

Cartographies of Intimacy

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1. Monuments and Counter-Monuments

Countermemories of Terror in a Buenos Aires Neighborhood

by [Mónica Szurmuk](#) | Sep 1, 2021



“Casa de Belén” Foster home in Banfield, Lomas de Zamora, province of Buenos Aires. Credit: Agostina Invernizzi

At the beginning of Argentina’s draconian military dictatorship, the local parochial church in my neighborhood in Lomas de Zamora, a suburb nine miles south of Buenos Aires, opened a foster home appropriately called “Casa de Belén”/House of Bethlehem. I first found out about this home through my best friend from school whose family was very active in the church. Her father was involved in the project, and they welcomed the model of raising children in a nuclear family rather than in an institution.

My father was also very excited about Casa de Belén. His clothing store donated school and sports clothing for the children housed in Hogar Pereyra, an orphanage, a twenty-minute walk away. Every March, María de los Ángeles, the nun who ran it, came to my parents’ store with the children and they all spent an afternoon trying on pinafores for

elementary school, grey pants, white shirts and blue blazers for high school, running shoes and jogging pants for sports class. My father made sure every single kid got exactly what they wanted and left his store happy.



"Baldosa" Tile in the Escuela Normal Antonio Mentruyt of Lomas de Zamora in memory of the students of the school who disappeared during the military dictatorship. Credit Agostina Invernizzi

My parents loved the idea of the foster home as it was presented. They assumed that some of the children in Hogar Pereyra were going to be placed there. When I mentioned this to my friend, she shook her head and told me this house was meant for different children. I was perplexed. She could not say much more about this. I am not sure whether I inquired further.

In my family we were aware of human rights abuses from the beginning of the dictatorship (1976-1983), and we were close to people who had disappeared. We were very careful and very aware of signs of danger. We lived in lingering fear. Yet we never connected the opening of this foster home to what was happening in the country. The possibility that the military would include the kidnapping of children in their plan was unthinkable. Until it was not.

I am not sure when I became aware of the disappearance of children, of the fact that pregnant women would be kept alive until they gave birth and their children were then given away, often to childless military families. Even as I write this now, when all this has been common knowledge for decades, it seems horrifying beyond words.

Sometime later in a dance class, I became friends with Ximena (not her real name), a young woman a couple of years older than me. In Argentina at that time, when you met someone, there was always a period of feeling out before being able to address issues of politics and human rights violation in conversations. When we got to that point, Ximena told me about her cousin who had disappeared pregnant with twins. The family had found out that she had given birth in captivity but they had not been able to track the babies. Let me stress something: now we know babies were given away, their identities changed, their bonds with their families torn asunder. Now we know.



Plaque in the Dr. Herzl Community Ashkenazi cemetery of Lomas de Zamora in remembrance of the disappeared of the community. Credit: Agostina Invernizzi

But at that time, grandparents went to maternity wards and family courts to inquire. Through Ximena's aunt, I found out that many children were missing and that their grandmothers had started working together to find them and had formed an organization called "Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo," echoing the existing Mothers of Plaza de Mayo that was looking for the disappeared. The "Abuelas" were also mothers but they were seeking for two generations of family members, they were looking for their children and also their grandbabies, some born after their mothers' abduction, some abducted with their parents. I started seeing Casa de Belén in a new light. What if the children at Casa de Belén were also children of women who had disappeared?

The house did not stand out in a block of low single family homes. A one storey "chalet" like many built in the suburbs of Buenos Aires between the 1930s and 1950s, it had a small front yard, a low wrought iron fence with a gate that was never locked. Neighbors, however, started noticing eerie details: strong built men who seemed to have no relationship to the family coming in and out; an older woman waiting across the street hoping to see children come out of the house. There was something odd happening in this very regular house. Yet it is always hard to ascertain what goes on inside a home. The outside appearance of normalcy concealed a violent intimacy. The legal files associated with the case document the horrifying instances of sexual, emotional and physical abuse the children in Casa de Belén went through.

Through Ximena and her aunt I found out that the Abuelas had set up a barebones operation in an apartment in the city. I went there one afternoon to tell them what I knew. The soft-spoken middle-aged woman who talked to me, an abuela herself, told me they were aware of the existence of the place. A family court judge in the area, by the name of Delia Marta Pons, was notorious for arranging adoptions of kidnapped children. She also asked me for the names of the people I thought might be involved.

When I started looking for information on the case thirty-five years later I found very little. Casa de Belén is still functioning within the district's program for minors as a foster home. Hogar Pereyra is still functioning as an orphanage. There are no outside markings, these buildings do not stand out in the midst of the tree-lined cobblestone streets. Casa de Belén is more of an anomaly now than it was in the late 1970s since most of the low-rise houses have been torn down to build highrises.

I read legal cases, and focused on one that was especially horrifying. Three siblings who had been five, three and two at the time of their abduction had spent most of the dictatorship at Casa de Belén until their father who had sought refuge in Sweden was able to regain custody with the help of human rights organizations. The children's parents were Paraguayan immigrants who had been very active in the political and social outreach activities of their Catholic church, Their father was imprisoned for his activism before the military coup took place. After the coup his wife, knowing she was in danger, moved the family to a shantytown in Lomas de Zamora where she shared a house with

another couple. One night four policemen burst into the home and killed the three adults. The children testified to a memory of being held tight by their mother one last time. Witnesses recall seeing her fall after being shot, one of the bullets grazed the head of her youngest child as she was falling.

The perpetrators left the children in the care of Alicia (not her real name), a neighbor who was then eight months pregnant. They told her they would come back for them. They didn't. Three weeks later, as Alicia and her husband took the children to family court. Alicia has testified several times. She was never asked how she took care of those children during those harrowing three weeks. Nowhere in the legal documents are any questions asked regarding how she soothed these children, whether they slept or if they cried in their sleep. She is only asked questions regarding the injury the baby had received. Terrified of how they could justify having with them a baby with a bullet wound, Alicia and her husband had patched up the injury themselves. Those three weeks occupy less than a paragraph in the files. The fact that a woman, a poor woman especially, will take care of children if asked is taken as a given.



Pozo de Banfield. One of the two largest concentration camps in the province of Buenos Aires. Credit Leonardo Mora

I talked to Alicia very briefly. She is guilt-ridden and feels that every time she is called to testify people blame her. It is shocking that she is not considered a victim, and that there is no record whatsoever of what happened during those three weeks that the children stayed with her. There was never any attempt to include Alicia in any type of reparations.

By then, the father's sister had arrived from Paraguay to take custody the children but the judge ignored her requests. Supported by adoption laws which had been changed in the 1970s and that established social and economic guidelines for custody of children, Judge Pons placed the children in Hogar Pereyra for a few days, and then in Casa de Belén under the care of Doming Vera and Manuel Maciel, a married couple who lived in the house with their three birth children and with several foster children. Papers were drawn granting them custody of the three siblings, they were enrolled in the parochial school under the last name Maciel and they were baptized in the parochial church for a second time with new godparents. The godfathers, still unidentified, were perpetrators—responsible in essence for collaborating in the children's abduction. The children had already been baptized as babies in the church where their parents had been activists.

Together with Agostina Invernizzi and Malena Velarde, two graduate students at the Latin American Literatures Program at the Universidad Nacional de San Martín, we started thinking of ways of bringing awareness to this story. We knew that the children who had gone through Casa de Belén, now adults in their 30s and 40s, did not want attention and we wanted to respect their privacy. We designed an interactive map to place the trajectory of children from the house where they lived with their mother through the courts, the orphanage and the Casa de Belén. Since the mid-2000s, Argentina has made an effort to mark spaces of memory. None of these spaces these children went through are remembered in any way, our map centered them. We also included the existing memory sites in the area: in the courthouse, the high school and in the Jewish Ashkenazi cemetery. We included in our map Pozo de Banfield, one of the two largest concentration camps in the province of Buenos Aires is part of the official network of memory sites and functions as place of remembrance and education and which is a few blocks away from the other memory sites.



Pozo de Banfield. Street signs on pencils in remembrance of a group of high school students who were fighting for discounted bus fare for students in the city of La Plata. The night when they were abducted is remembered as “La noche de los lápices.” These giant pencils outside the Pozo de Banfield display signs that read “No desaparece quien deja huellas”. Credit: Leonardo Mora

One of the striking issues for us was how close all the places were, how these children had traveled a very short trajectories from their place of relative safety (the house where they had lived with their mother which was in itself “a safe house,” a place where she moved once she knew she was in danger) to this alternative home where they were so horribly abused. It became clear very soon how discourses of home are feminized and class, race and gender underpinnings populate these histories. The legal reason given for refusing to place these children with their biological family was economic: they were poor. The children were told that they were lucky they lived in a middle-class area of town, they went to a private parochial school, to a club for sports.

We have planned a guided tour that rather than showing these places and telling this story from a place of distance both spatial and temporal, invites participants to acknowledge their own places of memory, pleasant or unpleasant. We hope to promote a living memory of the space that involves the embodied experiences of the participants in which personal and collective experiences and memories are interwoven in the same space. For example, tour members could include the spots where someone they loved had disappeared or had been raped, but also places where pleasant things had happened such as a first kiss, the first steps of a child, a corner where they had spent a nice evening drinking beer with friends. The tour was canceled because of the pandemic and we actually decided not to try any online alternative because we believed in the experience of the collective walk through the neighborhood: we wanted the participants to surprise us and be surprised themselves with sensory experiences, the sounds of the street, the smells of the flowers, the rhythm of walking on cobbled streets. These sounds and sights are counter-monuments to the physical house, a place of ordinary architecture and extraordinary cruelty.

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