Vestiges of Memory Post-Atentado: Monumental Photographs and Spaces of (Impossible) Return

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Unlike private mourning for a loved one or a public ceremony held for victims of a fatal accident, a calculated and premeditated act of terror such as the bombing of the Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires, the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA), forever changes the landscape and the memoryscape of the public sphere. The ongoing impunity pertaining to the terrorism unleashed at 633 Pasteur Street in 1994 is akin to a bodiless grave and prevents any closure for those intimately tied to and affected by the tragedy. As Jennifer Schirmer has stated in her work about speech acts and spaces of resistance pertaining to the disappearance of individuals due to authoritarian regimes, “While cemeteries are bounded, ‘timed spaces of grief’, the absence of a body creates painful contradictions: a loss with no end, a bodiless grave, an enclosed space waiting to be filled with a grief that has no closure.” The persistence of impunity, as in the case of the AMIA, results in a manifestation of what I call a boundless space of grief, which is exhibited by the proliferation of protest groups, commemoration ceremonies, the ongoing production of cultural and artistic expressions, the dedication of monuments devoted to memory and justice, and parks allocated throughout Argentina in memory of the victims.

While conducting fieldwork in 1998 on the topic of memory and justice in the wake of the 1994 atentado, the car bomb that targeted Argentina’s Jewish community by destroying the AMIA building, and the 1992 Israeli Embassy bombing, I was struck by the assertion of memory and its representation.

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1 This chapter, which represents seventeen years of study and reflection on the AMIA bombing, would not be possible without the encouragement and support of Sofia Kaplinsky Guterman, Dr. Patrick O’Connor, and my esteemed coeditor, Dr. Natasha Zaretsky. I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to Natasha Zaretsky, Dr. Paul Wilson, Dr. Sue-Je Gage, Sarah Rubenstein-Gillis, LCSW, Robert M. Levine, LCSW and Christopher MacNamara for their comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this work.


3 Fieldwork conducted from 1997 to 1998 was supported by the Tinker Foundation in pursuit of a master’s degree in Latin American and Caribbean studies at the University of Chicago. The 1999 thesis was titled “Memoria y Justicia: Separate Places for Separate Spaces.”
My search for articulations of the aftermath of the atentado in Buenos Aires brought me to the Macabi and Hebraica Jewish centers; to the La Tablada cemetery; to Ciudad Universitaria, where rubble from the building was dumped; to various Sephardic and Ashkenazi synagogues; to the vacant lot where the Israeli Embassy once stood; to the interim home for the Argentine Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut (YIVO), on Ayacucho Street, where books recovered from the bombing were being cleaned and restored; to rehearsals with the Coro Guebirtig; and regularly to Pasteur Street and Plaza Lavalle, which ultimately became spaces of return.4

I became attuned to what Elizabeth Jelin describes as “vehicles of memory,” as I have been particularly interested in the “dynamic link between individual subjectivities, societal or collective belonging, and the embodiment of the past and its meanings in a variety of cultural products.”5 Jelin addresses the struggle to make historical meaning and to voice one’s truth when multiple actors are involved in asserting memory and defining the past. Of the many vehicles of memory I encountered during my fieldwork, I have paid specific attention to what I deem the “spaces of return” that are Plaza Lavalle and Pasteur Street and the active movement devoted to sustaining memory and pursuing justice in the aftermath of the AMIA bombing spearheaded by Familiares y Amigos de las Víctimas (Family and Friends of the Victims) and Memoria Activa (Active Memory).

In this chapter I address the tensions surrounding representation, departing from the spaces of return. The claiming of space and voice regarding how to advocate and how to remember is a seemingly complex universal problem in the face of injustice. I trace the bifurcation of protest groups in pursuit of justice post-atentado. And, at twenty years since the atrocity, when the terrain of justice is riddled with impunity, I analyze the use of particular vehicles of memory—photographs of the rubble; of the original AMIA building; and of Andrea Guterman, who was killed in the bombing—and determine that such remains, which I essentially deem “vestiges of memory,” carry a monumental load when framed within certain artistic and commemorative practices.

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