

*Surviving Sideways: The Child Victim in Post-Trauma Literature
from the U.S., Argentina, and the Netherlands*

This dissertation project examines how the persistent symbolization of collective traumas and social conflicts as the victimization of children enacts symbolic and real violence against the real children and adults who are ignored, marginalized or demonized as threats within the narrative of the Child in peril. Using a theoretical framework assembled from childhood studies, queer theory, race studies, and trauma studies, I propose that the Child, as the representative face of both the collective memory and the collective future of the nation, is the crucial figure in survivorism: the drive to refuse the passivity and dependency understood to define the “victim” in order to assert personal agency and claim the identity of “survivor.” The rhetorical invocation of the Child as (potential) victim galvanizes a re-commitment to whatever ideals, goals and identities are presented as most imperative for its (that is, our) protection. Exploiting the figure of the Child victim allows the (adult) nation to establish the criteria under which other victims and vulnerable people, children and adults both, are defined as innocent or culpable, grievable or non-grievable, supportive or threatening.

I want to demonstrate both the portability and widespread invocation of the Child in post-traumatic memory discourse—how consistently the figure of the child victim has been used to represent the promise of national renewal, despite very different sociohistorical circumstances—and the fact that the representative Child, despite the constancy of its deployment, is exceedingly specific according to those circumstances. In particular, I analyze the role of the Jewish child in post-occupation memory discourse in the Netherlands, the child of disappeared parents in post-dictatorship Argentina, and the middle-class, suburban, white child in the United States post-9/11. I look to political and media discourse, including the re-mediation of certain key works of

literature, to come to conclusions about who precisely the Child is in each case and how the vulnerability of these respective poster children has been exploited to consolidate a survivorist image of the strength, moral righteousness, and wholeness of particular political projects in the wake of shattering collective traumas. I then look to literature written by and containing child victims who challenge, complicate, and reject the symbolic position to which they have been consigned. These works suggest alternative modes of survival that reject “uprightness”—the autonomy, individualism, invulnerability, and competitiveness of the dominant survivorist model—and instead evidence the viability of what I call “sideways” survival: a survival based on mutual care, acknowledgment of vulnerability, and affinity with the other.

With this dissertation, I contribute an original theoretical framework with the development of the concept of “survivorism.” Moreover, I am applying and extending childhood studies research and theory, which has largely focused on the nineteenth century United States, in new temporal, geographic, and sociopolitical contexts. The texts I work with in the US context include Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *God Help the Child* (2015), Sherman Alexie’s *Flight* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (both 2009), and Junot Díaz’s *Drown* (1996) and *This is How You Lose Her* (2012). In the Argentine context, I work with Felix Bruzzone’s *Los topos* (2011), Mariana Eva Pérez’s *Diario de una princesa montonera. 110% verdad* (2012), and Mariana Enríquez’s *Las cosas que perdimos en el fuego* (2016). In the Dutch context, I work with Anne Frank’s *Het Achterhuis* (1947), Ed van Thijn’s *Het verhaal* (1999) and *18 adressen* (2004), and Ischa Meijer’s *Brief aan mijn moeder* (1972), *Hoeren* (1978), and *De Dikke Man* (1991-1995).