In Argentina, New Generations Remember

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For Argentines born after dictatorship, public encounters with the past help stitch together a memory of the country’s collective traumas.

March 24, 2021 marked the 45th anniversary of the coup that installed state terrorism in Argentina. The military junta that took power swiftly shut down Congress, outlawed unions, muzzled the press and, to eliminate political dissent, kidnapped, tortured, assassinated, and disappeared activists. Large sectors of society collaborated with, and benefited from, the civic-military-ecclesiastical dictatorship.

Buenos Aires is my hometown. As a Porteña, I observed firsthand what unfolded during seven devastating years from 1976 to 1983: 30,000 desaparecidos, a paralyzed, silenced, and militarized society, paramilitary gangs storming the city, people being kidnapped, and a whirl of rumors, indifferences, and complicities. I know what it is to lose friends and how it feels to be terrified. These are indelible memories for the witness generation. But what about those who were born later? How
are younger generations remembering that historical period?

For over three decades, I have been exploring the memory transmission and (re)construction process. My focus is the city of Buenos Aires, a territory hit hard by dictatorship-era violence and repression. Several questions guided me: What are the sources of knowledge about this past? What are the forums where memories are shared, debated, and written? What shapes does human rights memory activism take? How are young people encouraged to insert themselves in this historical process? I can say that how younger generations remember this past is a question with multiple answers. Several memory communities coexist. Different versions of the past, and the relevance ascribed to it, constantly change and link with evolving cultural and political environments.

In the early 1990s, a German artist began laying stumbling stones (stolpersteine in German), cobblestone-size cubes inscribed with the names of victims of Nazi extermination, in hundreds of locations. The idea was that people would stumble upon them and be confronted with the past. I propose delving into four memory landscapes—activism, postmemories, museums, and trials—as deployments of stumbling stones that people encounter and that present them with the events of state terrorism. These landscapes illustrate how young people are encouraged to confront this past and how this may shape memories and ways of remembering.

Landscape One: Human Rights Memory Activism

Two distinctive features characterize Argentina’s memory landscape: a commitment to accountability and over four decades of unyielding human rights memory activism—meaning an activism committed to remembering human rights violations with a focus on justice. Argentina, as scholar Kathryn Sikkink argues, is a “global human rights protagonist.” From the historical trials of the juntas in 1985 to the transnational Operation Condor trial that concluded in 2016, the country has led prosecutions in Latin America. These trials shape how society remembers, and they also explain the vitality of the movement and its success in integrating young people. The human rights memory activism landscape as a stumbling stone is characterized by the active coexistence of many fronts, a strong coalition of struggles, and the visibility of this multi-cause presence in political public spaces.

Human rights memory activists have explicit demands: truth, justice, and memory. Since the nullification in 2005 of the impunity laws that had shielded human rights abusers, trials have mushroomed and many genocidas (perpetrators of genocide) are serving life terms. Argentina advanced accountability as the only acceptable option. Reconciliation was not included in the agenda. Why promote reconciliation with genocidas who don’t show remorse or confess to their crimes? Or with repressors who keep hiding information, including regarding the whereabouts of hundreds of stolen children? Human rights organizations have shaped official memory policies. These range from the conversion of former torture and extermination centers into memorial spaces and museums to national commemorations, such as the national Day of Remembrance for Truth and Justice on March 24, the anniversary of the coup.

Human rights memory activism took center stage in 1977 when the Madres de Plaza de Mayo emerged in the midst of brutal repression to look for their disappeared children. Some Madres searched for their 500 stolen grandchildren and became the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo. They were joined in 1995 by H.I.J.O.S., the daughters and sons of the disappeared. From day one, activists established the streets and public places as the sites of their struggle. Taking to the streets became a powerful communication tool to denounce the state, make demands, educate the public, recruit supporters, and generate action.

The intergenerational links between activists, and how they complement each other, are crucial to their potential influence on society. H.I.J.O.S. has been key in building support among its members’ generational
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peers. The Abuelas add layers of interactions across generations. As of today, 130 grandchildren, now in their early 40s, have been recuperated. The search continues. The Abuelas’ media strategies target young people and include events such as concerts, sports competitions, and Teatro X la Identidad, an annual cycle of free performances launched in 2000. Each performance that I have attended was sold out and packed with young people. Overall, activists have generated multiple spaces and networks for intra and intergenerational encounters. There are always young people in marches and demonstrations. H.I.J.O.S. joins the Madres and Abuelas and their supporters follow. This strengthens a movement that massively takes to the streets to challenge any setback in progress towards accountability, relentlessly reminding society that impunity is not an option.

A main component of human rights memory activism is its many fronts, which link past and present injustices. For instance, the Madres support the right to legal, safe, and free abortion and wrap around their wrists the green scarf symbolizing this demand. Ni Una Menos, the grassroots feminist movement for women’s rights and against gender violence and femicide, supports many other human rights causes and sides with the Madres. These interactions are essential to engage young people. It is not only about what happened four decades ago but about what’s happening now. These connections have encouraged and energized new generations of activists in a society devastated and paralyzed by brutal repression.

Landscape Two: Postmemories, the Younger Generations

While there is one dictatorship/witness generation that observed firsthand what unfolded under state terrorism, there are multiple post-dictatorship generations that have a mediated knowledge of it. In 1998, 15 years after the commencement of civilian rule, I explored the postmemories of the generation born during the dictatorship. Scholar Marianne Hirsch defines these memories as second-generation memories, which are the memories of the children of survivors of collective trauma and are based on stories they were told and images they have seen. As stumbling stones, the postmemories landscape points to the effects of trans and intergenerational dialogue, education, and the media that create encounters to stumble upon this past.

I talked to young people who hadn’t been directly affected by the repression and whose postmemories were based on what their elders, teachers, and the media had told them. The media, including film and popular music, were key information sources.
powerful (hi)story tellers “bringing back” the dictatorship and creating realms for reflection and discussion of contemporary politics. Everybody knew what had happened but not why. Knowledge was uneven and depended on what had been talked about or silenced within individuals’ circles. There were different versions of this past and ways of coping with its legacy. We couldn’t generalize about this generation’s memories. There were, however, common grounds: a persistence of fears and social silences, condemnation of the dictatorship’s crimes, criticism of how little young people had been told and taught about this past, and, in spite of the rampant impunity at the time, a belief in the rule of law and hope for justice.

What do we know about the younger post-dictatorship generations, today’s teenagers or those in their 20s? Throughout the years, I kept observing and listening to young people. I participate in marches and events, visit memorial museums and spaces, attend trials, conduct interviews, and engage in informal conversations. In trying to understand how young people make sense of that historical period, I look at official memory policies, activists’ campaigns, and the points of encounter between activists and non-activists. How do they interact, antagonize, and dialogue? How do these exchanges shape memories?

I have found that this past’s relevance continues to vary depending with whom you talk. Differences in memories’ content and attitudes about state terrorism are always present. Knowledge is uneven and ignorance is widespread within groups not linked with activists. I also noted that encounters with this past make an impact, generate empathy, and trigger dialogue. That was the case with Televisión X la Identidad, a successful cycle of fictional representations of real cases of stolen babies commemorating the Abuelas’ 30th anniversary. During my conversations with high schoolers, I heard reactions like: “In addition to giving a real testimony, it really opens your mind,” and “We finished watching it with my mom, we dried our tears, and we went to sleep.”

Renowned artists, musicians, actors, filmmakers, and celebrities—including sports stars like the late football icon Diego Maradona—continue to support the human rights memory movement. This follows a tradition that was part of the cultural landscape when human rights took center stage. The movement shapes and consolidates a memory public sphere populated by influential opinion leaders respected by young generations.

Landscape Three: Memorial Museums and Spaces

In Buenos Aires, the Escuela de Suboficiales de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA) stands in the memory landscape as an obstinate reminder of mass human rights violations. During the dictatorship, ESMA functioned as a torture and extermination center, and fewer than 200 of the approximately 5,000 people taken there survived. Some were assassinated and their bodies incinerated or dumped into clandestine unmarked graves. Others were thrown alive into the ocean during the “death flights.” A few bodies have been recovered.

Today, the 35-building compound that covers 17 square hectares has become the Espacio Memoria y Derechos Humanos ex-ESMA. Housing many institutions, it is an environment where multiple cultural and educational activities take place, such as screenings, concerts, and seminars. Casa de la Militancia, the H.I.J.O.S. headquarters, hosts multiple events and offers free educational programs, such as high school diplomas and certifications in sports journalism. A recent exhibit of printers’ collectives at the Cuatro Columnas building showcased posters with illustrations and slogans from current struggles, such as movements against gender-based violence, including homages to murdered activists Berta Cáceres and Marielle Franco as well as demands for abortion rights. One read, “Quiero que me saquen esto que me puso adentro el viejo” (I want them to take out this [thing] the old man put inside me), capturing how an 11-year-old girl who had been raped asked for an abortion.
The memorial museums and spaces landscape integrates several initiatives. The spaces of ESMA offer the possibility of stumbling upon the past, irrespective of the intention for visiting the compound, be it the memory museum, a screening, or a seminar.

The space of memory at the Casino de Oficiales, the headquarters of the repression, opened to the general public in 2007. It was subsequently remodeled and, since 2015, houses the Museo Sitio de Memoria ESMA. It was designed with younger generations in mind, an audience mainly comprised of those who didn’t directly experience state terrorism, who have more distance from the events and less contact with those who lived it. The idea was to develop strategies to communicate with young people through a dynamic exhibit of targeted content and language. Panels, screens, and audio recordings were installed throughout the building. Large monitors show videos providing historical information, some of them in a fast-paced style accompanied by a loud soundtrack. The concern about future generations included the need to consider changes in the evolving political and cultural contexts.

Since 2007, I have periodically toured ESMA and observed visitors’ interactions with the site, including what they say, ask, and write in the visitor books.

Comments in the visitor books reflect their feelings, ranging from questioning their elders for how little they knew about this past to group statements praising memory policies.
Visitors have always included young people and their numbers have increased over the years, including through visits by high school and college students. The initiatives developed by educational institutions, student organizations, church groups, and neighborhood associations that bring young people to ESMA are essential to strengthen the museum’s role in the memory process.

The site is powerful, and its impact on visitors is evident. I have seen young people visibly moved—watching videos, reading signs, observing in silence, whispering to their friends, and comforting each other with a hug. Comments in the visitor books reflect their feelings, ranging from questioning their elders for how little they knew about this past to group statements praising memory policies. “I really liked it and the truth is I felt the history,” one visitor wrote. “We didn’t know anything and today we learned a lot,” and “Thank you for teaching me what my teachers couldn’t,” wrote others.

**Landscape Four: Trials for Crimes Against Humanity**

The Argentine trials are public spaces for the ongoing writing of memory, arenas for memory battles, and forums where new knowledge and perspectives on state terrorism continually emerge. The trials are public, and anyone can attend and witness these proceedings firsthand. Survivors’ testimonies offer new insights into the human rights violations committed and how the repressive apparatus worked. Listening to those who suffered and witnessed atrocities transports us back to the scenes of the crimes. What unfolds at the hearings broadens our understanding of society’s complicity, including the involvement of corporations and the Catholic hierarchy. Attending the hearings allows younger generations to be part of a historical process and judge what their elders did. As stumbling stones, the trials landscape allows younger generations to confront a past about which they may know very little. It allows them to engage in the accountability process, which is at the core of human rights memory activism.

Human rights organizations encourage society’s participation. Their call is for everybody to be there. As the H.I.J.O.S.’s slogan says: “Los juzga un tribunal, los condenamos todos” (A court judges them, we all condemn them). To increase young people’s involvement, educators developed several initiatives, such as Sociales en los Juicios, a program at the University of Buenos Aires. Students spend a full day in the courthouse, witness the proceedings, and interview someone linked to the trial, such as a survivor, relative, or witness. The goal is to engage students in the accountability process with an activity pedagogically linked to their fields of study. Their accounts about the experience, compiled in the blog Diario del Juicio, combine emotional feelings with critical analysis of the proceedings and underscore the political act of bearing witness.

I attended hearings when this program was implemented between 2010 and 2012. I observed these students arriving very early and waiting for the courtroom to open, timidly observing other attendees, murmuring among themselves, and asking questions. I’ve been approached by some students looking for someone to interview. This generated conversations about why they were there, their observations, and their feelings about the experience, including the difference between having knowledge about the events and hearing about them from the witnesses or listening to the repressors’ inexcusable defenses. Judging from what I experienced and observed, attending the hearings seems to be a transformative experience. I have seen the memory landscapes keep multiplying and there’s one consistent and unifying goal: justice as the only acceptable outcome.
impact on these students faces, changed when they leave the courtroom after a long day.

**A Conglomerate of Memory Landscapes**

For essayist Ilan Stavans, the whole city of Buenos Aires is a “conglomerate of memorials.” He was referring to the proliferation of memorialization initiatives in the aftermath of state terrorism, including the monuments, murals, and the identification of buildings that housed torture centers. Museums, trials, marches, and other events add to what we could call a conglomerate of memory landscapes that support and complement each other. Memory landscapes keep multiplying and there’s one consistent and unifying goal: justice as the only acceptable outcome.

“Los pibes saben poco y nada” (The kids know next to nothing) is a recurrent comment from members of the witness generation. The “pibes” ignore what they weren’t told. However, this past’s presence in the public sphere is unavoidable. New information keeps emerging, and involving younger generations is at the core of many memory initiatives. Human rights memory activists are relentless. During the last year, H.I.J.O.S. celebrated its 25th anniversary of multi-faceted activism, including ongoing escraches, their campaigns to uncover and publicly shame assassins and torturers. And in recent years, inspiring young women activists led the massive mobilizations for the legalization of abortion, successfully winning this demand at the end of 2020.

Last year, when the pandemic “locked” people inside their homes, activists resorted to their creativity to commemorate the Day of Remembrance for Truth and Justice on March 24. They digitally took to the streets through two projects. First, a pañuelazo covered the city with the Madres’ iconic kerchief. Scarves of all sizes and materials adorned windows, fences, doors, and banners. Second, a proyectorazo projected images and videos on buildings. The initiative simultaneously reproduced and distributed images on social media, and people from all ages got involved. Activists invaded neighborhoods and generated encounters with the “pibes.” These interconnections and interactions open spaces where memories can be transmitted and written.

It’s difficult to assess the degree to which memory landscapes impact how young Argentines remember this past. They do perform as stumbling stones scattered throughout the city that will continue to confront young people.

One day in January 2020, I’m leaving the Museo Sitio de Memoria ESMA, slowly walking toward the compound’s exit. Close to me walks a very tall man. I wonder if he is a basketball player. He suddenly turns to me and says: “Fuerte!” (Powerful!). I see his tearful eyes and can read the emotions in his face. We start talking. It’s his first visit. I tell him that I’ve been there many times, but the impact doesn’t diminish—it’s always intense. He is 35 years old, lives just five blocks away, and today decided to come. He cannot believe that he knew so little about what he just learned. He is ashamed of his ignorance, for not having visited ESMA before. I assure him that he shouldn’t be ashamed; it’s important that he came and may now share his experience. He is already sharing; he hasn’t stop texting friends during the visit.

We say goodbye. I keep walking, asking myself, “Why did he know so little?” I think about the relevance of memory landscapes and the transformative experiences they may trigger. Forty-five years after the coup, young people keep stumbling upon this past.

Susana Kaiser is Professor Emerita at the University of San Francisco. Her research focuses on communication, memory, and human rights in Argentina. She has published about young people’s memories of state terrorism, media campaigns developed by relatives of desaparecidos, trials for crimes against humanity, and other issues related to memory.