Briggs 2014, 318). Of all the people I interviewed, Dulce seemed

to bear the most open wounds. She insisted that finding the fragment had brought her “peace” and “healing,” but in the next breath she said, “it has destroyed me.”

In some sense, exhumation is an inherently melancholic act. Žižek writes: “Melancholy occurs when we finally get the desired object, but are disappointed in it” (2000, 662). In this sense, exhumation can be nothing other than melancholic: The “desired object” is the missing person; but the “getting,” the return, is always only bones. Exhumation never brings back the beloved.

A member of the forensic team told Dulce’s family they were lucky to have identified the bone fragments. This remark made Dulce’s sister angry, and she retorted, “Lucky? How so?” A brother’s murder cannot be lucky. Later in the conversation, Dulce said, “But we were lucky, even if the word is shocking.” She mentioned that in other secret prisons and torture centers, bodies were burned, and no identifications can be made. Of the return of the bones, she said, “It’s a complicated situation. I’ve had a lot of therapy in my life. I’ve suffered from melancholy (*yo sufría de melancolía*).”

I stopped the interview early. I sat with Dulce drinking yerba mate and playing cards until her son came home, not wanting to leave her alone. Months later, in the depths of *Pozo de Vargas*, as I scraped mud from bones, I often thought of Dulce. I wondered if the fragment of bone I was touching belonged to her brother, and if it did, would it bring her healing or pain?

The evening before Fernando’s family buried his father’s bones at the cemetery, they gathered for an informal memorial. A cousin brought a forgotten home movie, an old super-8 unearthed from a closet. The short clip showed Fernando’s father, 20 years old, at a backyard *asado*, barbecuing, joking. Fernando watched the clip over and over. He was mesmerized by the swing of his father’s arms, how he turned his head, how he squinted. It was the first time Fernando had seen his father in motion other than in dreams.

Only by chance had Fernando seen the film in the presence of his father’s bones. The movie could have been found earlier or later, played at another time. Yet the bones and film were present in the same room. Their meeting gave rise to a tension, a temporal and emotional disjuncture. The movie was from the past; the bones were in the present. The body in the film was alive and moving; Fernando recognized his father. The body in the urn was unmoving and lifeless; Fernando could not recognize his father. Which was more his father, the flicker of light on the screen or the bones in the urn?

Human remains offer definitive proof of death. Exhumations are structured by this truth. In a trial, remains provide legal evidence. For a family, they resolve uncertainty about the fate of the missing person. In the griefwork model, human remains prove to mourners that the death is real, offering an experience of “reality testing,” a crucial psychological step in decathexis and closure. But as Fernando confronted his father’s bones, his experience was not about reality testing so much as reality making. Reality testing says, “I can’t believe it is

him; it can't be him." Reality making says "I will myself to believe it is him; it must be him." The effort to recognize a father in bones is not the work of decathexis—severing ties and withdrawing energy—but of cathexis—investing energy and cultivating attachment.

It bears repeating that the strange word "cathexis" is a neologism, the translation of the very ordinary German word *Besetzung*, which has a range of meanings like "to charge" as with electricity, "to occupy" as with troops or with thoughts, and "to set in place" like a jewel (Gay 2006, n465; Laqueur 1992, 242). To set bones in place takes labor. Achille Mbembé notes that bones embody a tension between "their strange coolness on one hand, and on the other, their stubborn will to mean, to signify something" (2003, 35). Fernando was trying to charge his father's bones with meaning, to occupy their cool presence with love.

After the memorial, Fernando sat on the edge of the bed next to the urn. He felt an urgency to recognize his father. Soon the bones would be gone. Between mass grave and cemetery, his father's body was surfacing only briefly, from burial to burial. There was little time. And then it happened. Suddenly, "he was real." Fernando curled his body around the urn and "cried like a baby all night."

In his sensitive tracing of responses to death among Hyolmo Buddhists in Nepal, Robert Desjarlais (2016) draws on the concept of "poiesis." Originating in Greek thought and elaborated by modern philosophers like Hannah Arendt, it means "to act, to do, to make" and is related to the terms "poetics" and "poetry." Desjarlais identifies how mourning (as well as dying) draws on this "creative making," a striving to make meaning of our lives and circumstances. Desjarlais writes that through poiesis, "people fashion something out of the elements of their lives, even if those elements are bone bare, at times" (2016, 12).

From bare bones, Fernando fashioned his father. A strong spirit of poiesis runs through experiences of exhumation. There is creative making in the struggle to recognize the missing person in the fragments of bone and in the imaginative work to connect dream fragments, photos, and film clips to trace the shape of the beloved.

The Brothers

Several months later, Fernando and I met again. On a summer evening, the intense heat of the day had softened. We sat at a sidewalk café and drank orange soda. He was eager to talk. He said, "I have to tell you about this crazy thing that happened since I saw you last." He paused for dramatic effect. "We had a funeral for my uncle."

"Where did they find his body?" I scanned my memory for recent identifications.

"Well, they didn't find it, not exactly."

Fernando's father and his uncle were both political leaders in the resistance. When the remains of Fernando's father were found, there was initially some uncertainty as to which

brother had been discovered. When the body was finally identified as Fernando's father, his cousin Eduardo was very disappointed. "Eduardo really thought it was going to be his father that they found. We all did." Eduardo accompanied Fernando to see the bones in the EAAF lab and came to the memorial. "He was kind of jealous," said Fernando. "He wanted the same thing."

In my fieldwork in Guatemala, I encountered a similar situation. Two brothers had been disappeared and exhumation recovered a single skeleton. Traditional forms of forensic identification could not determine which brother had been found. DNA analysis was inconclusive: Neither brother had children, and with only maternal and paternal samples to analyze, there was no way to distinguish between them. The uncertainty was a source of pain for the family. Who had been found? Their father had a dream in which the younger son appeared to him to say it was his body. In the archives of the forensic lab, the case file reflects the scientific view that the recovered remains could be those of either brother, but for the family, the dream identification was conclusive.³

Three years after Fernando's father was identified, Eduardo surprised the family by announcing that he was organizing a funeral for his father, body or no body. He had bought a plot at Chacarita Cemetery in Buenos Aires and made all the arrangements. When Eduardo called Fernando to invite him, he said, "My father is just as dead as your father, and I deserve a memorial too." The way Eduardo saw it, his father was probably killed in a death flight, in which soldiers threw prisoners, alive but heavily drugged, from military airplanes into the sea. Very few bodies of people killed in death flights have ever been recovered. Eduardo had decided there was no hope that his father's remains would be found. He had spoken with a priest who assured him there could be a memorial mass without a body.

Fernando said, "Eduardo was kind of defensive. He wanted me to tell him it was okay with me. Well, sure, why not? If it makes him happy." However, not everyone in the family saw it that way. Eduardo's half-brother Matias was adamantly opposed. Ten years older, the child of his father's first marriage, Matias is an artist who lives in Lisbon. He argued that their father would not want a mass, and without a body, it made no sense to have a funeral anyway. As Fernando related the brothers' debate, Eduardo said, "I want to go to the cemetery and have a place to remember my father." Matias replied, "But you *don't* remember him. I do, and he would hate this." For Matias, a grave in Chacarita was not what his revolutionary father would want. Matias had not even wanted to search for his father's body; he did not support exhumations.

Absence as Presence

In 1985, at one of the earliest exhumations carried out by the EAAF, a group of Madres of Plaza de Mayo hurled stones and shouted insults at the team, who reacted with disbelief and shock, imagining themselves as allies (Joyce and Stover 1991; Rosenblatt 2015). Led by outspoken activist Hebe de Bonafini, a large and powerful faction of the Madres stridently

opposes exhumation. As one mother explained: “We reject exhumations, because we want to know who the murderers are – we already know who the murdered are!” (Brysk 1994, 688).

Families of the missing do not always support exhumation, a fact that has received little attention in forensic scholarship (Rosenblatt 2015). Anthropologists Derek Congram and Ariana Fernández have made the critique that the “subject of mixed support for mass grave exhumations by primary stakeholders (mainly families of the victims) has been largely, shamefully, avoided in forensic anthropology literature” (Congram and Fernández 2010, 23).

In 2001, under the auspices of Poland’s Institute for National Remembrance, an exhumation broke ground to investigate the Jedwabne pogrom of 1941, in which over 300 members of the local Jewish community were massacred. The exhumation was suspended when an international coalition of rabbis objected, citing Jewish law forbidding disturbing the dead (Rosenblatt 2015, 130).

Families in Cyprus and Spain have opposed exhumations (Congram and Fernández 2010; Kovras and Loizides 2011; Renshaw 2011; Sant Cassia 2005). A high-profile case involved the family of poet Federico García Lorca, who publicly opposed a proposal to exhume his body from a suspected mass grave. In a letter to *The New Yorker* in 2009, Lorca’s niece wrote:

We would choose to leave Lorca where he is, in the company of all victims, whether named or unnamed, whether remembered silently by their relatives or forgotten because they have none. We feel that the best way to remember all victims of the terrible crimes committed by Franco’s troops is to preserve and protect this burial ground, where Lorca is one victim among many (quoted in Rosenblatt 2015, 68).

In Lorca’s case, the family’s wishes were overruled, and the suspected mass grave was exhumed to much media attention. In the end, no bodies were found at the site (Sime 2013, 46).

Although families and communities oppose exhumation for a variety of reasons, a common thread is the sense that returning bodies to families is an attempt to avoid reckoning with the past by minimizing the effects of violence, surreptitiously converting a political open wound into an apolitical private grief. The faction of Madres de Plaza de Mayo who oppose of exhumation articulates this position. One mother said, “We don’t agree with the exhumation of the bodies... they want to eradicate the problem of the disappearances because then there are no more *desaparecidos* only dead people” (Graciela de Jeger quoted in Fisher 1989, 129). Madres leader Hebe de Bonafini put it this way: “Many want the wound to dry so that we will forget. We want it to continue bleeding” (quoted in Robben 2005, 144). Such a stance rejects any notion of “closure” in favor of a wound left purposefully open—strategically creating a problem that cannot be eradicated—in what could be described as a willful political melancholia (Butler 2003; Honig 2013; Eng and Kazanjian 2003).

In this perspective, disappearance is not just a personal loss, but a social wound of significant political power that should not be allowed to close. It should remain open—and families

should work to keep it from closing. The Madres situate their loss within an ongoing political commitment. To quote Hebe de Bonafini again, “The tremendous affection we have for our children is not expressed properly by looking for a pile of bones. Our children are something else, they have become something else, they are in all of those who continue their political struggle” (quoted in Rosenblatt 2015, 99). This double action of refusing exhumation and enlarging their political agenda to encompass forms of activism that do not center on disappearance is an agentive response to loss, a creative making. Just as poiesis is evident in the imaginative attempt to recognize a father in exhumed bones, so is it evident in the refusal to look for bones.

Judith Butler writes that “one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance” (2004, 21, original emphasis). For family members mourning the disappeared, the transformative experience of exhumation involves submission to the violent loss of loved ones. But it also involves creative making, the poesis of striving for meaning among the bare bones of those losses.

Building on Robert Desjarlais’ theorization, I propose to call this creative making anchored in loss a “mourning poiesis.” Mourning poiesis can be found in the desire for exhumation as well as its rejection. It can be found in projects like commemorative tiles (*baldosas*) placed at the site of kidnappings—on sidewalks, the walls of schools, in front of hospitals—interpolating the desaparecidos into the daily life of the city (Samanes and Quiroga 2015). Mourning poiesis can be found at street marches and protests when the names of the disappeared are read aloud and met with the cry of “*presente!*” in call and response. The dead are named and made present in the political life of the community.

The insistence on the ongoing presence and political power of the dead found in these projects is diametrically opposed to closure. These practices of mourning poiesis cultivate attachment to the missing, invest energy in the disappeared, and assert the vital immediacy of the dead. They place the responsibility for this work not just with the families of the missing, but with the community, expanding the role of mourner from the individual to the collective.

Angels and Atheists

Eduardo and Matias argued about the memorial for several weeks. Finally, the half-brothers semi-agreed to a plan. Eduardo would do whatever he wanted at the cemetery. Matias would skip the cemetery but come to the *velorio* (wake) afterward. All was well until Matias saw a photo of the tombstone Eduardo had selected: an imposing marble angel. That was the last straw. Matias, deeply offended that his Marxist father was to be commemorated with Catholic symbolism, stayed in Lisbon. Eduardo went ahead with the funeral and wake without him.

When I asked Fernando what he thought his uncle would make of all this, he said that Eduardo seemed happier and more at peace since the funeral. “And that’s what matters.” He paused. “But my uncle was a leftist revolutionary, an atheist. He doesn’t want his name on a goddamn angel, that’s for sure.”

As the story of Fernando and his cousins illustrates, there is no single way to consider exhumation, to experience grief, to assign meaning to human remains, or to perform funerary ritual. One brother finds meaning in Catholic funeral mass and a marble angel, and one brother finds meaning in Marx and the angel of history, facing the wreckage of the past (Benjamin 2019).

The transformative experience of exhumation encompasses a multiplicity of responses. Within one family opinions proliferate, experiences differ, and approaches diverge. Even a single person’s feelings may shift, conflict, and be paradoxical. I once asked Fernando about the possibility of finding his mother’s body. He said, “If it happens, okay, but I’m not really looking for it.” When I asked him why, he said that he was not sure he wanted “to go through all that again.” Only a few minutes earlier he had told me that finding his father was a turning point in his life—an experience that had allowed him deeper levels of loving connection with his girlfriend and had made him ready for fatherhood. Fernando describes his experiences of exhumation in terms of both renewal and depletion as Dulce describes hers as both healing and painful. The transformative experience of exhumation contains multitudes.

The Myth of Closure

While *Mourning and Melancholia* (1968) is Freud’s most influential work on grief, it does not represent his final thoughts on the subject. In later years, Freud substantially revised his views.⁴ No longer did he see grief in terms of the clean sundering of attachments. He came to see the ego as what Tammy Clewell describes as an “elegiac formation” (2004, 65) constituted by the traces of losses. In *The Ego and the Id*, written in 1923, Freud reflects on his original theorization of melancholia and writes, “At that time, however, we did not appreciate the full significance of this process and did not know how common and how typical it is,” and how in fact, its characteristic process “makes an essential contribution towards building up what is called its ‘character’” (Freud 1989, 27). Rather than a pathological process, Freud came to see melancholy as a deeply human process, indeed the process that makes us human.

In part, Freud’s revisions came through his own experiences of loss. In 1920, his beloved daughter, Sophie, who he called his “Sunday Child,” died in the flu epidemic. Her young son died three years later. These deaths affected him deeply. Nine years after Sophie’s death, Freud wrote to his friend and colleague, the Swiss psychiatrist, Ludwig Binswanger to offer condolences at the news of the death of Binswanger’s son:

We know that the acute sorrow we feel after such a loss will run its course, but also that we will remain inconsolable, and will never find a substitute. No matter what may come to take its place, even should it fill that place completely, it remains something else. And

that is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating a love that we do not want to abandon (Freud 1992, 386)

Grief persists in its complexity and mystery as “something else”—for a long time, maybe forever. Losses leave traces. As the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges wrote: “We are our memory/we are that chimerical museum of shifting shapes/that pile of broken mirrors” (1999, 271). From these fragments we construct ourselves as mature humans, aware of fragility, interdependent with others.

Like Freud, psychologist and grief researcher Pauline Boss also revised her influential theory of Ambiguous Loss. After working closely with families of those missing in the September 11th attacks in New York, she came to reject the closure model, calling closure “a myth” and concluding that families of the missing could experience non-pathological courses of grief independent of the discovery of human remains (2004).

In recent psychological research, a linear closure model of grief has gradually given way to models that favor meaning-making over closure, accept zigzagging paths, not just linear stages, recognize ambiguity without pathology, and acknowledge continuing bonds between the living and dead rather than commanding decathexis (Bonanno 2009; Boss 2006; Valentine 2008). But the linear model of grief continues to hold powerful sway. It informs clinical treatment as many psychologists and grief counseling programs continue to hold “closure” as a therapeutic goal (Boss 2006). Arguably, traces of this model can be detected in the increasing medicalization of grief evident in the revisions of the DSM-V (Wakefield 2013). Popular discourse too, from self-help books to sympathy cards and Wikipedia entries, echo refrains of closure (Boss 2006; Bonanno 2009).

Forensic teams and their sponsoring agencies, like other groups, continue to be deeply informed by a linear model of grief and explicitly reference “closure” as their objective. However, even as “closure” dominates the forensic discourse, ethnographic study of forensic practice reveals experiences of families of the missing that do not fit neatly within these models of grief.

On Elegiac Transformative Experience

Transformative experiences substantively change how we live in the world, our sense of self, our ways of making meaning, and our fears and our desires (Carel, Kidd, and Pettigrew 2016; Paul 2014). The transformative experiences of exhumation I have explored here bear notable features. They are inextricably bound to violence, death, and mourning. They encompass a wide range of emotional valences. They are characterized by creative making under conditions of violence, loss, and constraint—what I have called a mourning poiesis. Finally, they involve individual and collective experience, with both personal and political possibilities.

I use the term “elegiac” in recognition that exhumation is tethered to death and loss but also to denote that exhumation is marked by contradiction, embodied politics, and the

intersection of personal and societal histories. Here, I follow Lochlann Jain (2013, 2007) in their development of an “elegiac politics” of cancer, which does not disavow death and insists on “pushing” together with the private and public faces of cancer (2007, 89), and Angela Garcia’s theorization of the “elegiac addict,” which draws attention to the meeting of personal and historical loss (2008).

The elegiac transformation of exhumation does not promise definitive closure or inevitable progress toward healing. Transformative experiences can be positively or negatively valenced, containing both joy and sorrow (Carel and Kidd 2019; Paul 2014). The birth of a child and the death of a child are both deeply transformative experiences. Exhumations can open old wounds, reveal deep divisions, and stir disagreements. But they can also offer new possibilities: to recognize the father and in so doing discover in oneself the readiness to be a father. The elegiac transformation has the potential to hurt and heal. Sometimes it does both at once, in the same gesture, in the same breath, as Fernando described the return of his father’s remains as a valuable turning point he would not want to endure again, and Dulce felt healed and destroyed by her brother’s remains. An elegiac transformative experience encompasses positive and negative valences and can contain paradoxes.

Transformative experience, as theorized in L.A. Paul’s (2014) foundational work, centers on decision-making and personal life choices like having a child. As an aftereffect or residue of violence, exhumation concerns a very different kind of transformation. Exhumation is always already tied to experiences of violence, which bring change through terror and force—negating decision, choice, and consent. Elegiac transformation is thus in dialogue with recent work, which expands Paul’s theory of transformative experience to include contingency, vulnerability, and subjection (Carel and Kidd 2019). Exhumations are linked with webs of experiences like forced disappearance, political oppression, murder, and mourning, which are transformative in their own right. The elegiac transformation of exhumation is not about decision-making but about going on in the aftermath of violent rupture.

In this going on is a possibility for creative making, what I have called “mourning poiesis.” Elegiac transformation remakes the experience of loss within its constraints. Even in circumstances of great pain and difficulty, people find ways of creative-making. Exhumation gives rise to practices of mourning poiesis: acts like giving DNA samples or throwing stones, organizing memorials or refusing to attend them. It may take overtly political form as evident in the inception of the field. The group of graduate students from the University of Buenos Aires who began searching for the disappeared in the 1980s, and became the EAAF, began exhumations as activists, deploying scientific certainty in an agentive response to a regime that used uncertainty as a weapon (Fondebrider 2015; Joyce and Stover 1991). From its beginning, exhumation has been a social and political practice.

Elegiac transformative experience does not disavow the pain and devastation of loss, nor does it deny its creative possibility and political potential. It allows for multiple and paradoxical experiences of meaning-making. The official discourse of exhumation is that opening graves bring mourners closure. Examined with the fine-grained attention that ethnography

allows, family members' experiences of exhumation include open wounds as well as closure, attachment as well as letting-go, devastation as well as rebuilding. In practice, exhumation is a melancholic practice, ambiguously fragmented with pain and healing, an elegiac transformation that builds something new with "that pile of broken mirrors" that is memory, loss, and mourning.

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Notes

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1. The figure of 30,000 disappeared is widely cited and symbolically important to families of the missing. The total number of disappeared is not known. The official report issued by the *Comisión nacional sobre la desaparición de personas* in 1984 estimated the number of disappeared at 9000. Not all bodies were hidden in clandestine graves; some bodies were burned, abandoned by roadsides, or left in public in staged armed confrontations; some living prisoners were pushed from airplanes into bodies of water (Argentina, and Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas 1984; Robben 2018).
2. The categories of "families of the missing" and "forensic team members" are not always distinct: Some forensic team members have missing family members.
3. Kinsella and Blau (2013) relate a similar story of two brothers in Timor-Leste.
4. Charles Briggs (2014) has persuasively argued that Freud's early writings on mourning and melancholy have been interpreted in an overly linear manner, at least in part due to issues of translation, which failed to capture Freud's intent. Nevertheless, griefwork is commonly understood to be a linear.

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