

## **Utopia, Memory, and the City: Testimonial Marks and Demands for Justice in La Plata, Argentina<sup>1</sup>**

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Utopia is, in one respect, the unacceptable, a no-place, the extreme point of a reconfiguration of the sensible, which breaks down the categories that define what is considered to be obvious. However, it is also the configuration of a proper place, a non-polemical distribution of the sensible universe where what one sees, what one says, and what one makes or does are rigorously adapted to one another.

- Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 40

The city is a space where both the acceptable and the unacceptable coexist, where “proper,” “improper,” and “appropriated” places overlap and often coincide. With its walls, buildings, monuments, and parks, the city becomes invisible and anonymous for those who go through it under the anesthesia of routine. At the same time, the city is a place that defines and shapes the identity of those who inhabit it, providing a sense of belonging, a place where the self—the citizen—properly and rightly dwells. In that sense, the urban space turns out to be a utopia for Jacques Rancière, as it is a zone of paradoxes. It is also the site of a debate over views of the past, present, and future, as well as about our rights and the rights of others. In the terms of Jean Baudrillard—another French intellectual who led a revolutionary

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project on urbanism in the 1970s called “Utopie”—the city contains and confines all social possibilities, which enables it to free those possibilities and put their revolutionary potentiality into play. Therefore, the urban space is for Baudrillard an order ruled by the laws of a dialectic utopia, where the critique and analysis of the *topos* (the established and accepted order) allow for the creation of *utopia*, which at the same time cannot become accepted as the ruling order if it wants to continue existing as such (31–32).

Within the discourses generated from and about that *topos* and its surroundings, it is possible to discern, on one hand, an “official” narrative, generally constituted as the mainstream history of the city and its inhabitants. On the other, less visible narratives flow underneath many layers and with multiple ramifications: these are testimonials, often displaying themselves as utopian zones in the sense that, while seeking absolute justice and the representation of all silenced voices, they destabilize the mainstream historic discourse from numerous angles. Furthermore, these testimonial practices configure a space full not only of promise and expectations but also of impossibility, since neither the ultimate truth nor the construction of an acceptable narrative for every group involved in the events and its memory can be reached. Moreover, as has been abundantly discussed and theorized in recent years, to testify means to attempt to narrate an absence, to fill a hiatus and, more than anything, to attain the unattainable truth.<sup>2</sup> But besides its ability to reveal the hidden mechanisms of history, the greatest wealth of this genre perhaps lies, as Víctor Casaus pointed out three decades ago, in its flexibility, in the way it compensates for what it lacks and what it cannot achieve by taking features from other modes of narration and of expressing reality (46, 51).

It is there, in those unorthodox modes of narration, where we would like to dwell, exploring the testimonial practices thus given, not in the literary field, but at another graphic level, in the public and popular spaces of the city of La Plata, Argentina.<sup>3</sup> While reading urban practices in the manner of unconventional testimonies, from graffiti, stencil marks, and murals to the setting of commemorative plates and refurbishing of buildings for the purpose of bearing memory, it is possible to observe, on one hand, the disenchantment with the state and its institutions and, on the other, the projection of a utopia: that of a construction of an inclusive, unequivocal historic narration and the fulfillment of simple justice.

In this context, the city almost literally exemplifies Walter Benjamin’s assertion that history is “the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]” (*Illuminations* 261). In a metonymic way, the urban space narrates different versions of history through testimonial fragments. Therefore, it is possible to “read” it in a Benjaminian fashion, paying special attention to its polyphony, one that creates a dynamic and ever-changing testimonial palimpsest. Likewise, this type of narrative as shaped by the

city's inscriptions amounts to an alternative history that challenges linearity and allows us "to seize hold of memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" as well as to "brush [mainstream] history against the grain" (*Illuminations* 255–56), thereby attempting to avoid empathy or rapport with official versions. The city not just allows but even mandates its citizens or whomever "peruses" its streets, walls, and buildings to rebuild a collective memory based on those fragments provided by urban art, planned and unplanned architectural projects and murals, graffiti, and the like, which for Benjamin were the main clues of the past that remain in the moment of the "now."

Therefore, the multiple manifestations of alternative art, such as graffiti, stencils, so-called street art, as well as buildings, and various marks in general, enable us to observe in La Plata some of Benjamin's theorizations about historical and testimonial narrative.<sup>4</sup> These manifestations have the potential to register and recompose a story in their nonlinear, fragmentary form (Buck-Morss). Moreover, "la ciudad aparece como un prisma que cuenta un relato de identidad y describe la compleja relación entre la memoria histórica y el olvido" (Bueno 12) (the city appears as a prism that tells a story about national identity while it describes the complex relationship between historical memory and oblivion) (my translation). The prism we will deal with is particularly interesting both for its testimonial strength and for the utopian concept it displays, as it unfolds in various interpretations: La Plata, the "city of diagonals," is, in the manner of Thomas More's *Amaurota* (Moro 103), a meticulously planned (in this case, provincial) capital, designed as a perfectly square grid according to the guidelines of the rational and provident urbanism of the late nineteenth century, which was aimed at achieving a fair and equitable distribution of and for its inhabitants. Dardo Rocha founded La Plata in 1882 after the difficult federalization of Buenos Aires, attempting to create a "perfect city." Urban planner Pedro Benoit diligently designed it, following rationalist concepts, and soon after it became a key cultural, political, and educational center.<sup>5</sup> From there, Rodolfo Walsh's *Operación Masacre* takes shape (and I mean not only the writing of Rodolfo Walsh but also the key historical facts depicted in it).<sup>6</sup> It is in La Plata that infamous events such as the "Noche de los Lápices" (Night of the Pencils) occurred, and it is no coincidence that the city is also where important human rights activists such as Hebe de Bonafini (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo) and Estela de Carlotto (Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo) reside, as well as key witness Jorge Julio López, who has twice been disappeared for more than five years, the second time during a period of democracy.<sup>7</sup> In an article about López, Ana Longoni asserts the paradigmatic nature of this city, which was, in her words, "encarnizadamente arrasada por la dictadura" (fiercely devastated by dictatorship), to the point that in Argentina, according to popular knowledge, "en proporción al total de su población es el lugar con mayor índice de

desaparecidos” (“Todos somos López” 96) (in proportion to its total population, it is the place with the highest rate of disappeared people) (my translation).

As it may be expected, then, in La Plata there are numerous marks, trails, and commemorative traces of historical facts and political events from the 1960s and 1970s as well as from much earlier times. Thus, blissful commemorations, such as monuments for the centennial of its foundation, commingle with less fortunate collective memories, such as those commemorating the Falklands (or Malvinas) War. Furthermore, there are traces of other types, many of which are related to demands for social justice. Also, as is common to most cities in the contemporary world, we see examples of street art and urban culture in general, not all of them related to memory. There are paintings of all kinds—group and individual, planned or casual, created with crude spray or brush painting or with artistic precision—that sometimes point to the past and its remembrance and at others denote an irreverent attempt to delete or discredit that same historical memory, silencing the claims of other sectors. We see in the city “la disputa por una nueva cultura visual en medio de la terca persistencia de signos del viejo orden” (García Canclini 271) (the fight for a new visual culture in the middle of the stubborn persistence of signs of the old order) (my translation), which is also a fight over memory, historical representation, and desired models of society. In other words, the utopian projections of society’s diverse groups are displayed in conflict, and a resolution to that conflict generates a utopia in itself, since complete agreement poses an impossibility. Thus, the contradiction (Rancière) or the dialectic movement (Baudrillard): first, a certain degree of dissent is essential to democracy’s well-being; secondly, and related to the first, the concretion of one sector’s desires or political vision over another’s would mean the establishment of a totalitarian order, a *topos* whose existence depends on the unilateral praising of one version over the others, silencing any discrepant voice. That is something that the urban marks in La Plata clearly reject.

On the topic of human rights, La Plata’s urban testimonials show a polyphonic diversity through which the articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are represented and interpreted, especially in the alchemical search for whole truth and ultimate justice. This pursuit of civic ideals is particularly difficult when dealing with events that are fairly recent and still very much divisive within and obscured from the public. All around the city are abundant demands for respect for human rights by way of graffiti, markings, murals, and stencils, exhibiting particular concern for articles 1, 3, 8 and 9, which emphasize the rights to life, liberty, security, and justice. Moreover, these claims are in themselves a manifestation of article 19, concerning the freedom of opinion and expression. Recently, there have appeared more notable appeals about general freedom and with regard to article 2 of the Universal Declaration, against discrimination. Through these

visual voices, the city screams for equity, freedom, and, above all, justice, since every claim around the issue of memory implies that “forgetting” serves as a synonym for “impunity” for the public.

I would like to consider some specific examples found in the city, by which it can be said that “the walls scream” (Gassmann), disputing the right to speak and to assert their multiple political visions and memories in the public space. My first stop would be the commissioned mural commemorating the “Noche de los Lápices” at 78th Diagonal and 8th Street. This is one of the most meaningful murals with regard to the historical traces of the 1970s in the urban narrative. Painted in 2006 as part of the commemoration of the thirtieth anniversary of the events, the block-long mural portrays the young faces of the protagonists and reads, “A 30 años de la Noche de los Lápices—patrimonio cultural del pueblo” (Thirty years after the Night of the Pencils—the people’s cultural heritage) and, underneath, “Hagamos una patria sin excluidos” (Let’s make a homeland without exclusion). In this last statement, an evocation of the struggle for social equity and justice links the ideals of the disappeared youths of the 1970s with those of today, Benjamin’s theses resonate with their utopian and messianic spirit.<sup>8</sup>

The mural is primarily an assigned (since it has been commissioned) place of memory that politically defends the need to bring the past into the present through the portraits of the protagonists: above the red star, the signature of the group makes a political agent explicit, thus working as a collective and in some sense anonymous, but still well-defined, authorial claim. However, that same section has undergone a proliferation of attempts to erase it, to take that authorship away or to reclaim the mural by signing with aerosol, gluing posters, or using some other type of marking. Of course, as is common in many contemporary cities where graffiti abounds, it is not just the section with the signature of the Agrupación María Claudia Falcone that has been marked by other markings and “signatures.” Different social sectors and a variety of visions of history and attitudes toward memory are all displayed on the wall.

Undoubtedly, the mural is not just a testimonial of the historic event: at the same time, it also serves as a commemorative piece. It also testifies to the diversity of opinions on history and memory, specific commemorated events, the mural itself, and, to a great extent, political views in society. With regard to memory, the mural shows first and foremost a position that embraces remembrance as a form of historical healing and of justice. The markings on it also function as a means of impeaching that same commemorative state. There is an amnesiac attitude that can be interpreted as an “against-history” or “apathetic” position. There are, then, many attempts to appropriate the mural from different political standpoints by “signing” it, maybe not necessarily trying to discredit or disrespect the

commemoration, but definitely trying to appropriate the wall and its voicing capabilities.

Continuing my journey through the city, it is worth mentioning the urban presence of memory furnished by the recovery and the marking of spaces used during the last dictatorship for the practices of state terrorism—namely, spying, kidnapping, illegal detention, and torture. In some cases the recovered spaces now serve to promote human rights and have completely changed their original function. In other instances, only a plaque has been placed to both make aware of and denounce the previous (mis-)use of a space and the victims of human rights violations committed there, while the space is still committed to the same official purpose—hopefully without any underlying illegal operations. Such is the case with Comisaría 5, an infamous police station in the 1970s (and possibly earlier), where Jorge Julio López was detained and tortured during his first disappearance and where torturers such as Christian Von Wernich (who, according to testimonies, used to go there to “bless” torture sessions) and Miguel Etchecolatz conducted their criminal operations.<sup>9</sup>

The commemorative plaques and mosaics on the walls and streets of La Plata bring to the present not just the past but also the different uses and functions of the space where historic moments cohabit with the “now.” Many times these texts show that there is yet a need for justice, that violence and abuse are not from the past, but rather a part of the present that should be watched and prevented from occurring in the future. The plaques and mosaics act as collective memory landmarks to alert about the past and hopefully prevent it from repeating itself in the present and future.

Among the instances of spaces “recovered” for democratic purposes, such as human rights education and activism, one case in point is the building now assigned to the Comisión Provincial por la Memoria (Provincial Commission for Memory). The commission is located where the building that housed the Dirección de Inteligencia de la Policía de la Provincia de Buenos Aires (Police Intelligence Agency of Buenos Aires Province), or DIPBA, used to be. Founded on August 8, 1956, as part of the actions of the Revolución Libertadora (Liberator Revolution), this intelligence agency was responsible for many kidnappings, killings, and disappearances in the 1960s and 1970s. From the outside, the building has not changed much, except for the reddish color of its façade, which allows it to be easily identified, unlike in the past, when there was a deliberate effort to disguise the building among the other buildings of the block. The commission is a self-supporting entity created in the year 2000 by human rights groups. Its creation led to a law (Provincial Law 12642) that transferred all classified police archives from what used to be the DIPBA to the commission in order to start the process of declassification for justice purposes. In October 2003 the commission opened its doors to the public, and in 2007 it was recognized by UNESCO as part of the Memory of the

World register. As a consequence, the space continues to work mainly as an archive (as it was, in a way, for the police); the interior still holds an important number of documents with information on Argentine citizens who were subjected to obscure, illegal, and unfair scrutiny and persecution by DIPBA as part of state terrorism practices, even years before the dictatorship began. However, those documents now displayed within its walls serve an opposite purpose, as they are important evidence in the search for justice and have been instrumental during the Juicios por la Verdad (Truth Trials).

Moreover, the commission has established a Committee against Torture and carries out many educational, cultural, and historical activities in collaboration with other entities. For example, the program Jóvenes y Memoria (Youth and Memory) is designed to allow high school students in the province of Buenos Aires to explore history and collective memory through art and media. Also, the old DIPBA building now contains a very complete library on human rights that is open to the public five days a week. The commission has its own magazine, *Puentes* (Bridges), published since August 2000 and now housed in that same building; its main mission is to make declassified archives public.<sup>10</sup> An inscription on the CD that compiles the first twenty-five issues of the magazine clearly describes its mission, in some way echoing Benjamin's idea of a present that simultaneously contains past and future:

Puentes que unan a las generaciones y se conviertan en espacios de diálogo y transmisión. Puentes para llegar a otros territorios, habitados por otros ciudadanos en este vasto país de la memoria. Puentes, en fin, que nos permitan pararnos justo en el medio, en este minúsculo presente, para poder pensar el pasado y el futuro al mismo tiempo. (Comisión Provincial por la Memoria)

(Bridges to unite generations and to become a space for dialogue and diffusion. Bridges to arrive to other territories, inhabited by other citizens in this vast country of memory. Bridges that, without a doubt, will allow us to stand in the exact midpoint, in this minuscule present, and be able to think the past and the future at the same time.) (my translation)

About ten blocks from the ex-DIPBA building, the next stop is the Museum of Art and Memory, on 9th Street between 51st and 53rd Avenues, whose mission is very much linked to the former entity.<sup>11</sup> The museum, too, is open to the public, a free-access space that is independent and autonomous from the state. With a particular focus on art's testimonial possibilities and its capacity to serve as a form of memory, the museum hosts both permanent and temporary exhibitions with an emphasis on memory and urban art. For example, in April 2010 the museum displayed art from different local and

national urban groups such as Calle Tomada and Escombros, as well as art exhibits sponsored by the public university (Universidad Nacional de La Plata) on memory, agency, and urbanism. The exhibits question the fixed rules that often characterize institutions like the museum.<sup>12</sup> One of the first exhibits, for instance, invites the public to pass through the doors of the museum toward the neighborhoods and even the outskirts of the city, quoting Néstor García Canclini: “la ciudad se desborda y se multiplica en ficciones individuales y colectivas” (the city overflows and multiplies in individual and collective fictions).<sup>13</sup> But it is not just in “fictions” that the city overflows its fixed parameters and limits; it is also by means of the diversity of conflicting stories and memories that still serve to configure a common history. Inside the Museum of Art and Memory, the visitor observes both this multiplicity and the commonalities and recurrences of stories in La Plata: the walls of the stairways, from the first floor up, narrate the history of urban art from the 1960s to the present, showing, for example, how the city “changes its skin,” how graffiti that is painted over may reappear several years later, seeming at first like an anachronism but ultimately revealing to the passerby the continuity of yet-unsettled sociopolitical demands.

Walking through the streets of La Plata, it is possible to perceive the recurrence and/or replications of history and the unresolved character of the many and diverse collective demands. One of the major demands refers to the lack of justice and of certain civil liberties. It is apparent that, at least for a sector of the population, the city, and by extension the country, suffers from state totalitarianism, or at least from strong echoes of it, even after almost thirty years of reestablished democracy. Without a doubt, the case in point is that of Jorge Julio López, the aforementioned witness who was twice kidnapped and “disappeared,” the second time on September 18, 2006, during the post-dictatorship democratic era, after testifying against the repressor and torturer Miguel Etchecolatz during the Juicios por la Verdad. The strong “presence” of López’s absence can be seen everywhere: murals, stencils, posters, graffiti, and banners are just some of the manifestations of this demand for truth and justice. These are calls to break the silence and the circle of impunity, calls that ironically testify to and make present the absence of the witness. In the heart of the city stands the Dardo Rocha Passage, a cultural center established in 1926 that also houses the Museum of Latin American Contemporary Art. There, a giant poster with Lopez’s photograph hangs in the central hall, serving as both a silent audience and a backdrop during the performances of the Fiesta Nacional del Teatro (National Theater Festival) from April 15 to 26, 2010. Close by, the building of the public university’s Humanities College displays a full-length image of him walking. Visible from a distance of several blocks, the image is accompanied by a text that appeals to us, citizens and passersby: “5 años sin López ¿A qué te podés acostumbrar? (Five years without López. What can



you get used to?) (my translation). Certainly, these demands for justice with regard to López's case are not exclusive to La Plata.<sup>14</sup> But it is here, in the city he inhabited and where he was kidnapped twice, that these signs acquire particularly strong implications.

The murals project into the future the angel of history, which paradoxically runs forward while looking back.<sup>15</sup> To the future, there is the ideal of social justice and integration, with or without memory, portrayed by the CILSA mural on 53rd Avenue.<sup>16</sup> Even though it proclaims that “nos acercamos al país que busca la integración” (we are getting closer to the country of integration) (my translation), it has been marked with spray paint in a way that somehow reverts its meaning. Yet, retrospectively, the angel points to the catastrophe, calling for a future of justice and memory, as is implicit in most urban markings: the previous references to López, the proliferation of stencils referring to the military dictatorship and asking for “juicio y castigo” (prosecution and punishment), for example. Among many other allusions to collective memory and a need for justice, there is also the idea that the past should be “here and now” to prevent it from repeating itself. The commemorative mural about the still-unsolved murder of the teacher Carlos Fuentealba in Neuquén in 2007 and the banners and various stencils about the femicide of Sandra Ayala Gamboa are examples of this view of memory as a narrative that is not just related to the past but instead must continuously be actualized toward the possibility of a better future.

Moreover, as with López's second disappearance, the problems with solving the Ayala Gamboa case—and Fuentealba's, also from 2007—reveal an association that is not unusual in Argentina (nor in Latin America) between perpetrators and state bodies, even in democratic times, as she was last seen at a public building (ARBA, the Buenos Aires province taxes agency) and an employee of that institution is the suspected murderer. It is for that reason that the plaintiffs accuse the Economy Ministry of obstructing the judicial process. In any case, the numerous banners, stencil marks, and graffiti referring to these unsolved crimes show that the past persists in an act of presence in order to 1) claim justice, 2) act as a warning sign to prevent repetition, and 3) create civic consciousness, making all people aware of their own responsibilities for the building of the common good.

Therefore, the retrospective view means a present that is indivisible from projections of a future in which there is hope for justice, equality, and democracy. This view is also noticeable with regard to the topic of the right to work and human dignity (Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights): the murals on First Avenue and on the walls delimiting the perimeter of the Club de Estudiantes de La Plata (Students of La Plata Club), as well as on the northern border of the planned city, point to a future of social equity while expressing a clear critique of capitalist practices.

Returning to our commemorative urban journey, another vital space that has been regained for civil society is the Centro Cultural Islas Malvinas

(Islas Malvinas Cultural Center) in the southern part of the city. The building and grounds were formerly the location of an army squadron; now, in this new role as cultural center, the traumatic memories of two conflictive historical moments coexist: on one hand, the dictatorship that the military junta tried to legitimize and justify as a war “against subversion,” and on the other, the Falklands War, another military-imposed event that distressed and disrupted civil society. The latter, a dreadful episode in Argentine history, has had one positive outcome, as it marked the beginning of the end for the military junta’s regime. In sharing this commemorative space, both events become one, united against collective oblivion and the consolidation of Argentine identity even in the face of tragedy. In contemplating this coexistence, it is interesting to note that the apparent primary focus of the center is on the combatants of the Falklands War and the still-pending question of Argentine sovereignty over the islands. However, in the building’s interior, the main patio displays a tribute to the disappeared victims of state terrorism and their families: a sculpture with a poem and a specially dedicated wall that show different layers of Argentine history. The commemorative area, suitably called the “Wall of Memory,” describes how historical events cannot really be “covered” or silenced the way a wall can be painted anew. As this wall symbolically demonstrates, the different historic layers come alive in the present in many ways. A group of mosaics with photos of disappeared people from La Plata is displayed, simulating a structure in the midst of being remodeled or still unfinished (as is our history), with a window that has been covered with plaster and the bricks still showing. A dedication plaque from the authors/artists completes the composition, ending with the following: “Este mural quiere ser una caricia en el alma para las madres, para las abuelas, para sus hijos, para quienes recuerden, para esta sociedad que debe despertar . . .” (This mural attempts to be a warm caress to the soul of the mothers, grandmothers, their children, for those who remember, for this society that needs to be awakened . . .) (my translation).

The urban narrative repeatedly insists that there will never be justice without memory. About ten blocks south of the Centro Cultural Islas Malvinas, almost peripheral in the perfect urban composition of diagonals and square parks but quite significant in the reconstruction of the recent past, a private dwelling has just opened its doors to the public. It is the former house of civilians Daniel Mariani and Diana Teruggi, on 30th Street between 55th and 56th. Reopened thanks to the support of the national government and the Asociación Anahí (Anahí Association) just in time for the thirty-fifth anniversary of the military coup on March 24, the “Rabbit House” or Casa Mariani-Teruggi shows how private stories intertwine with national history, particularly when talking about state terrorism.<sup>17</sup> In addition to hosting a clandestine press for the publication of the newspaper *Evita Montonera* behind the sophisticated and ingenious façade of a rabbit breeder and

butcher, the house itself became a tragic testimony to state terrorism after the brutal attack perpetrated on November 24, 1976, by the police under the orders of the aforementioned Miguel Etchecolatz and the military forces. On that day the house was bombed from the air and the ground, and all the civilians inside, activist and non-activist alike, died, with the exception of Clara Anahí Mariani, the owners' daughter, who was three months old at the time and is still missing. The site has been declared one of national interest, a "historical monument," and part of Buenos Aires province's cultural heritage by several entities as well as by a number of laws and resolutions passed between 2000 and 2004. The project to fully bring the past to life and also to prevent further deterioration of the building started to take shape in 2008 with funds from the national government. Nowadays the reopened house can be visited free of charge and allows the public to see the structure much as it was the day after the attack, including the car parked in the garage, as if we were entering a photograph, a scene from the past that comes to life, revealing its horrors in the indivisible present.<sup>18</sup>

The last stop in this journey through the city, its memory, and its utopian hopes suggests once more that these urban practices tend to represent history in its fragmentary nature, patches of truth and evidence about the past that are combined with present demands and future projections. These practices, as well as the resulting representations and their interpretations, change every day, as does the city itself, as if it were constantly shedding its skin and growing a new one. However, the change is never a complete one. Traces persist: as in the past, they cannot be erased, no matter how many layers of white, amnesiac, silencing paint are used. Moreover, these signs, which serve as historical markers or as calls for attention to a variety of matters, are neither static nor permanent; they are modified every day by the presence of new voices with new interpretations and versions of the past and present, as well as visions for the future. Only some references and representations—memory, opposition to dictatorial practices by the state (or by certain governmental elements), and denunciations of injustice—are recurrent and lasting, perhaps due to their unfixed character. The recurrence implies an act of resistance on the part of those who defend the importance of memory over conciliatory forgetfulness.

This last stop is the corner that identifies the street art group Calle Tomada, half a block from the Museum of Art and Memory. The spot seems like an appropriate place for final observation: a mural that could be called "Against Silence," which covered a single wall on 53rd Ave. in March 2009, has been growing. It has now rounded the corner and taken over part of the wall on 9th St., decorating the frame of a gate in a way that evokes a "No Parking" sign with the motto "No a la impunidad y al silencio" (No Impunity nor Silence).<sup>19</sup> As it has grown, however, it has also changed ideologically and symbolically. What was once a tidy political mural has become, two years later, a palimpsest of marks, paintings, drawings, stencils,

and spray-painted graffiti declaring love to one person or another, converting a portrait of a politician into a greenish alien, along with many other signs that are difficult to “read.” To paraphrase Terry Eagleton in his readings of Benjamin, these traces or marks show the historicity of the object (the city), the scars that it has accumulated in the hands of its owners and users (the citizens), and the actions of erasing, conserving, and/or revitalizing them is a political practice that depends upon the mark itself and the context in which it operates (61).

Finally, with regard to memory, La Plata’s public spaces become testimonial in every sense of the term: in the city’s streets, both on the walls and in a variety of sites that people can access freely and many times fortuitously, it is possible to observe the presence and the present of Argentine history, as well as the positions of different sectors that have appropriated both the spaces and history in many ways, dissenting about what to remember and how, or even deciding to impose erasure and silencing spray paint over the memory of others, adhering to amnesiac or apathetic politics. Although there is plenty of disagreement over what to remember, how to remember, or why one should remember at all, the variety of urban marks are a demonstration of democratic exercise, even when they denounce the lack of and/or call for a pursuit of a complete *Rechtsstaat* (in other words, a democracy in utopian terms) or, even more paradoxically, when they aim to impugn and censor dissident voices (Mandeville 150–51).

The city—in this case, La Plata—in its acts of memory and forgetfulness, in its search for truth and justice, and especially as a testimonial narrative, expresses and contains the ambiguities of history as read from the present. Disputes over memory, resistance to forgetfulness, struggles against impunity and discrimination, and, most of all, re-significations of spaces as warnings and instructional signposts for future generations: all these different aspects emanate from a single past but offer various readings of and projections into the future. These elements all reveal the construction of a common, collective history that Argentina’s now-democratic society, in a utopian gesture, still seeks.

## Notes

1. This paper was originally presented in Spanish at the international symposium “Ongoing Dialogues on Human Rights” at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, Sept. 29–Oct. 1, 2011. I deeply thank Derek Petrey for his thorough revision and editing of my translation.
2. I based this statement mainly on Giorgio Agamben’s theorizations (particularly, *Remnants* 34–35), but many other authors also dwell on this issue, such as Derrida, Guerin, Langer, Bernard-Donals, Felman, and Laub, as well as, in reference to Latin American testimonial practices in particular, Amar Sánchez, Beverley, Gugelberger,

- Sarlo, Vallina, Vezzetti, and Jelin, to name a few consulted for this research. See works cited for further references.
3. I have purposely chosen La Plata as the location for this research because it is Buenos Aires province's capital city and a key setting for Argentine history outside the perimeter of, although still very close to, the federal capital. Apart from the particular memory practices that take place there, as we will see, it is also a unique case in point when talking about utopia, since it was originally planned to be a perfect and harmonic urban space.
  4. The most cited of Benjamin's texts on the issue of testimonial narrative, and specifically for theorizing about Latin American *testimonio*, is "The Storyteller" (*Illuminations* 83–109). For more on the discussion about *testimonio* in Argentina and my perspective on the subject, see Walas, "Alternativas testimoniales." Regarding the idea of the "mark," see Benjamin, "On Painting, or Sign and Mark" (*The Work of Art* 221–25). On the development of street art in Argentina during the last two decades, Ana Longoni's article "(Con)texto(s) para el GAC" provides a good analytical summary.
  5. Many nationally and internationally renowned figures were educated at its public university, including several democratically elected presidents of Argentina, such as current president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, and of other Latin American countries, including Juan José Arévalo (one of the few democratically elected presidents in Guatemala in the twentieth century). Other renowned figures of literature, arts, and the sciences educated in La Plata include René Favaloro, Emilio Pettoruti, Pedro Henríquez Ureña, Florentino Ameghino, Ernesto Sábato, and Carlos Saavedra Lamas.
  6. The city of La Plata is mentioned in the first lines of the second edition's prologue to *Operación Masacre*, in which Walsh identifies it as the foundational setting of his investigative and writing project (19). Furthermore, the city has a central role in the story in many ways. For example, the orders are given by the Buenos Aires provincial police department, whose main office is located in La Plata. For more on Walsh's testimonial writing, see Amar Sánchez "La propuesta de una escritura."
  7. "La Noche de los Lápices" refers to the kidnappings and disappearances that took place on the night of September 16, 1976, in La Plata. The victims were a group of teenagers who belonged to the Unión de Estudiantes Secundarios (High School Students Union) and were protesting a hike in bus fares and requesting a free or discounted student bus pass instead. The event was made into a film by Héctor Olivera in 1986, the screenplay based on the book by journalists María Seoane and Héctor Ruiz Nuñez, who, for their part, worked from the testimony of one of the survivors, Pablo Díaz. Some historians believe that the testimonies given about this event refute the "two demons theory" and the "war theory," and assert instead the concept of "innocent victims." For more on this, see Seoane and Ruiz Nuñez; Vezzetti, *Pasado y presente* 118 and *Sobre la violencia revolucionaria* 115–16; Jauretche; Calveiro; and Longoni, *Traiciones*.
  8. On this topic, see Echeverría 15–20 and, for another perspective, Jennings 13.
  9. With regard to the recovery of spaces and the installation of commemorative markers, it is worth noting the work of La Plata's Asamblea Permanente de Derechos Humanos (Permanent Human Rights Assembly). After the dictatorship and with the return to democracy, this organization, established in 1975 with the clear objective of supporting any demands for justice for human rights violations, has been instrumental in the Juicios por la Verdad and the call for historic memory reparations.

10. It is worth noting that not all of the DIPBA documents in the archive have been declassified for the general public, due to their critical role in some of the still-unresolved judicial cases and trials.
11. The museum was founded by the Comisión Provincial por la Memoria, the entity that administrates the DIPBA archives, in 2002.
12. For more on the difficult relationship between urban art and the museum, see Longoni, “(Con)texto(s)” 14–15. There, the author poses the following open questions: What happens when urban art modalities are translated into museum space exhibits? Do they become more “artistic” than “political” manifestations when they enter the museum? In one of the exhibits at the Museum of Art and Memory, Longoni would have a possible answer given as a street political mural is reproduced while retaining its militant power. Quite on the contrary, here in the museum, the mural still questions and protests the restrictions imposed by the state on the right of expression: why is the mural allowed in the museum and applauded, considered a “work of art,” while in the street it constitutes a violation of the law and the artist is prosecuted?
13. My translation. The quote appears printed on the floor of one of rooms accompanying the Calle Tomada exhibit and also in the brochure for the whole exhibition under the title “Arte en la Calle” (Art in the Street), Museo de Arte y Memoria, April–May 2010.
14. See, for example, Memoria Abierta 105–8 about urban marks related to López in Buenos Aires. There are also marks about the search for López in other major Argentine cities such as Mar del Plata, Rosario, and Córdoba.
15. I am referring here to Benjamin’s ninth thesis based on Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*. This image and Benjamin’s “reading” of it have received plenty of attention and commentary in recent years by historians, philosophers, and literary critics, to the point that, according to Andreas Huyssen, it has attained “cult status” (9). For some of those interpretations, see Deriu 192–93, Echeverría, Buck-Morss 8–11, and Eagleton 259–68. Of particular interest is Hanna Arendt’s comparison of the *flâneur* with the angel of history (12–13).
16. CILSA stands for Centro de Integración Libre y Solidaria de Argentina (Argentine Center for Integration and Solidarity), a nonprofit NGO founded in 1966 that is dedicated to helping people with disabilities.
17. That is the name given to the house by Laura Alcoba and chosen as title for the Spanish and English versions of her childhood memoirs, originally published in French as *Manèges. Petite histoire argentine*. In them, Alcoba narrates her experiences living in the house with her mother (who was in charge of printing the “illegal” Montonero newspaper), which coincide with the installation of a device to hide the clandestine press and with the setting up of the rabbit business. Alcoba left the house about four months before the military attack took place, but she speculates in her narrative about who might have given up the information about the house’s political activities. For more information on the house and its history, see also Paineira and Ramos Padilla.
18. I thank Julieta Calabrese Tello for allowing me to enter the house in 2010, in the middle of the reconstruction work, and for providing me with valuable information at that time. I had the opportunity to visit the house again when it had already been reopened in July 2011, and that allowed me to compare and observe how the project was taking its envisioned shape. About the idea of “indivisible present,” I again refer to Benjamin’s concept of “*Jetztzeit*” or present as *nunc stans* (*Illuminations* 261).
19. The group’s logo is a street sign indicating the (nonexistent) intersection of “9th St. and 52nd,” this being another name for the group; that sign was first installed on the

corner we are referring to, which is 9th St and 53rd Ave. For more information on the group and street art projects in La Plata, see [www.calletomada.blogspot.com](http://www.calletomada.blogspot.com)

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### Appendix: City Images\*

Graffiti, stencils, and marks around the city of La Plata, with a variety of political demands



1.

2.

3.

1. Stencil against higher bus fare; 2. “Elections pass, hunger remains” (my translation);
3. Stencil implying that the dictatorship has continued in democracy.



4.

4. Against human trafficking , particularly in women for prostitution and sex labor.

**Below, our first stop:**

“The Night of the Pencils,” mural on 78th Diagonal and 8th Street, School of Fine Arts, National University of La Plata



1.

2.

1. and 2. Wall from two different angles; on the right, corner detail that claims authorship and political affiliation



4.

4. On the left, stencils on the floor of Plaza Moreno, located between the cathedral and city hall, at the heart of the city.

**Second Stop, Below:**

1. “Comisión Provincial por la Memoria- DITBA”/ Provincial Commission for Memory: front; 2., 3., and 4. Archives; 5. and 6. Museum on second floor, 7. Poster of one of the programs offered by the Commission; 8. Exhibition in main hall about López: “5 Years of Impunity – López Is Missing Here.”



1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.



7.



8.

**Museum of Art and Memory:**



“Calle Tomada” (Taken Street) in the Museum of Art and Memory. This 2009 exhibition specifically focused on street art. Pictures 1. and 2. Exhibits; 3. Staircase with walls displaying the history of urban art and its connections with social demands in La Plata.

**López in the streets: graffiti, stencils, altered street signs, posters, and other street marks**



1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



6.



7.

1. and 2. Both read: “Without López, there won’t be a ‘Never Again’”; 3. and 4. Other graffiti and stencils alluding to silence and López’s disappearance; 5. Street sign intervention; 6. and 7. Stencils with López’s image, counting the time he’s been missing.

Below, 1. and 2. In the main hall at the historic Paseo Dardo Rocha, during National Theatre Week, a poster displays López's picture and the demand that he be returned alive.



Above, College of Humanities, National University of La Plata. The painting on this side of the building is updated every year.

**Murals for Justice:**



CILSA mural: utopia of full integration. It reads, “Nos acercamos al país que busca la integración” (We are closer to the country that looks for full inclusion [my translation]). However, the sun on the flag has a sad face spray-painted on it. 53rd Ave. between 16th and 17th Streets.



In yellow, it reads, “Las tizas no se manchan con sangre” (Chalk should not be stained with blood [my translation]): Mural about the death of the teacher Carlos Fuentealba at a peaceful protest in Neuquén, April 2007. The mural also refers to other murdered teachers, such as Francisco Isauro Arancibia, one of the founders of CTERA (Confederación de Trabajadores de la Educación de la República Argentina), shot down in March 1976, right after the military coup. The word “Diente” (Tooth) might be an irreverent inscription over the mural.

**Mixed Media about Femicide and Social Justice Demands:**



These three pictures manifest different visual denunciations of the murder of Sandra Ayala Gamboa at the site where she was last seen and might have been killed, at 7th Ave. and 46th St. 1. Posters and paintings at the abandoned building next door to ARBA (state tax agency); 2. Corner where the entrance of ARBA is located; 3. Detail that also denounces authoritarianism.





More murals demanding social justice, close to the Estudiantes de La Plata club, 1st St. between 56th and 58th Sts. On the right, 4. The mural parodies an American Express ad: “One package of Terrabusi crackers after Kraft bought the company = \$3.99; taking back the factory, PRICELESS” (my translation); 5. and 6. Center and left, detail and complete mural. It reads, “Ningún muro tapa el hambre” (No wall can cover hunger [my translation]).

**Centro Cultural Islas Malvinas:**

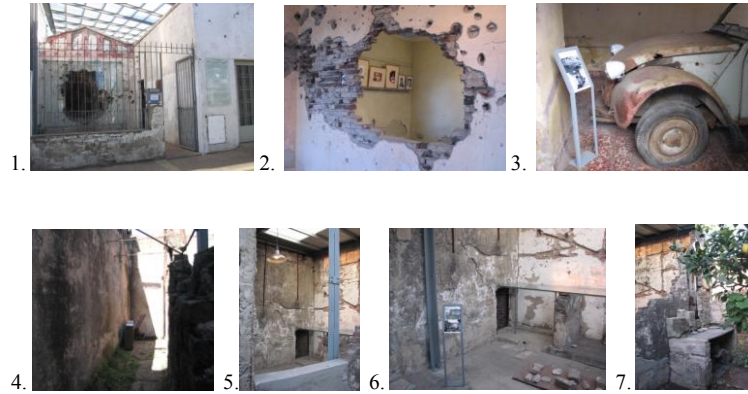


1. Entrance to the Centro Cultural Islas Malvinas; 2. In the central courtyard, a sculpture by the group Escombros (Rubble), with a poem by Lydia Burry that talks about the need for remembrance; 3. The “Wall of Memory.”

Below, 4. Detail of the wall of the mosaics with faces of the disappeared; 5. On the right, a commemorative piece about the Malvinas/Falklands War, also with pictures of both disappeared and combatants.



**“La casa de los conejos”/ “Rabbit House,” Casa Mariani-Teruggi (30th St. between 55th and 56th Sts.):**



Different areas of the house, now a museum of memory, showing the impacts of the brutal attack. In the patio, the clandestine press (*embute*), which was accessed by a sophisticated mechanism. 1. Front; 2. Internal wall; 3. Garage with car inside; 4. Inside the *embute* before reconstruction; 5. and 6. Entrance to the secret place, now uncovered; 7. Lemon tree and remains of the fireplace that disguised the entrance to the *embute*. Below, 8. Wall with pictures of the victims, including the baby Clara Anahí Mariani, whose grandmother is still looking for her.





**Last Stop: murals against silence and impunity – transformations of a street corner**



Mural on 53rd Ave. towards the corner of 9th St., which identifies the urban art group “Calle Tomada” (also known as “9 & 52”). Above, 1. The mural in 2009; below, 2. The same wall in 2011.



Below, corner (3.) and the side on 9th St.(4., 5., and 6.). Some of the paintings are almost destroyed, but still the denunciation of impunity remains.



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Walas, Guillermina. "Utopia, Memory, and the City: Testimonial Marks and Demands for Justice in La Plata, Argentina." *Layers of Memory and the Discourse of Human Rights: Artistic and Testimonial Practices in Latin America and Iberia*. Ed. Ana Forcinito. *Hispanic Issues On Line* (Spring 2014): 47-72. Web.

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