

# Does the Unconscious Influence Our Ethnography? Psychoanalysis during Fieldwork in Argentina

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**SUMMARY** *Ethnographic fieldwork is an emotional research practice because of its intersubjective nature and empathic embrace of the actor's perspective. This intersubjectivity also involves the fieldworker's unconscious, which influences ethnographic encounters and anthropological interpretations. Two years of psychoanalysis in Argentina revealed the influence of the unconscious on my fieldwork about political violence and trauma through dream analyses and the analyst's interventions. This understanding improved the rapport with research participants and opened an alternative road to reflexivity. [Argentina, dreams, fieldwork, psychoanalysis, unconscious]*

## Introduction

"Please, take a seat," the general said, as he gestured with his hand at a comfortable chair in a sparsely furnished room of the Officers' Club in Buenos Aires. I took in the natural light and chose another armchair with its back to the window. This seating arrangement would leave me in the dark and expose the general's face to me. I am uncertain whether he sensed my intention. Probably he had the same in mind. He smiled wryly and ceded the chair to me. Thus, mistrust entered our relationship from the beginning. Our conversations were polite and our demeanor a display of good manners, but a mutual mistrust was always lurking behind these courtesies. We tried to read between the lines of our questions and answers and did not discuss his motives for granting the interview.

General Ramón Genaro Díaz Bessone must have suspected me of leftist sympathies and assumed that I knew of the indictment against him. He was held responsible for the rape, torture, and disappearance of Argentine civilians committed by his troops when he had been Commander of the Second Army Corps in 1975 and 1976. General Díaz Bessone rejected my suggestion that massive disappearances had taken place in Argentina and that torture was endemic in the hundreds of secret detention centers where tens of thousands of disappeared captives had been held between 1976 and 1983. In our first meetings I

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did not address the accusations against him because I was trying to suspend our mutual mistrust and establish a good rapport.

Rapport is essential to ethnographic fieldwork. Only a good working relationship between researcher and informant will enable the dialectic of empathy and detachment that allows the fieldworker to understand reality both from the informant's perspective and the observer's perspective. This dialectic is particularly crucial when studying violence. One has to consider the other as a complex fellow human being instead of a one-dimensional perpetrator or torture victim. A further complicating factor is that these interviewees generally want to have their compelling narratives accepted as the truth because of the political and emotional stakes involved. The interviewer is at risk of empathizing too strongly with the interviewee and taking the narrative at face value. In previous work I described this interactive dynamic with the term *ethnographic seduction*, which was defined as "the combination of a deliberate maneuvering of the dialogic alliance by the interviewee and the unconscious countertransferential reaction by the interviewer" (Robben 1996:84). Critical questions are not asked, and the interviewer has an illusion of congeniality and genuine contact with the interviewee that makes the dialogue seem truthful. What is experienced as empathy and excellent rapport is in fact a countertransferential identification, namely the displacement of unconscious affects, ideas, and wishes on the interviewee that are in fact destined for others, often one's father or mother.

I experienced such ethnographic seduction with officers, former guerrilla commanders, bishops, and human rights activists, and it prevented me initially from critically probing their persuasive discourse. A study of the transcribed interviews made me discover the process of ethnographic seduction and enabled the restoration of the dialectic of empathy and detachment. Such conscious reflection failed, however, to uncover other emotional influences, influences whose discovery required another reflexive approach. Psychoanalysis turned out to be that approach, although I did not know this at the beginning of my fieldwork in Buenos Aires.

Psychoanalysis became popular as a therapy among the Argentine middle class in the 1950s and influenced the mental health treatment of the working class in the 1960s and 1970s. The military dictatorship repressed the socialized psychiatric services and disappeared clinicians. The Argentine military did not persecute psychoanalysts with private practices but went after psychotherapists who treated guerrilla insurgents or worked in public hospitals out of political activism. An estimated thirty to sixty psychologists and a handful of psychoanalysts were disappeared (Plotkin 2001:219, 2003:205–208). Nevertheless, psychoanalysis continued to be a part of Argentine urban culture and an influential interpretive model for human behavior at the time of my fieldwork (Bass 2006; Hollander 1990; Plotkin 2003).

Soon after arriving in Argentina in 1989 I decided to enter into analysis, even though I was skeptical about psychoanalysis as a theory and a therapy.<sup>1</sup> My aim was to understand the cultural significance of psychoanalysis in Argentina and become familiar with its concepts and practices, because even Argentine military officers underwent analysis, and junta commanders had used psychoanalytic terms in their public speeches (Plotkin 2001:221; Agosti 1978; Massera 1979). After interviewing four analysts, I decided to work with L. Her approach,

a combination of Freudian theory and Kleinian object relations theory, was more concerned with interpersonal relations in the present and family dynamics in the past than with uncovering unconscious influences that dated back to early childhood. I did not realize at the time that this participant observation of psychoanalytic therapy would also benefit my research project by revealing how unconscious forces influenced my fieldwork about political violence and trauma in Argentina.<sup>2</sup>

The psychodynamics of ethnographers has been examined in numerous reflexive works because the fieldworkers themselves are anthropology's principal research instrument. Psychological anthropologists have written about transference and countertransference (Robben 1996; Borneman 2007; Coleman 2009; Devereux 1967; Hunt 1989), and conducted autoethnographies that relate the researcher's personal life to the fieldwork relations (Ellis 2004; Okely and Callaway 1992; Reed-Danahay 1997). Anthropologists have also been self-conscious about their ethnographic encounters (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009; Crapanzano 1980; Dwyer 1982; Herdt and Stoller 1990; Rabinow 1977). Finally, they have written about their emotions in the field (Briggs 1970; Davies and Spencer 2010). To these reflexive studies, I want to add an understanding of how the fieldworker's unconscious may influence ethnographic fieldwork.<sup>3</sup>

How did the unconscious influence my field encounters? How could this influence be made conscious and improve my understanding of the interpersonal dynamics of ethnographic interviews? How could the analyst's interventions and the disclosure of unconscious processes provide ethnographic insight and critique that benefitted my fieldwork in Argentina? These questions are examined through three dream analyses. After all, as Freud (1968a:608) has famously written, "The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind." The assumption is that our mental defenses are weaker when we are asleep. The unconscious can then emerge in disguised ways manifested in dreams.<sup>4</sup>

The ethnographic material presented here has been derived from two diaries. A regular field diary served to identify the day's residues or daily worries that entered the dream analyses. An analytic diary, in which dreams, free associations, and analytic interventions were recorded after each analytic hour, has helped me to reconstruct the three dream analyses.<sup>5</sup>

### **Authority and Anxiety**

My second meeting with General Díaz Bessone went very well. I had been able to talk to him for several hours that morning, and in analysis that afternoon I went over the interview. Suddenly I remarked that I had felt "subverted" by the meeting, of having been cheated by the general. This association was puzzling. Did it arise from the general's frequent characterization of the guerrilla insurgency as "subversion"? But how could I feel subverted when he had been so courteous to me and had shared in detail his ideas about the military repression of the guerrilla insurgency; of course, without incriminating himself? L., my analyst, continued to explore my associations through pointed questions until it dawned upon me that the feeling of being "subverted" had arisen from some vague notions about the balance of power between the general and me.

I had somehow assumed that I was in a superior position by being the interviewer: I was asking the questions, and he had to answer without knowing what I would ask next. Yet, my experience was different. Behind his friendliness and willingness to respond, I sensed a certain falseness. As a scholar I was of course interested in his deliberate deceptions, but somehow I felt cheated and vulnerable as a person. These reflections opened an examination of the issue of authority.

The question of authority arose frequently in analysis. The ambivalence toward one's father has been a classic subject of psychoanalytic and anthropological theory. Freud examined the father complex as a stage of human development, whereas Malinowski (1985) tried to demonstrate that this Oedipus complex was cultural rather than universal. The love, hostility, and even death wishes toward one's father are later projected on other authority figures, such as dictators, whose death may be experienced as a loss but also as a liberation (Borneman 2004; Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich 1975).

Authority figures appeared regularly in my dreams. The analysis of several dreams in June 1989, when I was interviewing General Díaz Bessone twice a week, became important to clarify and mature my ethnographic relation with Argentine officers. One dream that occurred the day after my first meeting with General Díaz Bessone would prove to be insightful upon psychoanalytic examination. It is one of those dreams that are rich in analytic potential but short in recall because the dream underwent a process of condensation.

I am standing in the living room of my childhood home in the Netherlands. My father is also there. The curtains are drawn, and the room is sparsely furnished. On the mantle piece, there hangs a painting. My father says: "I think that our neighbor will like this painting." He opens the door and General Díaz Bessone steps in. He says he likes the painting, and leaves.

In analysis, I mentioned my feelings of anxiety in the hours before meeting General Díaz Bessone—the first veteran of the dictatorship with whom I had arranged an interview. How would we relate to one another? Would he be hostile to me or dismiss my research? Would I be able to establish a good rapport? What would happen to my research project if he would discourage other officers from talking to me? The appearance of the room in the dream referred clearly to the office at the Officers' Club where I had interviewed the general. The drawn curtains referred to the room's poor natural light and indicated the equivocation of our relationship. I told L. that I did not need psychoanalysis to show me the reasons for my anxiety because this sentiment was typical of first fieldwork encounters and referred to understandable worries about gaining rapport. Moreover, I had acquired the professional skills to deal with it during two previous fieldwork projects in Brazil. I even construed the dream as a latent wish fulfilment, according to Freud's understanding of dreams: I was looking for the approval of General Díaz Bessone during the meeting but on a deeper level I was searching for my father's approval and acceptance. The methodological explanation of preconscious worries—preconscious because the underlying concerns can be made conscious through reflection—and my attempt at self-analysis by suggesting unconscious oedipal wishes might be

reassuring, but they also obstructed the access to the unconscious. The preconscious and conscious anxiety about failed fieldwork shielded an unconscious anxiety that, according to classic psychoanalytic theory, might be disguised in a dream through a process of censorship and distortion. Such mental censorship prevents many unconscious influences from becoming conscious, whereas those that make it through the barriers of resistance are manifested in incomprehensible dream fantasies (Freud 1968a:144; Brenner 1973:173–176). I had to admit during the analytic session that my anxiety was more visceral than research related. It could be explained in terms of my self-doubt as a fieldworker, but it might also be interpreted as a resistance to a further excavation of the unconscious.

L. observed that the dream, my reflections, and the self-analysis demonstrated that authority figures can have strong emotional effects and may even destabilize people. Emotions are authoritarian. They impose themselves on people. My anxiety had to do with the feeling of being powerless in Argentina, of being in a situation of emergency without an escape, while meeting a man who had once ordered the torture and disappearance of helpless men, women, and children. This anxiety put me in an emotional state of surrender when I entered the Officers' Club, according to my analyst, while I had assumed in contrast that my relation with the general was best characterized by mutual mistrust. I did not experience any submission but had to admit that there was a sense of vulnerability. I realized during the analytic hour that this lack of mastery over my situation in Argentina manifested itself in the suspicion that my ways were being watched and my phone was being tapped. In fact, I had already undertaken action. A friend had given me precise instructions on how to discover a phone tap: I had to dial 115, and immediately hang up the phone. If I did not hear a ring, then the phone was bugged. I dutifully followed his advice. There was no ring. In my next interview with Díaz Bessone, I asked him about the possibility of telephone surveillance. He proposed to bring me into contact with military intelligence, and they could ascertain whether others were listening in on my telephone conversations. I did not take up his offer. It only raised my feeling of vulnerability further and provoked more anxiety because of the experience of a constant threat, but my analyst observed that my actions meant that surrender is not inevitable and that one can guide the course of life and take control of limit situations.

The analytic exegesis helped me overcome feelings of anxiety before interviews, and my self-confidence showed when I met with six of the nine judges of the Argentine Supreme Council of the Armed Forces on December 20, 1989. I was taken to the conference room and seated at the short end of a large rectangular table, exactly opposite the court's president. Before the interview could begin, I was asked to present a short autobiography and summarize my current investigation in Argentina. After my introduction, followed by a lengthy historical exposé from Rear-Admiral Juan Carlos Frías about the terrorism leading up to the coup d'état of 1976, I asked my first deliberately provocative question: "Why did the Armed Forces not execute the guerrillas publicly?" My attitude toward veteran Argentine generals had changed. I was no longer anxious or intimidated, and I felt at ease standing up to them in a contestational manner. The answer of Rear-Admiral Eduardo Davion was as surprising as revealing

and would not have been given without my assertive attitude: "If one would have done what you are asking, the reason why, then there would have been immediate revenge, not only on the executioner or those who presided over the trial but also on their families. That is to say, the terror had also infused terror among the Armed Forces, and they responded with terror. This is the tremendous problem, the tremendous tragedy of this war."<sup>6</sup> In next day's interview, Brigadier Carlos Echeverría Martínez was even more explicit: "One can only fight terror by instilling a greater terror in the enemy ... And here we probably had to embark on that uncommon course that hurt and disgusted us all. If we wouldn't have more or less taken this road then Argentina would have been a bastion of Marxism at this moment."<sup>7</sup>

The meeting with the military Supreme Court became the subject of that afternoon's analytic session. Discussing paternal authority, I realized that I was of the same age-group as the Argentine guerrillas, some of whom came from prominent military families. I assumed that for the military judges I belonged to that generation and that this categorization may have worked its way into the ethnographic encounter. Clearly, my relationship with them was characterized by a tension between respect and rebellion in terms of my courteous demeanor and provocative questioning. It engaged me once more in an intergenerational conflict but one that differed from any adolescent conflicts due to my status as a foreign scholar and the resolution of my anxiety toward authority figures. This analytic awareness revealed my ambiguous field relations with retired officers and former guerrilla commanders, as became clear from an analysis of the following dream in October 1989.

I am waiting for guests to arrive in an upstairs apartment next to my childhood home in the Netherlands. I descend to the street level and hear the approaching voices of the former Montonero guerrilla commanders Fernando Vaca Narvaja and Roberto Perdía. The three of us climb the stairs and join the couple living in the apartment. I put on my best suit. We leave the place to attend some official celebration in Buenos Aires and start discussing my research. Vaca Narvaja says that the Argentine military are talking to me about the Dirty War as part of their psychological warfare. They can thus control the information I am receiving, and this will ultimately benefit them. Perdía asks cynically why I am conducting this research. I cannot recall what I answered in the dream, and neither what Vaca Narvaja said upon my reply, but I do remember that Perdía referred to an episode about which I had written. The fact that he recalls my written account makes a strong impression on me.

I am in the bedroom of my apartment in Buenos Aires when the telephone rings. I do not remember the exact words but the caller makes a death threat. I say "thank you" in an ironical way and then ask him: "Why don't you identify yourself?" He hangs up. I associate his voice with the rebel officer I spoke to on the phone some days earlier.

The doorbell of my Buenos Aires apartment rings. I open the door slightly. Fernando Vaca Narvaja forces his way in and transforms into an officer dressed in civilian clothing who is possibly a military rebel. The officer walks straight into my office. He grabs a pile of continuous computer paper, and a part cascades to the floor. As the paper unfolds, we see that the beginning and end are printed with text but that the middle of three or four pages is blank. "What is this?" asks the officer who transforms back into

Vaca Narvaja. I look at the Janus-headed figure, and say in an accusatory tone: "Why don't you put the names of the disappeared there?"

The analytic session began with recounting my dream, and I then went through the activities and thoughts of the preceding days to detect the residues symbolized in the dream. Two days before the dream, a major protest march had been held against the pardon by Argentine President Carlos Menem of hundreds of indicted and convicted officers and guerrillas. The pardoned former Montonero commanders Fernando Vaca Narvaja and Roberto Perdiá returned from exile the next day and had a meeting with President Menem. At noontime, I had lunch with retired General Sánchez de Bustamante and several guests at the conservative French Club. In the afternoon, I read an army directive about psychological warfare, called a former rebel officer about next day's interview, and then went to analysis.

L. did not discuss the dream's manifest content. Instead, she asked me about the political affinities of my parents and siblings. Somehow, she must have felt that the dream contained clues about underlying family dynamics whose analysis could be a causeway into my unconscious. The analysis showed the displacement of a family conflict from decades back onto the political violence in Argentina. As for so many members of my generation, the Vietnam War was a principal source of family discord during adolescence. My father and eldest brother stood by the United States for liberating the Netherlands from the Nazi occupiers. My other brother and I acknowledged the American effort in World War Two but supported the liberation struggle of North Vietnam. My mother and sister assumed a more neutral position, rejecting the violence from both sides.

The dream analysis made me understand that the three family alliances were displaced onto my research in Argentina. The Argentine armed forces and the guerrilla insurgency resembled the two adversarial male alliances, whereas the Argentine Church replaced the female alliance. How did this family dynamic become manifest in my understanding of Argentina's political violence and trauma? Apparently, the unconscious ambivalence so typical of father-son relations (Freud's Oedipus complex), the adolescent questioning of paternal authority, and my repressed wish to take my father's place in the family were transposed in a modified form on the retired generals I interviewed. These aging men used to be figures of authority. Some treated me in a fatherly manner, perhaps as a means of psychological warfare as Fernando Vaca Narvaja had suggested in my dream, but emotionally I did not understand the importance of this displacement for my fieldwork until its psychoanalytic explication. To complicate matters even further, the day after this analytic hour, I was going to have my first interview with a retired middle-ranking officer who had rebelled against army command in April 1987. The rebellion was caused by the ongoing trials against officers for crimes against humanity committed during the dictatorship. My alliance with rebel officers, or for that matter with retired generals like General Díaz Bessone, would be ideologically and emotionally impossible because of their human rights violations, just as I could not ally myself with my father about the Vietnam War.

The guerrilla commanders were also unsuitable for an ideological or emotional alliance because I consciously rejected their violent politics once

democracy had been reinstated in Argentina in 1973. Their return to arms proved particularly fatal for the noncombatant members of the guerrilla organizations. I loathed their betrayal of these political supporters who were left without any means of protection from the aggressive armed forces. As one former political activist observed: "It's a murderous decision [to restart the guerrilla operations] because they [the commanders] knew very well that they were condemning these people ... Because these were people of the neighborhood, these were people who couldn't move, who had their children, who were workers, who had no means at all. They were giving them away to the repression."<sup>8</sup> Aside from my conscious disapproval of the guerrilla commanders, I could not ally myself with them because of an unconscious resistance that came out in analysis. Such alliance would reinvigorate the father-son conflict that had waned during the decades after the Vietnam War. Furthermore, intergenerational conflict was both an insufficient explanation of my family's divide over the Vietnam War and of Argentina's political violence because the various alliances and enmities ran as much across as between generations.

The oneiric transformation of the rebel military officer into the former guerrilla commander and vice versa, as if they were a Janus-headed figure, could be interpreted as an equation known in Argentina as the two-demons theory. This explanation of Argentina's political violence of the 1970s assigned a dual responsibility to the armed forces and the guerrilla insurgency. The Argentine government called, therefore, for the prosecution of the former guerrilla commanders and the members of the military juntas as the two evils that had sunk Argentina into revolutionary and state terrorism. The dream content went against my scholarly opinion. I believe that the two enemies were engaged in an asymmetrical armed conflict, that the military repression was disproportionate, and that the insurgency was embedded in a larger political opposition movement against the reigning authoritarianism and economic exploitation (Robben 2018:65). The explanation for the equation of the rebel officer and the former guerrilla commander in my dream should probably be sought in their similarity as standing up to authority and being prepared to use violence to achieve their objectives.

The Argentine Catholic Church was also discussed in the analytic session. The church had played a contradictory role during the dictatorship. Most bishops had supported the state repression—some more ardently than others—while a few bishops had aligned themselves with the human rights movement. The politics of the ordinary clergy was equally contradictory. A few priests joined the guerrilla insurgency. Some participated in the military repression, including torture, whereas others supported the human rights movement actively. Most clergymen, however, were riding out the storm and continued with their usual pastoral services. After the dictatorship fell from power, the ecclesiastical authorities and the clergy unanimously encouraged the social reconciliation of Argentine society, despite their internal political differences. My emotional alliance with this divided Catholic Church would imply an unconscious alliance with my mother, who also maintained relations with the adversarial groups in the family. My mother was loyal to her husband and eldest son as well as to her two youngest sons. She was emotionally connected to all, and, therefore, attempted to forge their reconciliation. In a comparable fashion, at



least according to my free associations during the analytic hour, the Argentine Catholic Church was torn among various irreconcilable groups in Argentine society but nevertheless joined hands in a Christian spirit of reconciliation and preached forgiveness.

The second part of the dream was left unanalyzed, but I realize in retrospect that my response to the death threat can be understood as a sign that my earlier anxiety about the interviews with military officers had been resolved. The dream does not suggest a surrender to the threat but rather defiance. My accusatory confrontation of the rebel officer and the guerrilla commander in the dream's unanalyzed third part gives additional proof to the reduction of anxiety. The dream seems to refer to my feelings about the disappeared and my emotional affinity with the human rights movement. This emotional investment was not examined in the session for lack of time.

### **Comparison and Displacement**

In the early months of fieldwork I was pondering over my conceptual approach to the political violence in Argentina. My field notes show that I was struggling with two different comparative models. The first model compared the extermination of Patagonia's native population by the Argentine army in the 1870s with the annihilation of the revolutionary insurgency and political opposition movement in the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> The second model considered the ideological similarities between Nazi Germany and dictatorial Argentina. Both regimes were staunchly anticommunist and considered, respectively, the Jews and the revolutionaries as a contagious disease that poisoned the nation with alien ideas. In the week when I was weighing these two models, I had the following dream:

I am standing in a park of my hometown in the Netherlands. Its old trees cast a solemn, cathedral-like shadow. There are decaying leaves on the ground. The large, heavy branches form a green canopy that protects me from the strong sunlight. I am in Germany, and I am walking with a childhood friend through the park. We soon see a conglomeration of buildings from the sixteenth or seventeenth century. It seems a convent with a small chapel attached to it. We enter the chapel with its rows of beautiful oak benches and a sober-looking altar. There is only one long bench in the chapel, and it prevents us from approaching the altar. We leave the chapel by the rear entrance and arrive at an elevator. Someone tells us to go up to the third or fourth floor to view the complex of old buildings. Somehow, I press two buttons at the same time, and the elevator stops between the second and third floor. To our surprise, the door slides open and we step into a large room. The curtains are almost drawn and the natural light, already filtered by the trees, gives the room a laden, almost solemn, atmosphere. A large, heavy wooden table has been set for a dinner with eight to ten guests. As we are slowly walking through the room, an elderly lady with some authority, probably the head of housekeeping, looks at us sternly and asks us what we are doing here. She tells us that the room is completely off limits. I step forward and explain that the elevator brought us here by accident. She orders us to leave. I take a right-hand turn and see an alcove with an old man sitting in a dark leather chair. I cannot see his face because he sits turned away from the room's entrance in a 60° angle. His head is tilted forward as if he has dozed off while waiting for dinner to be served. His lower arms are resting on the chair's armrests. The moment I see this old man

in the somber light—the dark alcove is only lit by a dim reflection from the dining room—I realize it is Adolf Hitler. Although old and defenseless, he emanates an evil aura that impresses me tremendously. He has lived his life in his way, without remorse or guilt feelings. His evilness is natural, as if he had no choice. Now, in his old age, his worldly power has been spent but his spiritual power is still present. Germany has recovered from the war, old wounds have healed, and Hitler has survived unbeknownst to the world. The woman is aware of Hitler's presence, but is uncertain whether or not I have seen him. Again, she orders us to leave. We take the elevator to the ground floor, and then find ourselves being chased by Wehrmacht soldiers who apparently suspect our discovery. We run through the chapel and arrive in the park. I wake up.

Rather than entering into the day's residues in the dream, of which my mulling over a comparative study of Argentina and Nazi Germany is the most obvious, I want to draw attention to the dream's displacement. According to Freud (1968a:305–308), this process substitutes the dream's latent content for a manifest content, namely the dream narrative that is remembered after awakening. Unconscious ideas and symbolizations were represented in the mesmerizing figure of Adolf Hitler. Hitler had such a dominating influence on my country's history that his presence in my dream raises the barrier to the unconscious to an almost insurmountable height. Significantly, the nebulous contours of Hitler's face function to aggrandize his aura even more, in particular because Hitler was widely known for his hypnotic gaze. The dream shielded me from his deep blue eyes, perhaps because his evilness defies its representation in a visual image (Schmölders 2006:1). More likely, the displacement served to obscure unconscious interests whose resistance found expression in the appearance of Adolf Hitler. It was difficult to disengage from this strong dream image during the analytic session and enter into a mode of free association in search of deeper layers of meaning.

Even though I had not yet told L. about my comparative models, her first question was nevertheless why I made a comparison between Argentina and Nazi Germany. I gave an academic answer, telling her about the importance of stepping out of the confines of a historical context, and understanding this reality through a comparison with another historical situation because of similar structures, relations, and representations. I also explained that there might be certain similarities between the actions of the military in Argentina and Nazi Germany. She responded that it is difficult to deal emotionally with unique situations. They stand on their own. They cannot be interpreted or communicated. Hence, my anxiety before the unique and exceptional situation of Argentina made me look for precedents and analogies, for other experiences and events that had the symbolic value of highlighting what is hidden in a pure description of the situation.

Comparisons carry an added importance in research on violence and trauma because the deliberate infliction of pain on defenseless human beings is often incomprehensible. The comparison of dictatorial Argentina and Nazi Germany suggested a semblance that removed the singularity of the violence and trauma. Here, L. was right. I had attributed a comparative meaning that allowed me to integrate the unique historical realities into my understanding of the world. Furthermore, the dream analysis of Hitler's aura and his hidden face suggested

that any human being—including myself—in their deepest unconscious contains this evil in an ambivalent relation with the good because of the coexistence of love and hate. Hitler was the metaphor of evil but also the metonym of people's unconscious desire to harm others. L.'s intervention was crucial for my research because it allowed me to study Argentina's political violence and trauma on their own terms, unburden my conceptual doubts, and understand better my emotions to the atrocities inflicted.

The dream analysis made me also realize that the comparison of Argentina and Nazi Germany had influenced my interviews with General Díaz Bessone. This prejudice became apparent in the only real emotional outburst of the otherwise so polite general. We were discussing how solidarity organizations emerged in Europe during the Argentine dictatorship to support the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and how Argentina was likened to Nazi Germany. General Díaz Bessone was outraged: "This is the ideology, the psychological warfare that was carried out; the propaganda that all these organizations carried out. Because you who are living here realize that the Argentine Armed Forces have nothing to do with the—I'm not saying with the German Army—have nothing to do with the SS, have nothing to do with the Nazis."<sup>10</sup> The general tried to extricate me from the Argentina–Nazi Germany comparison by appealing to my good personal experiences with Argentine officers, but in the same sentence compared the Argentine Army to all other standing armies, including the German Army during World War Two. On the one hand, he emphasized the uniqueness of World War Two and of what he called the antirevolutionary war in Argentina, but on the other hand he redefined the basis of the comparison as that of universal armies.

I decided to press the general a bit further and told him that an Argentine Federal Court had convicted five junta members in 1985 for designing a criminal plan to combat terrorism. Low-ranking officers were ordered to torture, disappear, and assassinate people suspected of links to the subversion (Camara Nacional 1987:1:266). He interrupted me and said that if there was a criminal plan, then someone must have written it. I responded that the Holocaust did not exist in a written document but that Europeans saw a resemblance between the Jewish genocide and the Argentine disappearances. He looked at me grim faced and raised his voice: "Do you realize that comparing the Holocaust in Europe—the Jews that were turned into soap, the gas chambers, and whatever more—with what has happened in Argentina ... But that's an enormous absurdity!... There, millions of people, Jews and non-Jews died in the concentration camps of the Nazis. Here, what? No comparison. Here, there were no gas chambers; there was nothing that looked like it."<sup>11</sup> He was indignant at the comparison. My analyst's intervention made me admit that at least in this case the general was probably right.

### **Final Thoughts**

In the course of the first months of fieldwork in Argentina, I began losing my initial doubts about psychoanalysis. The principal reason for entering the analytic treatment had been ethnographic. I wanted to understand the cultural significance of psychoanalysis in Argentina and comprehend a public

discourse larded with Freudian terms. Several free associations and analytic interventions clarified my ethnographic encounters and conceptual analyses. These insights eventually won me over and made me continue the sessions until the end of fieldwork.

Can the psychoanalysis of anthropologists during fieldwork improve ethnographic research? Much depends on the influence attributed to the unconscious. We acquire our anthropological skills during graduate training and cultivate them in later research projects. Some of this knowledge may become anchored in the unconscious because it resonates with the ideas and affects lodged there. This anthropological unconscious, limited though it may be, can influence our ethnographic interviews and scholarly analyses. Most of our professional knowledge, however, exists in the conscious and preconscious, and can, therefore, be accessed through reflection. The unconscious has certainly an effect on our professional engagements and perceptions of reality, but our anthropological training circumvents and overlays most unconscious influences, including the knowledge anchored there, by inculcating general research methods and teaching us how to recognize biases and preconceptions. I am convinced that without psychoanalysis I would have also overcome the anxiety about building a good rapport. Also, I would have also eventually rejected the comparison of Nazi Germany and dictatorial Argentina. A digging into the unconscious may be personally enriching but does not necessarily yield ethnographic insights that cannot be achieved through reflection and a critical scholarly attitude.

Had the years spent in psychoanalysis in Argentina been futile? Certainly not. The psychoanalytic treatment raised my self-confidence as an ethnographic interviewer and allowed me to listen to stories that shake anyone's trust in their fellow human beings. Psychoanalysis also improved my rapport because I understood my emotional reactions to my interlocutors better. It made me aware of intrapsychic processes and interpersonal dynamics that developed during ethnographic research about human atrocities and massive political violence. Fortunately, I was never troubled by nightmares, and I knew that any disturbing dream would be dealt with in next day's analysis. These dream analyses raised my critical ability and yielded valuable ethnographic insights, but I also believe that such ethnographic understanding could just as well have been reached by other, albeit more winding, ways. Psychoanalysis during fieldwork is unusual. It is only possible in a few field sites and under rare circumstances. Nevertheless, my psychoanalysis became a royal road to successful fieldwork that improved my ethnographic observations and interpretations about Argentina's political violence and trauma.

## Notes

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1. I had the same ambivalent attitude towards psychoanalysis as Gingrich (2006). The low cost of private consultations in 1989, due to a runaway inflation, was a major incentive to enter into analysis. I had three analytic hours per week from May 1989 to July 1991, with the exception of the months of January.

2. Freud (1968b:172) defined the unconscious as repressed ideas, impulses, and childhood wishes that unknowingly influence people's behavior.

3. My research project in Argentina was not a clinical ethnography that examined the subjectivity of me and my informants because my psychoanalyst did not participate as a research collaborator, as was the case of Herdt and Stoller (1990:29) in Papua New Guinea.

4. Influenced by object-relations theory, my analyst paid equal attention to the manifest and latent content of my dreams. This approach was helpful in showing the influence of the unconscious on my fieldwork. Ewing (2003:45) and Hollan (2003:65) confirm the significance of the manifest content of dreams for anthropological interpretation, finding support from the object-relations psychoanalysts Heinz Kohut and Ronald Fairbairn, who showed that dream narratives can reveal people's social interaction and self-organization.

5. For a sustained neurocognitive critique of psychoanalytic dream analysis, see Domhoff (2003). He argues that dreaming is a nonfunctional byproduct of sleep and that the cognitive processes of dreaming and waking thought are similar, but that nevertheless "psychological information can be extracted from dream reports, a finding that implies that dreams have some meaning" (Domhoff 2003:169).

6. Interview with Supreme Council of the Armed Forces on 20 December 1989.

7. Interview with Supreme Council of the Armed Forces on 21 December 1989.

8. Interview with Alcira Argumedo on 9 April 1991.

9. The two military campaigns had similar objectives, such as achieving territorial sovereignty by defeating the native population and the guerrilla organizations; using disproportionate violence by killing captured combatants; waging a civilizing war that imposed a Western culture and Christian faith on the population; and dehumanizing natives and revolutionaries as vermin.

10. Interview with General Díaz Bessone on 21 June 1989.

11. Interview with General Díaz Bessone on 21 June 1989. General Díaz Bessone was handed a life sentence in 2012. He spent the years under house detention due to poor health and died in June 2017.

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