Strategies of Cultural Memory and Cultural Identity Retrieval – the Case of Yvette Melanson’s *Looking for Lost Bird* and Victoria Donda’s *My Name Is Victoria*
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Strategies of Cultural Memory and Cultural Identity Retrieval – the Case of Yvette Melanson’s *Looking for Lost Bird* and Victoria Donda’s *My Name Is Victoria*

**Abstract:**
The article is focused on the autobiographical memories of two adoptees, a Native-American Lost Bird and an Argentinean Desaparecida. They are both similar and dissimilar in the way their cultural memories and cultural identities have been wiped out by the regimes of their countries. The two memoirs narrate the events leading to the discovery of their true cultural heritage and their reaction to the shocking reality of their identities. The cultural heritage that had been imposed on them through their kidnapping and subsequent adoptions had been that of Jewishness and of loyalty to the Argentinean political regime. The article proposes an analysis of the strategies used for appropriating the lost cultural heritage. At 43/45 years of age (in 1996), Melanson moved her family to the Navajo Reservation (Tolani Lake, AZ) to walk the traditional path her ancestors had walked before her, on a quest to retrieve the identity of which she had been deprived, hoping to find her twin brother. Analía Perez discovered her identity at 27/29 years of age (in 2004), and immediately embraced the name her biological parents had given her; moreover, she also followed in their footsteps both in terms of her education and her political involvement.

**Keywords:** cultural memory; cultural identity; collective memory; mnemonic communities; identity retrieval.

**Motto:** “A nation that does not know its own history has no future”.
(Oglala Lakota activist Russell Means)

Introduction

Yvette Melanson’s words – “First, who am I? With what do I identify? With whom? Secondly, what have I become with the who that I am? And thirdly, why am I here? What is my purpose?” (Melanson 14) – reveal the reason for which both Analía Perez and Yvette Melanson wrote their memoirs. These memoirs were meant to be a journey towards self-discovery and towards the retrieval of an identity denied to them due to the fact that they had been abducted and adopted into families that could not be more dissimilar to their birth families. The cultural heritage and the identity meant for the writers of the two memoirs considered in this paper – *Looking for Lost Bird: A Jewish Woman Discovers Her Navajo Roots* and *My Name is Victoria* (O victimă a dictaturii argentine: Recuperarea unei identități) – were wiped out of existence. In effect, they provide a twist to Descartes saying *Cogito ergo sum*, turning it into ‘I remember therefore I am’. By not remembering their mnemonic communities, the two adoptees are an example of the consequences of such abductions and adoptions. The epigraph points to the same potential outcome, the disappearance of a community. By removing the children of a group – either a
political or an ethnic one – the effect is that the group loses its past, present and future. The intention of the Argentinean regime in removing the political dissidents and taking away their children and handing them over to ‘loyal’ families, was to ensure that the cultural heritage of those with left-wing sympathies would be obliterated.

The Native Americans and the Argentine political dissidents were deprived of their children – for two decades starting in the 1950s and ending in the 1970s and, respectively, from 1976 to 1983. The Argentinean left-wing supporters were defeated on a political, military and ideological level. In both cases, by taking away the children, these two groups were also deprived of their history. The children were placed in families that would raise them in ways contrary to either their traditions or their ideological beliefs. Victoria Donda thus outlines the situation in Argentina, simultaneously providing a synopsis of the situation of the Native Americans: the political dissidents within the Argentine authoritarian regime were left without an identity, heritage, history, memory, children (Donda 63).

2. The Historical Contexts

The historical context of the Dirty War started with the military coup that removed Isabel Perón from power (Kaiser 201). From 1976 to 1983, the Argentinean military junta launched this war on its own people “ostensibly against subversion” (Armony 305), claiming that they were acting in the best interest of the nation. During this time, 30,000 left-wing supporters disappeared, were tortured and presumably killed in the detention centers. Their children – either born in captivity or before their detention – were removed from the family and adopted by the partisans of the regime. The end of the dictatorship marked the “issue of a ‘self-amnesty’” (Kaiser 201). The Comisión Nacional para la Desaparición de Personas (CONADEP) was established, meant to investigate disappearances, the trials of the Military Juntas followed, resulting in life term sentences for the top commanders. In 1986 and 1987, the impunity laws were passed - “Full Stop” - applying “the statute of limitations to the prosecution of torturers and assassins” and “Due Obedience’ acquitting repressores, on the basis that they obeyed orders” (Kaiser 201). Carlos Saúl Menem, the Peronist president leading Argentina from 1989–1999, offered Decrees of Pardon to the “officers not covered by the impunity laws” and pardoned the “repressores and guerrilla leaders serving time” (Kaiser 201). Finally, with the arrival in power of Néstor Kirchner, the impunity laws were nullified and those who had tortured their co-nationals were to stand trial (Kaiser 201). At this time, the actions of the CONADEP, Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio (HIJOS) and the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo were far more successful. In fact, of the approximately 500 babies stolen, 100 have been found according to the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo Association (Scott – NPR).

In the case of the Native Americans, the Indian Adoption Projects from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s were administered by “the Child Welfare League of America and funded by a federal contract from the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the U.S. Children’s Bureau” (TAHD). During the progress of these projects, “395 Native American children from 16 western states” were placed with white families (TAHD). Trace A. DeMeyer argues that in the case of Native American children, the adoptions – meant to be permanent and closed – were “the ultimate weapon”, victimizing both children and parents/grandparents. The Indian Adoption Projects and Programs ensured that the Indian children disappeared from playgrounds or backyards or hospitals; nonetheless not all of them were adopted – some “were placed in orphanages and foster homes” (DeMeyer TWLCIAP). Those who were adopted were placed in white families: “about

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3TAHD – The Adoption History Project. [http://pages.uoregon.edu/adoption/people/cwla.html](http://pages.uoregon.edu/adoption/people/cwla.html)

4In Two Worlds: Lost Children of the Indian Adoption Projects. [https://www.academia.edu/2940086/Two_Worlds_Lost_Children_of_the_Indian_Adoption_Projects](https://www.academia.edu/2940086/Two_Worlds_Lost_Children_of_the_Indian_Adoption_Projects)
one in four Indian children were taken from their homes and placed in non-Indian settings. It was done by bending and sometimes breaking the law of the land. It was done, white Americans said, “for the good of the child” (Melanson 3). In addition, the adoptive parents were also unaware of the illegalities committed by those who brought them the child they would adopt. These children were treated as contraband, moved from one foster home to another, until their trail was cold:

I was one of those stolen babies (…) taken illegally from my birth parents when I was a few days old (…) separated from my twin brother (…) passed from person to person, like contraband that was too hot to keep. Then, when the trail had cooled and I was three years old, I was placed in adoption with Beatrice and Lawrence Silverman (Melanson 4).

Native American tribes were considered sovereign nations from a legal viewpoint – thus, transracial adoptions such as these against the grain, placing “an entire child population across lines of nation, culture, and race” (TAHD). The government’s plan was to ‘civilize’ the Native Americans, who were considered too poor and not intelligent enough to raise their own children: “The children were scooped up by social workers or missionaries who claimed their parents were ‘too poor’ or ‘too ignorant’, or ‘too drunk’ or ‘too savage’ to raise their own children” (Melanson 4).

The removal of Native children from their culture had a very specific purpose – that of destroying the future generations of Indians and ensuring that the “adopted children would not have treaty rights. Adopted children would disappear” (DeMeyer TWLCIAP). Children were taken from their families at any age and sent to schools where they were “forbidden to use their language and taught to forget their own culture” (Melanson 4). The result was to effectively ethnically cleanse “an entire population of Indian children” (DeMeyer TWLCIAP). The Indian Adoption Project was denounced as a genocidal policy toward native communities and cultures (TAHD). In 1978, activists saw their efforts come to fruition through the Indian Child Welfare Act which increased the difficulty for a non-Native family to adopt a Native-American child (TAHD). The projects were no longer active, but the “victims of these adoption programs have not received a formal apology in the United States” (DeMeyer TWLCIAP). The sealed adoptions and the closed birth records (in 2012) have prevented the adoptees from returning home, since the birth certificates were amended and falsified (DeMeyer TWLCIAP) and the biological parents are still unable to find their children.

In fact, in Yvette Melanson’s case, the date on her birth certificate was August 1955, while her real year of birth was September 1953 (Melanson 18). The same methods were used in Argentina for the children of the Desaparecidos – in Analia Perez’s case, the dates were 1979 and 1977, respectively. This difference of two years between their real age and the one in their falsified birth records allowed those in charge of the adoptions to hide the girls more efficiently; however, it was also a reason for disquietude – at least in Analia’s case, who felt more mature than her classmates. Analia was deprived of two years of her life leading to feelings of isolation and inadequacy growing up due to the differences from those she considered her peers (Donda 64, 65, 69).

3. Review of Cultural and Social Memory Theories – The Mnemonic Community as Purveyor of Cultural Memory

Jan Assmann defines cultural memory as an institution that is exteriorized and objectified and has stability due to the symbolic forms in which it is stored and which are transmitted across situations, space and time (110-111). Such carriers of cultural memory enable the creation of a cultural identity, a fact that becomes particularly obvious in the case of mnemonic communities: “On the social level, with respect to groups and societies, the role of external symbols becomes even more important, because groups which, of course, do not “have” a memory tend to “make” themselves one by means of things
meant as reminders such as monuments, museums, libraries, archives, and other mnemonic institutions (Assmann 111).

The cultural memory of such groups is clearly invested in the external objects that in one way or another represent the community. However, in terms of what is transmitted from one generation to the next, cultural memory “exists also in disembodied form and requires institutions of preservation and reembodiment” (Assmann 111).

In the case of the Navajos, whose culture tends towards the oral, by removing children from the tribe, those in charge of the Indian Adoption Projects ensured a discontinuity in the transmission of cultural memory. The traditional beliefs regarding “the origin of the world and the early history of the tribe (…) [are not part of] everyday communication but intensely formalized and institutionalized (…) [as] narratives, songs, dances, rituals, masks, and symbols (…) [which are instantiated] when the community comes together for a celebration” (Assmann 112).

Another instance of cultural memory that Jan Assmann brings into discussion is related to “fixed points in the past” and the way they relate to the present, since the past is important only as “it is remembered” (Assmann 113). Therefore, the historical consciousness termed cultural memory relies heavily on those who remember; it “reaches back into the past only so far as the past can be reclaimed as ‘ours’” (Assmann 113). This makes the temporal horizon of cultural memory an important element to consider. A necessary clarification reveals the fact that this sort of cultural memory does not deal with knowledge about the past as it is learned from books. The knowledge about the past that is inherent to cultural memory is what is remembered in a mnemonic community and it deals with how that past relates to that particular group and to how the group mediates the past through representations (Misztal 12). Under these circumstances, this type of knowledge of the past is an integral part of what gives the identity of that particular mnemonic community: “Knowledge about the past acquires the properties and functions of memory if it is related to a concept of identity” (Assmann 113).

Barbara Misztal’s research focusses on social remembering and as such she asserts that people remember things as members of their social group and thus they internalize common traditions and representations shared by their collectivities. She discusses “cultural memory as a memory institutionalized through cultural means”, referring to the “memories constructed from the cultural forms and to the cultural forms available for the use by the people to construct their relations to the past” (Misztal 11). Cultural memory is embodied in the practices of a community which are repeated regularly and in commemorations, ceremonies, monuments and festivals and it can exist independently of its carriers (Misztal 11-12). In order to give substance to a group, cultural memory deals with the personal remembrance through the lens of experience, as well as the collective remembrance of the past of the mnemonic community. The embeddedness of memories in a group that socializes its members towards what to remember and what to forget constitutes a community of memory, or what Barbara Misztal calls a mnemonic community (14). Mnemonic communities – such as the family, ethnic group, nation – “affect the ‘depth’ of our memory; they regulate how far back we should remember, which part of the past should be remembered, which events mark the beginning and which should be forced out of our story. The process of our mnemonic socialization is an important part of all groups’ general effort to incorporate new members” (Misztal 14).

Consequently, the group that socializes an individual has a great deal of influence on the way that individual will behave in an array of circumstances, all based on the memories embedded in his or her consciousness. This will obviously affect the individual’s cultural identity. By removing children from an ethnic or political group (the Navajo, the left-wing dissidents in Argentina), it was ensured that this cultural socialization within a mnemonic group would affect the individuality of those children, by creating for them identities far removed from the identity of their forefathers. This process of
socialization within a community of memory is subtle and tacit; it may be implicitly achieved through hearing family members narrate a shared experience indicating those elements that are memorable and those that are forgettable (Zerubavel qtd. in Misztal 14). Consequently, these communities of memory socialize people in terms of a collective past. The outcome is that those socialized within the community identify with its past attaining the “required social identity” (Misztal 14).

4. The Political and Traditional Heritage – Cultural Memory Retrieved

The fourth section focuses on Analia’s discovery of her parents’ path – the political one – and on Yvette’s discovery of the cultural traditions of the Navajo. Each of the two adoptees re-appropriated a part of the cultural identity and memory through the steps taken to walk in the shoes of their mothers. Analia was already inclined towards a life of public service – which was shown by her previous attempts to support a cultural center and her volunteering work. In Yvette’s case, she was not ready for the traditions of the Navajo, having to deal with her own prejudices; nevertheless, her struggles are all the more impressive and the results admirable. Cultures connect individuals based on shared norms and memories to the meaningful world and how it is experienced; therefore, the individuals can frame their identity through: “orientating symbols (...) embodied in the objectified forms of a commonly shared cultural tradition” (Harth 86).

Militancy was what saved Analia once she found out her roots and it prevented her from disintegrating from the shock. However, unlike other recovered grandchildren, Analia was already a left-wing activist; therefore, she was not surprised by her parents’ ideology. The same militancy was also one of the things she had in common with her maternal grandmother, Leontina, who was one of the 12 founders of the Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo organization. Analia identified with her parents due to what she believed to be genetic determinism. Before she was aware of her identity as Victoria, Analia had a choice between two avenues of study – sociology or law – which she considered a reflection of her real parents’ influence on her, regardless of their presence in her life. Analia also joined the youth organization La Venceremos, indicating that she shared her real parents’ ideals (Donda 98, 99).

In Yvette’s case, once she finds out of her heritage, she sets out to visit the Navajo Nation. On returning home, she received a package from her relatives with all the things she had admired on her visit – a Native American custom, which in effect makes sure that no one feels envy, by being gifted with the things one has admired:

I found a collection of gifts from the heart. Wrapped in tissue paper, there was the embroidered and beaded dress that I had admired on one of my sisters. Protected by cotton wool, there was the turquoise bracelet I had asked to try on. There was the blue shirt that I had told another sister was ‘so pretty’. And there were the moccasins that I had borrowed from someone else because they felt so good on my feet (Melanson 9).

Another tradition she finds out about is that of burying a child’s umbilical cord to insure s/he would return home. She identifies with the Lost Bird – Zintkala Nuni – and questions her previous wanderlust. In addition, she wonders whether it was her instincts that led her home. The custom brings a very emotional response in her. This is the first step for her in trying to retrieve the identity that was lost to her for 43 years. In addition, she finds out that as a twin, she was favored by the gods of the Navajo, but since she had been separated from her brother, they were both in danger (Melanson 17). On the road driving towards the Reservation, Yvette considers this journey her Vision Quest. The road trip is interspersed with knowledge and memories acquired later, but the Navajo traditions seem to make an appearance as a result of the actions she witnesses. Her daughters’ laughter makes her think of how her
own mother had been deprived of hearing her first laughter, which is compared with the Jewish circumcision, or naming ceremonies, and with the Christian baptism. Another rite of passage revealed to her is that of the *kinaalda* – the coming of age ceremony for girls: “it was as old as history. Navajos believed that the first one was held for Changing Woman, the mother of us all. It begins as soon as possible after a girl’s first menstruation, and it lasts for four days” (Melanson 62). Yvette’s daughters go through the ceremony – running towards the four cardinal points, on each day towards a new direction.

The most important tradition that she appropriates, however, has to do with creating traditional Navajo rugs. Her mother before her had been a talented artisan whose rugs were widely-sought after. Her sisters and aunt teach Yvette this tradition. Weaving rugs acts both as a strategy for cultural memory and cultural identity retrieval, as well as a type of therapy. In terms of identity, Yvette starts making the same movements her mother had before her. Furthermore, Yvette offers an analogy for these movements in “the patterning (...) for brain-damaged children”, since she believes that the shock of finding out about her biological family requires “new synapses and pathways in [her] brain” (Melanson 141). Thus, Yvette literally steps into her mother’s shoes, walks the same path as her and as Spider Woman, one of the mythological beings of the Navajo, who was said to have been the first weaver.

In terms of their relationships with their adoptive and biological families, the two adoptees take opposite positions. Yvette’s adoptive family lets her down, whereas her biological family welcomes her. For Analia, the reverse is true – she remains close to her adoptive parents even after finding out that her father was one of the torturers of the regime, while her biological family disappoints her on various fronts. Yvette Melanson, raised by the Silvermans, becomes her mother’s ideal girl as well as a tomboy in order to please her father. On Beatrice’s death, Lawrence remarried but the new wife did not want Yvette around. Her numerous Navajo family (five more siblings) supports her and her family when they move to Arizona, since work was hard to find there. From the very beginning Yvette felt loved and understood: “It was very uncanny the way I slid into this family. I usually hold back. But they thought just the way I did, acted the way I did” (Brawarsky 1).

In Analia’s case, aside from not talking about politics with her adopted father, she always felt loved and appreciated within the adoptive family. When she encounters her biological family she feels rejected by her real uncle, who had been instrumental in having her father captured and her mother killed. He “was responsible for the double disappearance of my parents: the first one, the physical disappearance, achieved by means of their sequestration by the operation groups commanded by him” (Donda 110). To truly destroy the rebellious legacy of the Donda family, Adolfo Donda Tigel had also sued her maternal family in order to adopt Victoria’s older sister, who was raised and educated in such a way as to completely reject the legacy of her real parents, whom she saw as traitors. Even her name had been changed from Eva Daniela to Daniela: “the second disappearance was a symbolic one, by destroying what my parents had left behind – my sister, by changing her name and endlessly lying to her and by handing me over to strangers as if I was a gift or a pet” (Donda 110). Thus, Analia’s sister, Daniela, was raised to believe that her parents had abandoned her by being truthful to their political beliefs; therefore she believed them to be delinquents (Donda 160). In addition, Clara, Analia’s adopted sister, was closer to her than Daniela. Although a blood bond united them, Analia had to sue her sister Daniela in order to obtain a photo of her father and some letters: “my first contact with the life that had been denied to me was a total failure. It is quite strange to consider how different Daniela and I are, how intangible and almost inexistent is the connection that unites us: the blood bond” (Donda 164). As a result of the unhappy encounter with her sister, Victoria refrained from contacting the rest of her family: “in my first moments as Victoria I did not have the strength or the will to open myself up to an entirely new family” (Donda 165).
On recovering a lost grandchild, the Abuelas gave them a folder with testimonials regarding their parents. Victoria’s real parents were nothing but a memory for those who had known them, to her though they were merely mediated memories: “my true parents, as I mentioned before had appeared in my life to simultaneously disappear once again: not only were they dead, but they had disappeared as well. (...) The only thing I had (...) were these pages, (...) which told incomplete and fragmented stories of their lives” (Donda 168). In order to obtain a more complete view of them, Victoria travelled to Canada to meet her grandmother Leontina, who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer. Leontina had fought indefatigably against oblivion and now she was “the victim of a disease that would make her lose any notion of what she had lived, even of herself. It was hard not to think of the fact that a veil of forgetfulness would cover the last year of that woman, erasing from her mind the great traumas she had lived through” (Donda 171). The meaning of Leontina’s life and the last memories of a beloved daughter were being wrenched away from her. Victoria realized during her visit – when a documentary was filmed as well – that she did not really wish to become close to them and that they seemed to share that feeling: “there was no real desire to become closer to each other, to truly get to know the person found beyond what each of us represent within the family. We all wanted one way or another to find Corianew, or to find what we loved about her, in the person now standing before us” (Donda 175).

5. The New Identity – Cultural Identity Retrieved by Shedding the Old and Embracing the New

For Yvette Melanson, the new identity that is uncovered is problematic, since it represents an abrupt departure from all that she had previously known. In addition, she has to struggle against the stereotypes accumulated during the 43 years she has lived as a white woman in terms of the Native American people. One truth remains – and it is closely connected to a Navajo custom – throughout her life, Yvette was restless and moved around incessantly. This migratory behavior – explained by the fact that she did not know where her umbilical cord was buried – disappears once she has found her new identity:

I have lived most of my life without much of a past and without being very certain of who I am. Maybe that’s true of anyone who was adopted. But when you go looking for your true self, you don’t always find what you’d expected. I was still shaky with what I’d learned about my once and future selves. I used to be white. I used to be Jewish. I used to be rich. (...) I used to be from New York (Melanson 6).

Despite the fact that she had not changed, her identity was no longer the same; nonetheless, she is ready to embrace it. As a result, she moves to the Reservation where learning more about her new cultural identity will become reality. This is a time during which she questions all her assumptions about her identity – from being Jewish to the shape of her face, the color of her hair, eyes and skin: “I was morphing into something new, no longer the woman I used to think I was, not yet the woman I was born to be” (Melanson 6). All these doubts are to be expected if one considers the cultural distance between the Jewish people and the Navajo. Yvette Melanson wonders if leaving her old identity behind is a necessity or whether she could perhaps retain some remnants of her old identity. The analogy she imagines for herself is that of a snake shedding its skin: “I was about to step out of my old identity, like a snake shedding its skin, and try on a new one” (Melanson 8).

The former and the current cultures are at war in her case due to the prejudices of both the Melanson family and the Navajo family. On both sides there are well-ingrained beliefs and in the case of
the Navajo the wounds caused by the white people are deep and still unhealed. One of the strategies Yvette uses to cope with the biases accumulated in her life as a white Jewish woman is that of humor – she openly admits to having acquired her stereotypes from “John Wayne movies” (Melanson 11). Thus, it is understandable that she resists the idea of being American Indian initially. In addition, some of the pop culture references she mentions also indicate a less than stellar attitude towards those she must now consider kin: “The Last of the Mohicans. The craggy face on the buffalo nickel. Geronimo on the warpath. The painted faces and half-naked bodies, swooping down on innocent wagon trains. The fearless Mohawks who walked the high steel to build New York’s skyscrapers. The nobler-than-thou Indians of Dances with Wolves” (Melanson 56).

Moreover, her life as part of the Silverman family had not prepared her for being part of an ethnic group she all but believed extinct.

For Analia, the pain of reclaiming an identity that was lost and shrouded in national controversy is great; however, the cultural shock is not as great as in the previous situation. Nevertheless, the circumstances make it more traumatic due to the involvement of her uncle Adolfo Donda Tigel as well as due to her sister’s rejection of what their parents had stood for and of herself. In addition, Analia/Victoria comes to an important epiphany in terms of identity: “there is a common point: our identity, our roots, are one of the first things we are given, these are the cards we have at the beginning of the game. Refusing someone’s right to these cards is like you are depriving that person of a foundation on which they would build their lives” (Donda 63). This refusal of the political regime to allow the left-wing supporters to lead their lives takes a further and more extreme dimension in depriving them of their lives and of their heritage by taking away their children. The foundation one’s identity is meant to represent is insubstantial in the circumstances surrounding the death of parents, kidnapping and illegal adoption of the children. It is hard for any of the sons or daughters of the Desaparecidos to build upon the shaky foundation they were offered by the circumstances. However, as opposed to Yvette Melanson, Analia did not know she was adopted. Events hasten and after her adoptive father’s attempted suicide, due to the news unmasking him and the accusations leveled at him, the representatives of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo contact her.

It is under these circumstances that Victoria Donda is reborn; nevertheless, she does not shy away from her previous identity: “my real life does not begin at 27 and what I had lived previously was not simply and unanimously a lie” (Donda 84). Therefore, as opposed to Yvette Melanson, who – while struggling with her new identity – is eager to shed her former one, Analia is not a part of her which Victoria is willing to part with. While Victoria is who she was always meant to be – Analia has provided her with the foundation she needs to confront her new cultural identity and the cultural memories to which any number of family members might subject her. A salient twist in Victoria’s interpretation of the situation is that of seeing the greater picture and imagining herself as part of the historical moment that she has lived through:

My story, that I am narrating within these pages, is not only mine – Victoria or Analia’s story, but rather, in a sense, it is the story of Argentina, a story full of intolerance, violence and lies whose consequences can still be felt, and which will not be complete until even the last of the stolen children during the dictatorship will not have recovered their true identity, until even the last of those responsible for these barbaric actions will have been tried for their crimes, until even the last of the 30,000 disappeared will have been given a name, a history and circumstance of death, and until even the last of their relatives will have been able, to finally mourn their dearly departed (Donda 84).
Victoria opts to consider her plight in the greater context of the children of the *Desaparecidos*. In addition, her penchant for politics can be detected in the passage presented above. She places herself in the intricate web of all those who had undergone the same predicament, she identifies with them and with Argentinean history. This tendency becomes a strategy in retrieving a cultural identity.

As opposed to Analia/Victoria’s ease in accepting her changed circumstances, Yvette’s quest towards her new identity included “wrong turns and blind alleys” (Melanson 39). But on this road to self-discovery and towards the appropriation of her Native cultural memory and the retrieval of her cultural identity, Melanson was not merely attempting to pinpoint her new identity or to grapple with the old one – her attempts were aimed at a negotiation between the old and the new: “I was looking for the crossroads where my identities might meet” (Melanson 39). The cultural memory of the Navajos had already taught her a valuable lesson: “cultures meet. cultures merge. I’ve been told that it’s the Navajo way” (Melanson 54). Thus, her Jewishness is not an impediment, her having been raised as a white woman is not an obstacle. These are merely potential assets in her new life, since the way she will treat any given situation will not be that of the typical Native woman. As a Jew belonging to the Navajo Nation and to her parents’ separate clans, Melanson was to become an Indian-giver – someone who receives a gift and at some point in the future finds a way to reward the giver in a valuable way. Melanson was “Tobacco Clan, born for Salt Clan. Tachi’inii, born for Ashiihi” (Melanson 57). But her combative character allows her not only to establish a craft business on the Reservation, selling the rugs she weaves, but also to speak up for the daughters of the Navajo women at Tolani Lake, AZ, when she realizes that her daughters as well as the other young girls were being harassed in school. An education provided by her biological family and immersed in the cultural memory of the Navajo and a cultural identity acquired within her Navajo mnemonic community would have prevented her from acting decisively in favor of her community. At the very end, she also succeeds in finding her twin brother and they undergo a cleansing ceremony together.

Yvette Melanson or Minnie Bob Monroe – these are not the choices she makes in terms of identity. The shift for her is more dramatic than what a name might signify – instead, she relocates on the Reservation in order to be better able to absorb as much of the culture she was supposed to have lived in. She takes a traditional road – not merely in the sense that she learns about the Navajo traditions, but by relocating and listening to the stories and memories of the mnemonic community. She walks the same roads as her mother had, she is told the significance of each place and action, she is taught about the culture and its traditions and finally she not only learns how to weave rugs, but – as an Indian-giver – she brings value to the community not only by creating a business to sell the Native art, but also by standing up for the daughters on the Reservation who had been harassed in school. She absorbs the teachings of the Navajo accepting the meeting of cultures and merging the elements of the two selves, finally finding a crossroads where the two identities – old and new – meet.

Analia’s reclaiming of the new identity occurs through the return to the name her mother had given her: “my true name – the one my mother had used for me in the 15 days I had been kept by her side before she was killed, regained its full meaning for me at this time of my life” (Donda 85). But this return is once more not marked by the disappearance of the previous identity of Analia: “not by imposing itself before Analia, not by replacing her, but rather by molding her, preparing the terrain so that they could live together” (Donda 85). In Analia/Victoria’s case, the merging seems even more seamless, since the terrain had been prepared by what was to follow through Analia’s activism and militancy and her awareness of and partiality to the ideologies of her biological parents. The shock had a lesser impact since she was aware of the plight of the families of the *Desaparecidos* through the activities of the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* and *Hijos* organizations. The reality of the found children of the former left-wing supporters, that had been terminated by the 1976-1983 dictatorship, simply became more
personal in nature. Under these circumstances Analia became Victoria in name, but at an underlying level she never changed: “when my true origins were revealed to me I was to accept them with the certainty of someone who knew that she wasn’t dealing with two persons at the same time, Analia and Victoria, but that those two persons, those two names and those two histories were one and the same: me” (Donda 85).

Thus, the two names refer to the same person and the conflict between the two identities is mostly seen in her treatment of the two families – the adoptive and the biological one. In addition, she follows in the footsteps of her biological parents.

Victoria rightly observes in her memoirs referring to the construction of an identity in the case of kidnapped children – such as herself and the other approximately 499 sons and daughters of the Desaparecidos: “for the kidnapped children it was impossible to build an identity, a history and a life without knowing our roots, heritage, without knowing who we are and who our real family is” (Donda 140). Indeed, once their identity as one of the HIJOS is revealed to them, this is the case. She fails to notice that, aside from the restlessness felt due to the difference between her assumed and real age and her political aspirations that took a different direction than those of her adoptive father, Analia was well on her way to having a well-rounded and well-established identity. In effect, she does not give up that identity once she finds out the truth. Perhaps her observation would be more pertinent if focused on the predicament of those who already knew they had been adopted, as is the case of Yvette Melanson. The earlier metaphor she offered – that of the hand of cards offered at the beginning of the game and used as a foundation – is further explained. The foundation comprises facts such as the birth place, the parents, and real age/year of birth. This foundation – not her identity as Analia – is what Victoria leaves behind: “Analia was not condemned to disappear. I am Analia. What was going to disappear indeed, or to be more exact, what was going to be torn down, were the basis on which Analia was built: the birth place, the parents, even the real age” (Donda 141). Victoria redefines herself in terms of her past and the assimilated cultural memories brought forth by her mnemonic community (the biological family), but Analia does not disappear since she is integral part of her. Thus, the new identity is assumed and Victoria repositions herself while finding a place for Analia (Donda 166).

The quests undergone by the two adoptees can be seen as individual and traditional for Yvette Melanson, who assimilates the Navajo teachings of her mnemonic community. In fact, she learns how to be part of that community and as an interview indicates, she tries to walk in harmony with the universe by being aware of who she is, in accordance with a Navajo proverb (Brawarsky 1). In this, she tries to follow a spiritual path. In addition, she is able to integrate her identities as both a Navajo and a Jew. The Passover tradition continues to be celebrated in her home, the dietary restrictions common to the Navajo and the Jews are also observed, and she finds the familiarity of living in a community (the Reservation versus the Kibbutz) as pointing to “the communal sense of purpose and caring for one another” (Brawarsky 1). Thus, at the very book of her memoir, Yvette Melanson has come to the realization that she has finally found herself despite having looked for a family. The necessary harmony with her surroundings and her mnemonic community are two more achievements. Moreover, she has also reached the necessary wisdom to no longer offer resistance to every situation she confronts, instead learning flexibility and adaptability. The new path she has adopted after her Vision Quest and her return to the Reservation from which she was kidnapped and the Navajo tribe that had mourned her disappearance runs parallel to the ‘Moses road’ she has previously been on.

For Analia Azic, the road taken is a historical and national one. She adopts various strategies in order to deal with the shock of her identity by going to therapy, being part of the creation of a documentary and by writing the memoir. The documentary’s destabilizing result led to confrontations with Adolfo Donda Tigel and she had to deal with threats. Another difficulty she encountered related to obtaining
new documents in her real name due to the hindrances of bureaucracy. Another strategy was that of taking on new responsibilities in public life as the youngest female representative, as well as the first recovered granddaughter that could do something regarding the situation of the children of the Desaparecidos. Analia’s final strategy was that of using the media – her interviews with various television channels and the documentary – to confront the ghosts of her past and to provide liberation from the terrible burden that was placed upon her shoulders. The documentary also allowed her to gather information about her parents and to construct a faithful image of their lives and characters. This was a necessary stage for her recovery of the identity she was denied so that she could come to the realization that her parents lived on in her.

6. Autobiographical Memory – Re-writing the Life-story

If we were to consider the case of a person suffering from retrograde amnesia, who was told the story of his/her life from the point of view of the mnemonic community to which he/she belonged, the situation would not be entirely dissimilar from that of Yvette Melanson and Victoriana Donda. The cultural memories they learn about as adults will never be autobiographical or lived. Thus, an essential kernel of their potential identities was removed with the removal from their mnemonic communities. Perhaps, in Victoriana Donda’s case, the cultural shock was not as great as in the case of Yvette Melanson, who had to adjust her self-image and to reject all the biases absorbed about her biological or genetic inheritance, by means of the culture in which she was socialized. The subjective experience of remembering is not the main strategy for Melanson and Donda, since the cultural memories they should have been inscribed with are missing in their cases. What we are dealing with are actually memories that can be termed collective (Halbwachs), social (Misztal), or even communicative (Assmann), which are then presented through the lens of personal interpretation. The selves that the two adoptees were born to be are seen as cognitive and emotional constructs. The canonical version of past events is defined as history, but in these two cases, the memoirs challenge that particular version moving into the realm of autobiographical memory. The difference between the two resides in what is voiced and what is silenced. In view of this distinction, Robyn Fivush’s discussion of voice as a form of power is particularly relevant for the memoirs of the two abductees/adoptees (76). Fivush asserts that “what is voiced changes with changing historical, social and political contexts” (76), resulting in the inclusion or exclusion of specific events and the memories of specific groups of people. In the previous political context of Argentina, the children of those who had disappeared during the 1976-1983 dictatorship, as well as the events of those times, were kept quiet. With the change of regime, they were given voice. In the case of the situation of the Native American children that had been removed from their families and adopted by white families – the propitious times came with the proliferation of watchdog organizations and an increased awareness and observance of human rights.

Fivush’s discussion of the spoken and unspoken, voiced and silenced memories is particularly applicable in the case of the two memoir writers. Through these memoirs, they share their personal stories with others in order to make sense of not only their personal memories, but also those of their mnemonic communities, namely their biological families. They accept reminiscences about the past and about their parents in lieu of actual lived experience, since they are trying to reconstruct a cultural memory and a cultural identity that had been withheld. In addition, the impossibility of experiencing these cultural memories and a relative reluctance become apparent – while Melanson moves to the Reservation, Donda only visits her biological family in Canada when circumstances make it clear that she might never find out about her mother if she does not go at that time, since her grandmother Leontina had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. In addition, while there, she feels that everyone she encounters is
simply trying to find Cori (her mother) once again through the others, rather than actually dealing with the reality of this new mnemonic community she had been shoved into.

In Melanson’s case, her biological father is still alive, and the entire tribe or clan or extended family is there to reminisce about her mother, but more specifically five of her six other siblings are those who tell her the stories of their family, clan, tribe and the plight of their ethnic group. In Donda’s case, the mnemonic community is formed by the nation and the troublesome past of the Argentinean dictatorship with the state terrorism it engendered, the left-wing supporters from that time and their families (including organizations such as Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo and HIJOS) and finally her own biological family.

Robyn Fivush is further relevant for this discussion of cultural memory and identity in terms of the way in which the two female abductees and adoptees structure their interpretations of their new cultural memories and cultural identities when they are writing their memoirs. Fivush argues that the construction of the self is different in Eastern and Western cultures, since in the first case, the self is seen as part of a community and in the second, it is constructed through individual choices and decisions (76). In addition, Eastern voiced autobiographies deal with the community and relationships and Western ones focus on the self and agency (Fivush 76). The two memoirs are meant to construct the self or a new cultural identity through cultural memories shared by the mnemonic communities to which the two abductees/adoptees belong and through making sense of these mnemonic narratives. The initial assessment seemed to yield a clear result in terms of interpreting Melanson’s memoir as Eastern in the fact that it deals with her being part of the Navajo nation, concentrating on the idea of community and the relationships within it and Donda’s memoir as Western, since it focusses on her making individual choices and decisions mainly looking towards the self and its agency. However, on a closer analysis one may notice other facts such as Melanson’s combative tendencies and her decisions to create a business selling Native crafts and her activism in seeking a safer school environment for the young girls on the Reservations. In these cases, while her decisions are her own, the reverberations are obviously beneficial for the entire community or for a limited group within the tribe. Donda’s memoir focuses on the road she takes in dealing with the new identity.

Personal memory is seen as autobiographical and it is dealing with the self, providing information about our lives and a sense of identity and continuity (Beike, Lampinen and Behrend 5). Lampinen, Odegard and Leding argue that while in adulthood we are not identical to who we were as infants or children, we do retain our identity since “the self is unified across time because we are motivated and able to create a story, a narrative that ties different aspects of the self together over time, the self is unified through memory and the process of narrative reconstruction” (229). This is precisely what the memoirs written by Melanson and Donda attempt to do – to puzzle together the pieces of their past in order to achieve this unity through memory. The narrative structure of their memoirs helps Melanson and Donda “experience the self in a continuous fashion” (Lampinen, Odegard and Leding 230). In terms of the cultural traditions and experience, Melanson and Donda cannot simply construct a “sense of self that exists continuously across time” (Lampinen, Odegard and Leding 230) since they were barely starting to witness their cultures within the framework of their mnemonic communities when they were kidnapped. The fragmented sense of self and the discontinuity between Yvette Melanson and Analia Azic’s sense of self and Minnie Bo Monroe’s and Victoria Donda’s sense of self across time – due to the discovery of their identities – are a perfect, if extreme, case of diachronic disunity. As defined by Lampinen, Odegard and Leding, diachronic disunity is understood as the failure to achieve a unified sense of self (as a mental construct) as a subject of experience and action at present (synchronously) and across time (diachronically). In addition, along the way to self-realization through political aspirations or a traditional vision quest, Melanson and Donda’s sense of self is also characterized by synchronic
disunity. In Victoria Donda’s case, this is due to her feelings of outrage and love for her adoptive father. In Yvette Melanson’s, it is her disbelief and finally feeling that she is home and feeling settled that reveal the synchronic disunity. These feelings of ambivalence are further exacerbated since she has to deal with two widely different cultures.

Robyn Fivush (75) discusses autobiographical memory as the story of one’s life, as a coherent construct that explains one’s identity. For Melanson and Donda this type of memory cannot be fully trusted. Their socially constructed autobiographies up to the ages of 43 (41) and 27 (25) fail to account for the cultural heritage they were denied since they were kidnapped and adopted. On finding their identities, the need to construct a new autobiographical life story emerges and this is achieved through their social remembering. Personal memory had been silenced, as had that of their biological families, clan, tribe, ethnic group, political group and nation. As “children need help from adults to create coherent narratives of past events” and Yvette Melanson and Analia Azic have been removed from their mnemonic communities as infants (before they could speak since in Latin in+fants has precisely this meaning of not being able to speak), they had not been socialized and therefore they lacked the fundamental understanding of the mechanisms required for “creating and maintaining coherent memories” (Fivush 89). The basic tools required for dealing with the creation of a cultural identity are one of the ingredients that the two adoptees have to acquire as adults and this acquisition will be part of their strategy in assimilating their cultural heritage by way of the cultural memories of their mnemonic communities.

By talking about one’s memories with others, these “memories take on a canonical narrative form” (Fivush 89), they are told and retold and they become stories. Since their biological parents are absent from their lives and cannot act as guides in the reinterpretation of cultural and personal memories in order to make sense of them, the authors of the two memoirs assimilated a different set of mechanisms, traditions and ideologies. However, in order for them to become immersed in the culture from which they initially hailed, they have to undergo a process of socialization and cultural immersion. Of the two authors, it is Melanson who sets out to achieve this by moving to the Reservation at Tolani Lake, AZ. Victoria Donda, on the other hand, only travelled to Canada, where her biological extended family had relocated only when her grandmother’s Alzheimer has threatened to remove forever any remembrances her mnemonic community might yield. Before taking these steps, their parents’ identities and the cultural memories they could glimpse were not integrated with their sense of self. Perhaps, to a certain extent, this lack of understanding led to the “fragmented sense of self” (Fivush 89) the two of them had experienced. Once the mnemonic community performed its duty, the new cultural identity – achieved by way of the cultural and collective memory of the said community – has come together, allowing Yvette Melanson’s wanderlust to subside and impelling Victoria Donda to pursue a political career that marks her as a chip off the old block.

For Benson (17) the ‘self’ charts the course of one’s life and the way in which one navigates the world and it functions as a locative system. The way this works is that the ‘self’ functions as a way to locate someone as part of a certain culture. Therefore, the dislocation and repeated relocation of the two abductees when they were young and their final relocation as they were adopted into the Melanson and the Azic families, marked their transformation. Jonathan Glover considers that “self-creation depends on the beliefs we have about what we are now like: on the stories we tell about ourselves” (qtd. in Benson 74). Thus, there is a great difference between the stories Melanson and Azic tell about their lives in their adopted families and the ones they tell after their identity is revealed. In terms of self-creation, the beliefs Melanson and Azic held about themselves collaborated in creating their identity. Azic was unaware that she was adopted, while Melanson had been informed of that by her adoptive parents.
Melanson believed she was white and Jewish, while Azic believed she was part of the family whose political ideology supported the 1976-1983 dictatorship.

7. Conclusion

The writers of the two memoirs retrieve their cultural identities and cultural memories through motion as movement through space, since they follow in the footsteps of their parents, literally and metaphorically. They also have to shed certain prejudices and to acquire new frames of reference. They navigate this new world and negotiate their new identities through heritage and self-creation, with a focus on the narrative creation of their new identity by means of writing their memoirs. They both listen to stories from the members of their rediscovered mnemonic communities and tell stories in their turn. The memoirs are a narrative retelling of the process of regaining their identity and represent an autobiographical memory, pieced together from stories told by others. Yvette Melanson and Victoria Donda reposition themselves by unifying elements of who they believed they were before encountering their original mnemonic communities and by adding to that identity the stories they are told. Thus, they make themselves in the act of making sense of themselves through telling stories (Benson 83).
Eliana Ionoaia, “Strategies of Cultural Memory and Cultural Identity Retrieval – the Case of Yvette Melanson’s Looking for Lost Bird and Victoria Donda’s My Name Is Victoria”.

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