

# CONCEALING GOD: HOW ARGENTINE WOMEN POLITICAL PRISONERS PERFORMED A COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

IN CONVERSATION WITH GRACIELA, CARMEN, AND LILIANA ORTIZ, MIRTA CLARA, MARÍA DEL CARMEN OVALLE, BLANCA BECHER, ESTELA CERES-  
SETO, SILVIA HORENS, MARÍA DEL CARMEN SILLATO, ALICIA KOZAMEH,  
VIVIANA BEGUÁN, IRENE MARTÍNEZ, ELENA SEVILLA, MARTHA RAMOS,  
SILVIA ONTIVEROS, PATRICIA TRABA, ISABEL ECKERL, MABEL FERNÁNDEZ,  
AND OTHER FORMER POLITICAL PRISONERS.

ALICIA PARTNOY

*Reading prison writings must in turn demand the corresponding activist counterapproach to that of passivity, aesthetic gratification, and the pleasures of consumption.*

—Barbara Harlow

*Primero soy penitenciario, segundo Capellan, tercero soy sacerdote.*

[I am first and foremost a penitentiary officer, second, I am a chaplain, and third a priest.]

—Hugo Bellavigna

*Nosotras queremos contar cómo sobrevivimos con alegría y en conjunto.*

[We want to tell how we survived with joy and collectively.]

—Blanca Becher (qtd. in Pertot)

## NOSOTRAS

We were survivors of secret detention camps and torture centers. We had witnessed the torments endured by our parents, siblings, friends, comrades, and children. We were at the hands of the military dictatorship ruling our

country since March 1976. We often feared our release more than our incarceration, since some had “disappeared” after allegedly being set free.

On a warm summer night, we climbed on each other’s shoulders to take a peek at the moon over Buenos Aires, and to hear the music from the concert hall across the street. On a gloomy fall day we desperately beat our tin water cups against the cell bars, to let the neighbors know that our compañera Alicia País had died due to medical malpractice. We were often punished with isolation: no visiting rights, no books, no letters, and no recess, as in March 1978 when we denounced the “massacre of the mattresses.” That day, we had written hundreds of letters to prison authorities confronting them for letting social prisoners burn alive after a mutiny inside that facility.

We were the women political prisoners of Villa Devoto. Most of us were highly politicized, and despite the fact that even in torture sessions many managed to deny any ideological affiliation, our jailers were aware of our beliefs, and used them to generate unrest and divisions. Anticolonial, anti-imperialist, and with deep roots in the Liberation Theology movement, through solidarity we resisted destruction. We were convinced that to fight for a national—or international—social liberation project was the right course of action against the dictatorship.

We had given birth shackled and after torture sessions, like María del Carmen Sillato, author of *Diálogos de amor contra el silencio: Memorias de prisión, sueños de libertad*. Some had learned in captivity about the disappearance of their children, like Carmen Cornes, who told her story to Beatriz López in *Hasta la victoria siempre . . . : Testimonio de Carmen Cornes, emigrante gallega y militante de la vida*. Others, including Alicia Kozameh, Margarita Drago, and Graciela Lo Prete had been arrested and tortured under the rule of President María Estela Martínez de Perón, while the military coup was in gestation. Kozameh authored *Pasos bajo el agua | Steps under Water: A Novel*; Drago published *Fragmentos de la Memoria: Recuerdos de una experiencia carcelaria (1975–1980) | Memory Tracks: Fragments from Prison (1975–1980)*; and Lo Prete’s *Memorias de una presa política* was published posthumously, under her prison alias La Lopre, after her suicide. Sillato, Cornes, Kozameh, Drago, and Lo Prete chronicle life in Villa Devoto, a high-security facility located in a peaceful neighborhood of Buenos Aires. *Nosotras, presas políticas, 1974–1983* [We, Women Political Prisoners] is our first collective book.

In 1999, former prisoner Mariana Crespo started the project that would culminate in the 2006 publication of *Nosotras*. With introductory essays contextualizing each chapter historically and politically, and additional documentation in a CD, *Nosotras* provides a deep insight into the lives and

beliefs of the over 1,200 women who spent years in detention. This unique book, the collective work of 112 former Villa Devoto political prisoners, includes letters, writings, and illustrations produced in captivity, and personal narratives written afterwards. *Nosotras* is dedicated “to Mariana (Crespo) and the other dear compañeras who did not see this dream come to reality” (8).<sup>1</sup>

Now that the book has been in the world for seven years, and the authors have coordinated multiple presentations, readings, and interviews to disseminate it and educate the population about their role in the resistance movement, this essay joins in this collective effort to address our shared history. As a poet and *testimonio* scholar, I am trained to mine the silences in texts. Engaging in alternative research practices, I analyze the correlation between the religious and political aspects of the collective identity performed in this polyphonic<sup>2</sup> volume. Written in many voices that seek to inscribe women’s political participation in Argentina’s national liberation movement, *Nosotras* tiptoes around a pivotal element in that struggle: a religious praxis anchored in Liberation Theology.<sup>3</sup> In conversation with several authors and other former political prisoners, and through close readings, I explore the possible reasons for that silence.

My initial research questions had been driven by a socio-semiotic framework and some personal prison experiences around censorship. I remembered that the Villa Devoto authorities paid very close attention to any signs of emotional weakness in our letters. When detected, the jailers—always invested in our psychological destruction—increased our vulnerability with punishments ranging from cutting our one hour outdoors recess to sending us to isolation. We were then careful when writing about our state of mind or spiritual needs,<sup>4</sup> since we soon realized that religion could easily become a tool for oppression.

As an insider/outsider, an atheist former Villa Devoto prisoner who did not directly participate in the book project, I naturally embrace the activist counterapproach that Barbara Harlow proposes when reading prison writings. Like most testimonial texts, *Nosotras* calls for exercising a counterapproach that, in line with Harlow’s words, I describe as co/labor/active.

My co/labor/action with the authors of *Nosotras* results in the application of a non-hierarchical model of research, and the implementation of an action component.<sup>5</sup> The actions we might consider around this particular article range from taking legal steps against those who ran the Villa Devoto prison, to denouncing the role the recently anointed Pope, Argentine Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, played in silencing and isolating those around him involved in the liberation theology movement. While his selection as Pope came as a surprise

as I was finishing this article, the controversy surrounding his actions is emblematic of the dramatic division in the Argentine Catholic church during the 1970s. That division had been experienced by many political prisoners, who identified with the progressive wing of the church, the one that moved to shanty towns, worked in factories, and deeply believed in what was then called “the option for the poor.”

In the years previous to the military coup, my dearest friends—several of whom were kidnapped, killed, and assassinated by the dictatorship—were active in the Liberation Theology movement. Moreover, many Villa Devoto *compañeras* had, like Mariana Crespo, aligned themselves with that progressive sector of the Catholic church. These experiences prompted me to question why the strong collective identity performed in *Nosotras* barely includes the religious aspect. Male political prisoners, on the other hand, easily discussed religious practices in their book *Del otro lado de la mirilla*, produced under strikingly similar circumstances by 150 former political prisoners in Argentina (Asociación Civil).<sup>6</sup>

In 2010, searching for answers to these research questions, and exercising a co/labor/active, non-hierarchical approach, I invited *Nosotras* authors to share the podium and talk about their work at the book launching for *Venganza de la manzana/Revenge of the Apple*. My book was being published for the first time in Argentina, finally breaking its eighteen years of exile. In those days, I also conducted five group discussions. At one of them, with my former cellmate Liliana Ortiz and her sisters Graciela and Carmen, who used to “live” in the cell next door, we concluded that the concealment of religious beliefs and practices, a survival tactic when writing to our relatives from prison, had become an empowerment strategy while crafting the book. It soon was obvious to us that the force driving the whole project had been the performance of an empowering collective identity.

If Catholic religious practices, controlled by prison authorities, were essentially disempowering, some political negotiations between the authors would be in order to achieve the goal of creating a collective identity. I will elaborate later about my reluctance to disclose further the dynamics driving those negotiations. Nonetheless, my conversations with several authors helped me identify some reasons for the scarce references to religious beliefs connected to their revolutionary practices. Those reasons originate in the conditions surrounding the completion of *Nosotras*, from the heavily censored (and self-censored) letters and prison notebooks,<sup>7</sup> to the complex post-dictatorial editorial process involving women with diverse—and at times conflicting—political approaches. The exposure of the prison priest in the book, and his public denunciation afterwards, serve as a unifying element. Father

Hugo Bellavigna, whom we nicknamed San Fachón (Saint Big Fascist) was emblematic of a messianic military dictatorship.<sup>8</sup> Viviana Beguán, who in prison was our representative before the authorities, states, “Un personaje que complementaba las tareas de inteligencia con verdadera perseverancia, era el sacerdote Hugo Mario Bellavigna. Su papel fue importante.” [One character that complemented intelligence work with true perseverance was the priest Hugo Mario Bellavigna. His role was an important one.] I read this and other comments about Villa Devoto’s priest in a survey compiled by former prisoner Mirta Clara for journalist Horacio Verbitsky, who used them as sources for an article on Hugo Bellavigna, titled “San Fachón.”

In the Buenos Aires winter of 2010, I sat across a cafe table from Blanca Becher, another former prisoner quoted in that survey and subsequent article. I spoke with her and other *compañeras* about my research. Becher, a fine scholar and sharp critic of cultural imperialism, asked me challenging questions, seeking to understand my project’s relevance and approach. I had just met her, and—to complicate the picture—she was aware that I had not contributed to *Nosotras*. My multiple excuses, I told the group, had been my distance from Argentina, my priority, as one of few outspoken survivors from the Little School secret detention camp, to denounce the crimes committed there, and my difficulties with the methodology adopted by the anthropologists involved in the initial steps of the book. Then I proceeded to share with my former prison mates something that had taken me years to realize: The real reason for my reluctance to contribute to *Nosotras* was my anguish when confronted with the letters I had written to my little girl from prison. I had not been ready back in 1999, when their project started, to revisit those letters. Although my research for this essay still tiptoes around the traumatic separation from our children, it allows me to search for ways to deal with that pain at least on an intellectual level, through the analysis of prison life-writings.

These works, as Miriam Fuchs reminds us with reference to Caren Kaplan, become “‘counter law or *out-law*’ writing, which breaks the ‘most obvious rules of genre’ and recasts itself to better serve the geopolitical cause of the writer” (32). Accordingly, like *Nosotras*, this essay simultaneously follows and breaks the rules that govern writing for social studies, history, oral history, poetry, letters, human rights reporting, and journalism. In doing so, these texts recast themselves beyond established genres of academic and creative writing to further several geopolitical causes: to recover the prisoners’ collective history, to denounce living conditions in Villa Devoto, and to highlight the complicity of the Catholic Church representative in psychological warfare against women political prisoners in Argentina.

Expanding upon Palestinian activist and writer Hanan Ashrawi's argument that "[t]he first person singular [is] no longer the domain of the masculine" (qtd. in Moore-Gilbert 66), the women formerly imprisoned in Villa Devoto advance the first person plural to perform an empowering collective identity in *Nosotras*.<sup>9</sup> While the dictatorship aimed to isolate and destroy us by squashing any vestiges of solidarity, we resisted by holding on to the collective spirit. Viviana Beguán,<sup>10</sup> who took a leadership role in drafting the book after Crespo's untimely death, gives us a glimpse into its initial steps: "Allí entonces se definió una cuestión que para mí me parece fundamental y que con Mariana no pudimos verlo porque las charlas estaban más al inicio, esto es que el verbo de escritura fuera la primera persona del plural '*nosotras*,' como había sido nuestro pensamiento y lucha política ideológica en la cárcel" [Then, (I realized) something central for me, something we had not envisioned with Mariana in our early discussions, that the verbal form to write had to be the first person plural 'we,' the same that had shaped our thinking and our political and ideological struggle in prison].

In *Barred: Women, Writing, and Political Detention*, Harlow sees in the texts she studies that "[t]he 'structural constraints' of what has often been referred to as the double colonization of many Third World women, colonized by a traditional patriarchy as well as by metropolitan imperialist interests, are being reconstituted in Cornel West's formulation (1988) as 'conjunctural opportunities'" (33). The authors of *Nosotras* apply the same resistance strategy when they choose not to concentrate on the women's religious beliefs and practices. Instead, through abundant references to him, they denounce the repressive actions of Hugo Bellavigna, the prison priest. His patriarchal and pro-dictatorial practices corresponded with the official position of the Catholic Church in Argentina. It is not merely coincidence that Horacio Verbitsky, who back in 2006 wrote the first exposé of the priest and who has written extensively about the complicity of Church and dictatorship, has emerged as the most visible critic of Pope Francis's role in the 1970s. The journalist reports that the coup leader General Videla revealed in recent interviews conducted in prison "que el ex nuncio apostólico Pio Laghi, el ex presidente de la Iglesia Católica de la Argentina, Raúl Primatesta, y otros obispos de la Conferencia Episcopal asesoraron a su gobiernno sobre la forma de manejar la situación delas personas detenidas-desaparecidas. Según Videla la Iglesia 'ofreció sus buenos oficios'..." ["that the former papal nuncio Pio Laghi, the former president of the Argentine Catholic Church Raul Primatesta, and other bishops . . . advised his government on the way to handle the situation of the disappeared people in captivity. According to Videla, the Church 'offered its good services' . . ."] ("Buenos oficios"). It is now known to the

international community that, with the exception of a few bishops who were killed or persecuted, high officials within the Catholic Church of Argentina blessed the military junta presided over by Videla with the mission to secure power, eliminate the opposition, and kidnap its children (see Goni). Today, one of the most serious accusations against Pope Francis is his denial in court of any knowledge about the appropriation of our children, although one of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Alicia de la Cuadra, had personally begged him back in 1977 to help her locate her granddaughter, born in a concentration camp (see Aranguren). In 1988, Emilio Mignone, a lawyer whose daughter was a disappeared catechist, published a book detailing the complicity of the Church with the dictatorship, and documenting the disappearances and assassinations of those involved in the Liberation Theology Movement. Verbitsky's extensive research, found particularly in his book *El Silencio* and a recent article "Cambio de piel," includes Mignone's sources and elaborates on Francis's role.

These current events, and the public discussions around them, lend new relevance to the study of *Nosotras*. When reading this book one must realize that the delicate act of balancing our physical and psychological risks with our need to resist the regime's annihilation campaign left traces in our writing. In conditions of political imprisonment, works that perform resistance bear the marks of trauma that tend to make them more powerful as tools for denunciation. We are here in the presence of what Ben Olguín, in his analysis of Zapatista testimonial practices, has described as the reader's need for a "pre-hermeneutic acceptance of strategic silences." Olguín notes that this is "similar to Sommer's prescription for a 'hermeneutic of solidarity' by demanding that readers read the testimonio . . . not so much through its testimonial utterances, but through the lack thereof" (153). English-speaking scholars will at this point have to negotiate their way through the empty spaces in this essay to figure out why silence becomes the most empowering of strategies. There are, following Doris Sommer, secrets that it will not serve any purpose to reveal at this point. In addition there is, following Olguín, the need to "invert the old testimonial teleology of telling by simultaneously soliciting information and knowledge—or rather, *revelation*—from *testimonio's* first world and metropolitan third world readerships" (150). Therefore, even when our working hypothesis is that the concealment of our religious beliefs enables the performance of an empowering collective identity in *Nosotras*, we seek a way for testimonial subjects to do research on our own practices that respects the silences in the texts and resists the interrogations of prevailing interpretive approaches.



Villa Devoto Prison. Photo by Sara Kozameh (used by permission).

### TO DESCRIBE A ROADMAP OF SORTS

Leigh Gilmore argues that “women’s self-representation describes territory that is largely unmarked, indeed unrecognizable, given traditional maps of genre and periodization” (5). Since “traditional maps of genre,” which I consider prescriptive in nature, can’t help us unpack the strategies used to construct the collective identity in *Nosotras*, we might adopt the more descriptive initial approach evoked by Jeanette Winterson’s question, “But does it matter if the place cannot be mapped as long as I can still describe it?”<sup>11</sup>

This place, this “original event,” as sociologist Inés Izaguirre calls *Nosotras* in her introduction (17), is divided into nine chapters. All of them except for the first (“1974/75”) cover one year of life inside and outside the Villa Devoto prison. The last one is 1983, when a democratic government was elected and the few remaining political prisoners were transferred to a penitentiary in the outskirts of Buenos Aires. In the book’s introduction, Izaguirre writes, “y aunque ha habido otros militantes que narraron sus experiencias carcelarias, y lo hicieron en conjunto, no existe otro trabajo donde sea posible recorrer 10 años de historia argentina desde adentro de los muros de la cárcel” (18)<sup>12</sup> [even when other political activists narrated their prison experiences and did it as a group, there is no other work that enables us to travel through ten years of Argentine history from inside prison walls].



In *Nosotras*, the former prisoners' collective identity is anchored in the country's history. Every chapter starts with a short essay titled "Afuera" [Outside], providing a political and historical context to the testimonial texts that describe life inside the prison in that particular year. Each chapter then continues painting a picture of our reality in Villa Devoto through drawings sent to our children, excerpts from letters and prison notebooks, poems, reports, political analysis, and current narratives in which different women recall the events. The book ends with a nine page appendix of decrees and regulations issued by authorities for maximum security prisons for political detainees from 1974 to 1980.<sup>13</sup> The accompanying CD includes several hundred letters from prison, military documents addressing our situation, and photos of Villa Devoto recently taken by Alicia Kozameh's daughter, Sara. This profusion of discourses complicates and enriches the self representation of the authors. This need to be seen as multifaceted, politicized human beings with an important role in the country's history was already recorded in 2002, by historian Margaret Crahan. She conducted extensive interviews with women former political prisoners in Buenos Aires, concluding that they "felt that their history has not been accurately recorded to date for, as one of them phrased it 'we are always represented as suffering—the authors are presenting their vision—not our reality'" (19).

The intention to write that accurate history is highlighted in *Nosotras*'s preface: "Mariana Crespo, nuestra entrañable compañera, tuvo la idea de escribir nuestra historia. Idea que fue tomada, en ese momento, por Darío Olmo, perteneciente al Equipo de Antropólogos Forenses (EAF), y por todas nosotras" (23) [Mariana Crespo, our beloved compañera, had the idea of writing our history. That idea was embraced, at that moment by Darío Olmo, who belonged to the Forensic Anthropology Team, and by all of us]. In a private e-mail, Viviana Beguán recalls this history:

Más o menos en el año 1998, desde antropólogos, Darío Olmo, convocó a algunas de nosotras, Mariana, la Negra Mena, Marta Celano, yo, entre otras, para que le narráramos nuestra vivencia en la cárcel ya que por los testimonios que habían tomado se evidenciaba una experiencia colectiva que tenía una gran importancia para ellos. Allí fuimos y quedamos en contacto con ellos; Mariana venía de Europa y se había entrevistado con un sobreviviente de los campos de concentración nazis que le manifestó la importancia de la memoria, de escribir de contar, tal es así que Mariana inclusive nos decía que era importante realizar una biografía de cada una, para que quedara de testimonio de nuestras vidas. Ella tomó la propuesta y nos convocó para escribir el libro. . . . Con Mariana diseñamos el esquema general, cartas y contexto, yo quedé a cargo del contexto y Mariana se haría cargo de la recolección de cartas y el trabajo sobre ellas, pero la muerte la sorprendió cuando el proyecto recién empezaba.

[Around the year 1998, Darío Olmo, from the anthropologists, invited some of us, Mariana, Negra Mena, Marta Celano, myself and others, to tell him about our prison experiences, since from the testimonials they had collected, they could detect a collective experience that was, for them, of great importance. We went and kept in touch with them (the anthropologists); Mariana had just returned from Europe, where she had interviewed a survivor from the Nazi concentration camps who had spoken to her about the importance of memory, of writing, of telling, and because of that Mariana even said that it was important to write a biography of each of us, to leave a testimony of our lives. She took the proposal into her own hands and called a meeting to write the book. . . . We designed with her a general outline, letters and context. I was left in charge of the context and Mariana would collect the letters and centralize the work on them, but death caught her by surprise when the project had just begun.]

Even though Mariana Crespo and many others embraced the tenets of the Liberation Theology movement, the religious mystique that often sustains people under extreme hardship is not present in the pages of *Nosotras*. That mystique is, however, more noticeable in some letters included in the CD. For example, in a missive to her father, on September 19, 1976, Mariana Crespo wrote, “si sentimos el dolor y el sufrimiento, transformado en fuerza significa voluntad, decisión de crecer de entregarnos de unirnos y solidarizarnos con aquel que también sufre. Y hoy en este momento de la historia . . . todo esto no es teoría ni lindas palabras sino que es la realidad dura de un país, de un mundo que busca sin tregua la paz que será el fruto seguro de una lucha que aún con muchas lágrimas triunfará porque el Amor determina la victoria” (*Nosotras* CD) [if we feel pain and suffering and transform them into strength, that means willpower, a decision to grow and to give of ourselves, to join in solidarity with those who suffer too. And today, in this moment in history . . . all this is not just theory and nice words but a hard reality for our country, for a world that searches without respite for a peace that will be the fruit of a struggle that even with many tears will succeed because Love determines victory].

Let us remember that Argentina is a predominantly Catholic country,<sup>14</sup> and that young people with deep roots in the Liberation Theology movement were extremely active in the movement for social change targeted by the military dictatorship. Many, like Mariana Crespo, had conducted political work in the shanty towns,<sup>15</sup> under the leadership of priests active in the movement of Priests for the Third World,<sup>16</sup> whose position, as I have mentioned, radically diverged from the official position of the national Catholic Church. In the preface to *Nosotras* (“Who We Were”) we can detect language from the Liberation Theology movement being used to explain our revolutionary inspiration: “Era el hombre nuevo [*sic*], ejemplo de honestidad y entrega. . . . Y así nos iniciamos en política” [it was the New Man (*sic*), an example of honesty and dedication to a cause. . . . And that is how we started our political

involvement]. Our struggle is also placed within an international and historical context. Accordingly, our fight was “la continuidad de experiencias lejanas, la vietnamita de Giap y su paciencia, la China de Mao y su guerra prolongada, la bolchevique con Lenin, la lucha contra el colonialismo francés en Argelia o la del pueblo palestino y su Organización para la Liberación de Palestina” (30) [the continuation of far-away experiences, the Vietnamese with Giap and its patience, the Chinese with Mao and its prolonged war, the Bolshevik with Lenin, the struggle against French Colonialism in Algeria, or the one of the Palestinian people and its Palestine Liberation Organization].

The scarcity of female political figures listed in that preface (Evita, Rosa Luxemburg, and Alicia Moreau de Justo are briefly mentioned) reminds us of Harlow’s observation about the double, and I would add perhaps triple, colonization of women.<sup>17</sup> The tension is dismantled in these few collectively written words included in the preface, which summarize our growth and identity building process, and highlight grassroots Christian practices as part of that identity:

minutos, horas y días entregados a esta forma de concebir la vida hicieron que  
 nos fuésemos convirtiendo en  
 mujeres libres, comprometidas, pensantes,  
 mujeres militantes sindicalistas,  
 mujeres militantes cristianas,  
 mujeres militantes políticas,  
 mujeres militantes revolucionarias. (31)<sup>18</sup>

[minutes, hours, and days devoted to this way of conceiving life made us gradually  
 turn into  
 free, committed, thinking women,  
 women fighting in trade unions,  
 women fighting as Christians,  
 women fighting politically,  
 women fighting for the revolution.]

These words stand out since they follow poetry conventions.<sup>19</sup> The self-representation privileged in this book targets a variety of audiences with a performance of our collective identity that is simultaneously political and artistic. *Nosotras, presas políticas* seeks to recover our agency lost to imprisonment, and in doing so the book challenges the silencing of our historic role as women who refused to submit to the military junta’s oppression. To do so, the political elements of our identity are magnified, beginning with the book’s gendered and collective title. *Nosotras* refers, though not so prominently, to many aspects of our identity, and particularly our role as mothers, teachers, and wives or companions of militant men—in sum, the roles that society tends

to assign women. Despite the variety of genres included in *Nosotras*, and following Harlow's observations about prison writings, the book "contradicts another focus peculiar to twentieth century literary developments . . . in the Western academy, and that is the self-absorbed, self-reflective obsession with the . . . unreliability of language."<sup>20</sup> It seems common sense that prison letters, heavily censored in nature, should include copious references to the impossibility of naming. Yet, in *Nosotras*, those references are scarce. It is not surprising, however—because reflections on self-referentiality often come after the events denounced took place—to read Izaguirre's comment in her introduction, "¿Cómo llamaremos, después de la lectura del libro, al capellán penitenciario Bellavigna que se define 'primero penitenciario antes que sacerdote?'" (19) [After reading this book, what will we call the penitentiary chaplain, Bellavigna, who defines himself first as a penitentiary officer, then as a priest?]. That was not an agonizing problem for us, political prisoners: We called him "San Fachón." We did this naturally, as illustrated in *Nosotras* through the experience of a prisoner's mother, who, convinced that it was the priest's real name, sent a letter to him addressed, "To the Priest of the Villa Devoto Prison, San Fachón." This generated Bellavigna's outrage, which he vented, screaming at the women during mass while shaking the envelope in front of their amused eyes and their hardly contained laughter (275).

Letters to prison authorities and high-ranking government officials were often the only resource available to our relatives for protesting our illegal and harsh incarceration. Our own letters, in turn, sought to reassure them we were all right while simultaneously denouncing our real condition. This results in a tension that we can easily perceive when rereading our correspondence today. Those letters are, however, invaluable documentation. *Nosotras*'s writing process heavily relied on them. "Se tipearon cerca de dos mil cuatrocientas cartas" [we typed more than twenty-four hundred letters], Beguán reported in a press interview ("Presentación"). From those, 500 complete letters are included in the CD that accompanies the book. The fact that 2,400 letters were harvested for the book from the many hundreds in the possession of each of the 120 authors, and that in turn, 500 were chosen to be part of the CD, sheds light on the complexities of the editorial process and the careful selection conducted by the collective.

For us, prisoners in Villa Devoto, the missives were limited to three two-pagers per week, addressed to relatives whose connection to us had been dutifully documented for the prison authorities. Every letter received, a lifeline for the recipient and those around her, gave us a glimpse at the outside world. We read them over and over, as precious tools to support and understand each other. Inés Izaguirre refers to "la creación progresiva de fuertes lazos afectivos entre un grupo grande de mujeres llegadas de todo el país, con distintas

miradas políticas, distintos sentimientos religiosos, distintas culturas, distinta formación profesional, pero una misma ansia de cambio” (17) [the progressive generation of strong affective links between a large group of women from all over the country, women with different political views, different religious feelings, different cultures, different professional backgrounds but the same yearning for change]. Almost three decades later, in 1999, those strong affective, political, and intellectual bonds enabled a collective writing process that culminated with the book publication in 2006. It was the thirtieth anniversary of the military coup, an anniversary marked by the validation of survivors’ testimonies. Additional evidence of this validation was the reprint that same year of *Pasos bajo el agua* by Alicia Kozameh and the publication of María del Carmen Sillato’s *Diálogos de amor contra el silencio*. Kozameh’s book, which was issued in English as *Steps Under Water*, had initially been published in Buenos Aires in 1987. Hers is the first work that chronicles, through short stories and vignettes, the experience of women political prisoners in Argentina. One of the five co-editors of *Nosotras*, Kozameh is a renowned writer and college professor. Focusing first on the kidnapping of the protagonist, her narrative moves through her imprisonment, her release, and her first contacts with the outside world.

#### TO RESIST THE CONFESSIONAL BOX

*Steps Under Water* shares with *Nosotras* both the denunciation of Hugo Bellavigna and a scarcity of references to religious practices. On the other hand, Sillato, a literary scholar and professor settled in Canada, has written in her own testimonial work *Diálogos de amor contra el silencio* about her faith and her work in grass-roots Christian communities.<sup>21</sup> While in agreement concerning their characterization of prison chaplain Bellavigna, Kozameh and Sillato come from different political backgrounds. “No menciono mis creencias religiosas en *Pasos bajo el agua* porque no las tuve. Nunca nos resultaron relevantes. Vengo de un amplio sector de nuestra generación



“San Fachón.” Drawn by Alicia. From *Nosotras, presas políticas, 1974–1983* (reproduced by permission of Nuestra America).

que nunca se identificó con ninguna religión. Estábamos traspasados por el ateísmo” [I don’t mention my religious beliefs in *Steps Under Water*, because I did not have any beliefs. We never saw them as relevant. I belong to a large sector of our generation that never identified itself with any religion, we were thoroughly atheist], states Kozameh (personal communication), a supporter of the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP-People’s Revolutionary Army).

María del Carmen Sillato, whose political organization Juventud Peronista (Peronist Youth) supported Montoneros,<sup>22</sup> was the first former cellmate to send me comments on the English draft of this article:

Aunque no se dice en ninguno de los textos de las compañeras que vos citás, para el momento de caer en cana también nosotras, las que veníamos de comunidades de base católicas, ya habíamos roto de manera terminal con la estructura de la iglesia. Esas comunidades de base trabajaban inspiradas en la Conferencia de los Obispos Latinoamericanos realizada en Medellín y en la Teología de la Liberación, o sea que ya desde ese trabajo de base había diferencias con la Iglesia Católica Oficial que no apoyaba esta teología ni la inserción de los curas en las fábricas y en las villas miseria. Pero teníamos la formación y por eso podíamos confrontar a San Fáchón. No sé si te acordás de las dos agarradas que tuve yo con él en el 78 y yo le rebatí todos sus puntos usando el evangelio. (personal communication 5 Dec. 2012)

[Even when it is not stated by any of the compañeras you quote in this article, when we were sent to the hole we, those of us who came from Catholic Base Communities, had already definitively broken ties with the Church as institution. Those Base Communities worked inspired by the Medellín Conference of Latin American Bishops and Liberation Theology, and because of that they had already broken ties with the official Catholic Church that did not approve of that theology or the active involvement of priests in factories and shanty towns. However, we had the necessary preparation and that is why we could confront San Fáchón. I don’t know if you remember the two confrontations I had with him in 1978, where I refuted all his arguments by way of the gospel truths.]

Scolded from the pulpit by Bellavigna for not responding accordingly to his initiative to move her to a better prison regime, Sillato argued with him that Jesus would not have abandoned those who suffer like her compañeras—he would not have saved himself alone (personal communication 3 Jan. 2013). On the other hand, when confronted by the priest once he noticed her tendency to elude him, Kozameh replied, “Yo tengo ascendencia judía y encima soy atea” [I have a Jewish background and on top of that, I am an atheist]. To which he responded, “You will never leave this place”: “Se va a quedar a pagar por esos dos pecados y por todos los demás que ha cometido” [You will stay to pay for those two sins and for all the others you committed] (*Nosotras* 274). Bellavigna’s statement to Kozameh and his attitude towards Sillato are clear examples of the way he exercised his authority as a representative of the

military and the high hierarchy of the church that blessed their weapons. I propose that the strategy deployed in *Nosotras* is the women's response to his psychological warfare—a term applied to these type of contexts by Father Ignacio Martín-Baró, a Jesuit priest assassinated in 1989 in El Salvador who wrote extensively about that “so-called dirty war” against the people (138–39).<sup>23</sup>

The use of the phrase “dirty war” has come to be associated with the violence of the Argentine military junta in the 1970s. These words were originally used by the dictatorship to justify the extermination campaign against dissidents and members of the resistance movement (1976–1983). The junta bombarded national and international media with allegations that a dirty, secret war was necessary to combat “terrorism and subversion.” I personally believe that since the genocidal attack on the population met with a minimum of armed resistance by those who opposed the dictatorship, it was not a war but an annihilation campaign. Therefore, the continuous use of this terminology to refer to our national tragedy is a victory of the dictatorship. Accompanying that genocide, there was psychological warfare against the population, including us, the political prisoners of Villa Devoto. Ignacio Martín-Baró was well-aware of this semantic difference; in El Salvador, he noted, “the manipulation of religious beliefs as psychological warfare becomes a substitute for, or a complement to, the so-called dirty war of Para-official repression” (139). One clear example of that psychological warfare was Bellavigna's deployment to Villa Devoto as the prison priest. “Recuerdo,” writes former political prisoner Silvia Ontivero, another of our leaders inside the jail, “este sacerdote-torturador (ponemos la tortura psicológica como otra de las tantas categorías en que se especializó la dictadura) dentro de un marco de grandes contradicciones para la dictadura. Ya no estaba desapareciendo a mansalva como los primeros años ni torturando salvajemente para conseguir quiebres y delaciones, de modo que en un despliegue de ‘creatividad’ inventó el quiebre via un sacerdote que le fue absolutamente funcional a esos fines” (Clara) [I remember this priest-torturer (psychological torture was one of the things the dictatorship mastered) within the framework of the dictatorship's great contradictions. It was no longer disappearing people in great quantities as it had in the first years, nor was it torturing savagely in order to “break” individuals and obtain confessions, therefore, as evidence of its “creativity” it invented a way to “break” us down via a priest, which was absolutely functional for these objectives]. Meanwhile, priests, nuns, and lay people who were involved in the Christian Base Communities were targeted for disappearance, torture, and assassination. The political persecution did not spare bishops like Monsignor Enrique Angelelli.<sup>24</sup>

Before being gunned down by members of the Salvadoran armed forces, Martín-Baró had argued that there were two types of religiosity impacting the relationship between religion and politics: “*vertical* religiosity, which leads to

alienation and social submission,” and “*horizontal* religiosity, [which] leads to critical consciousness and social liberation.” That horizontal religiosity was clearly practiced in the Christian Base Communities that followed Liberation Theology tenets. “Faced with the possible ‘subversive’ effect of horizontal religiosity,” Martín-Baró elaborates, “the directors of the psychological war in El Salvador have tried to promote forms of religious conversion or membership that contribute to political passivity toward the established order” (143). Martín-Baró also describes the means used in psychological warfare, highlighting as the most important tool “the unleashing of personal insecurity: insecurity about one’s own beliefs, judgment, and feelings, about right and wrong, and about what should or should not be done.” He concludes: “This insecurity finds an immediate and tranquilizing response in the solution offered by those in power: to accept the ‘official truth’ and to submit to the ‘established order’” (139). But we, the women of Villa Devoto, actively resisted San Fachón’s attacks. As evidenced in the narratives collected in Mirta Clara’s survey, we constantly challenged his strategies, which aimed at imposing that vertical religiosity so dear to the official church during the period of the dictatorship in Argentina.

The following accounts are evidence of the prisoners’ “horizontal” religious practices, and of Father Bellavigna’s goal to undermine them through an indoctrination that presented individualistic practices and values as desirable. According to Martín-Baró, “In order to make people feel insecure, psychological warfare tries to penetrate the primary frame of reference—their basic beliefs, their most precious values, and their common sense. It is here that religion begins to play an important role, since it forms part of the world view of any population” (139). When applied to the case of Argentina’s Villa Devoto, this psychological warfare aimed to promote self-preservation and delation during confession, to generate individualistic religious practices, and to eradicate any expression of collective solidarity.

#### TO NEGOTIATE THE ACADEMIC BOX

When I started this research I wanted to explore the reasons for minimizing references to religious practices and beliefs in *Nosotras*, and the subsequent personal and collective costs. My interest in the book’s production and its semiosis<sup>25</sup> had resulted from questions about the editing process. I soon realized that even when I found some answers, they were not easy to convey to English-speaking outsiders in the academic world. I had to abide by a solidarity pact, which respects the agency of the testimonial subjects.<sup>26</sup> However, even when most former prisoners whom I wanted to interview remembered me from the “inside” and had seen my commitment to justice and historic





Scene of a cell in Villa Devoto. Drawn by Claudia. From *Nosotras, presas políticas, 1974–1983* (reproduced by permission of Nuestra America).

truth after the dictatorship, Blanca Becher's careful inquiry into my motives and the institutions supporting my research alerted me of my risk to act as a scholar from the North with a set of pre-formulated questions, who can't

resist speaking *for* the subjects she interviews. This is why here my essay mimics *Nosotras* by producing a polyphonic testimonial text through the accounts sent to me by Mirta Clara. The voices of Silvia Ontiveros, Patricia Traba, Isabel Eckerl, Viviana Beguán, Mabel Fernández, and Blanca Becher illustrate what I have identified as six salient traits of Bellavigna's dirty war.

1) *The implementation of confession as spectacle for others and violence toward self*

Silvia Ontiveros testifies,

Como lamentablemente hubo compañeras que no resistieron tantos años de encierro y tortura, las tomaron como 'ejemplo' de arrepentimiento, usaron la 'confesión' para violentar más sus almas ya bastante atribuladas por el quiebre y nos las mostraban misa tras misa como trofeo ante quienes no aceptamos arrepentirnos porque en verdad, de nada teníamos que retractarnos. Nos bajaban a misa, manos atrás, paradas al final de la capilla de la cárcel para que observáramos el ritual oprobioso de las pocas compañeras quebradas que lloraban y se golpeaban el pecho mientras desfilaban ante el confesionario supuestamente para arrepentirse de haberse comprometido hasta con la vida para defender al pueblo y su causa . . . pienso en Cristo viendo la escena y poniéndose más que nunca de nuestro lado.

[Since, unfortunately, there were *compañeras* who did not resist so many years of imprisonment and torture, they took them as “examples” of repentance, they utilized the “confession” in order to further damage their already afflicted souls and they showed them to us mass after mass as trophies before those of us who would not accept repentance because, in truth, we did not have anything we needed to repent for. They took us down to mass, with our hands tied, standing at the end of the prison chapel so that we could observe the shaming ritual of the few “broken” *compañeras* who cried and pounded their chests while they lined up before the confessionary, supposedly to repent for having risked even their lives to defend the people and their cause. . . . I imagine Christ looking upon that scene and putting himself, even more than ever, on our side.]

2) *The promotion of individualistic religious practices that sought to erase any traces of human solidarity*

Patricia Traba writes,

Conocí a Hugo Bellavigna estando alojada en el Segundo celular . . . de Villa Devoto en 1978. Mi recuerdo concreto es la primera misa a la que asistí junto con todas las compañeras del piso. El día que nos tocó a nosotras coincidía con el primer aniversario de la muerte de Alicia País . . . había fallecido por un problema de asma en el 77 en el hospital de Devoto y habíamos acordado entre nosotras que pediríamos a Bellavigna que fuera en su nombre que la celebrara. Recuerdo que una compañera se acercó y le hizo la petición antes de que comenzara. . . .

Empezó a celebrar notoriamente molesto, con gestos bruscos y como apurado. Mi sorpresa fue el sermón, tengo formación católica, y a mí entender lo que este ‘sacerdote’ estaba gritando hasta ponerse colorado, no se correspondía con lo que me habían enseñado: “¡Primero hay que pedir por uno, después si quiero por mi hermana, mi cuñada o mi recontra cuñada!!!! . . .” repetía visiblemente enojado.

[I met Hugo Bellavigna when I was housed in cellblock two of Villa Devoto in 1978. My concrete memory is the first mass I attended along with all my *compañeras* from our floor. The day we were supposed to go happened to be the first anniversary of the death of Alicia País, who had died in the prison hospital because of asthma complications in 1977. We had all agreed to ask Bellavigna to hold the mass in her name. I remember that one of us approached and petitioned him before the mass. He began the ceremony as if incredibly bothered, hurried and with brisk motions. I was surprised by the sermon, given my Catholic formation and my understanding that what this “priest” was yelling, red in the face, did not correspond to what I had been taught, “first a person has to ask for herself, then if she wants for her sister, her sister-in-law or her super-extra-sister-in-law!!!! . . .” he repeated, visibly angry.]

*3) The privileging of the priest’s role as military personnel over that of a spiritual advisor, becoming a loyal representative of the military authorities*

Isabel Eckerl remembers,

El estaba subordinado al Servicio Penitenciario Federal, con el jefe de Inteligencia Galíndez que reportaba a Suárez Mason y a Sánchez Toranzo y en la Comisión Interdisciplinaria donde concurrían todos los Jefes Penitenciarios, psiquiatras, psicóloga, asistente social, nos querían hacer firmar el arrepentimiento. . . . Cuando íbamos a misa él nos increpaba con un: “A confesar, los lobos tienen que confesarse.”

[He was an officer of the SPF (Servicio Penitenciario Federal/Federal Penitentiary Service), along with the Head of Intelligence, Galíndez, who reported to Suárez Mason and to Sánchez Toranzo and the Interdisciplinary Commission, a committee with all the penitentiary officers (including the psychiatrist, the psychologist, the social worker and others) that wanted us to sign a statement of repentance. When we went to mass he would scold us with the words: “to confess, the wolves need to confess.”]

*4) The active participation in the interdisciplinary commission, a kind of tribunal that established levels of recoverability through self preservation and delation during confession*

Viviana Beguán writes,

En sus homilias exaltaba el egoísmo, el miedo, la necesidad de la preservación personal ante todo, el cumplimiento del reglamento con independencia de lo que sucediera alrededor. A la vez, cuando las compañeras católicas se confesaban, las

instaba a la delación de las “cabecillas.” Para caracterizar nuestro grado de “Recuperabilidad” establecieron la Comisión Interdisciplinaria. Esta junta se convirtió en un nuevo juicio, por supuesto anticonstitucional y en ella participaron el Jefe de Seguridad, Área, Requisa, Médico, Psicólogo, Psiquiatra, Personal de educación (Maestro), Atención espiritual (el Cura participó en la primera etapa y luego por disposición de la Nunciatura se retiró), y la presencia militar con el Tte. Cnel. Sanchez Toranzo. Trataba asimismo de influir en nuestros familiares, y recomendaba el comportamiento que deberíamos seguir una vez recuperada la libertad

[In his sermons, he emphasized egoism, fear, the need for personal preservation above all things, the compliance with rules despite whatever happens around you. At the same time, when Catholic comrades confessed, he encouraged them to give the names of “our leaders” away (through accusations and delation). In order to determine our levels of “recoverability,” they established the Interdisciplinary Commission. The commission became a new kind of tribunal, of course an unconstitutional one, and was formed by the heads of Security, Region, Surveillance, the doctor, psychologist, psychiatrist, Education (the teacher), Spiritual Services (the priest participated at the beginning but he left under orders of the Nuncio), and the military represented by Lt. Col. Sanchez Toranzo. (Beguán adds a statement that she included in *Nosotras*: He also tried to influence our relatives, and he recommended behaviors that we should follow once we were released (275).]

5) *The promotion of punishment for any occasional display of religious activities outside his personal control*

Mabel Fernández remembers,

. . . era en los [años] de mayor encierro . . . teníamos 22 horas adentro y solo salíamos una hora al pasillo interno y para el baño. . . Bueno, en el 3º Piso de Celulares nos preparábamos para festejar Navidad. Nos propusimos armar un pesebre en el pasillo, al fondo; cada celda preparaba una pieza que hacíamos con miga de pan y saliva. . . . Entre todas lo armamos con el permiso de alguna *bicha*. . . . Quedó precioso. Habíamos ido a misa y le pedimos al cura que lo bendiga. Vino, lo bendijo. Todo bien. Estábamos adentro de las celdas y sentimos pasos de las celadoras hacia el fondo y en seguidita vuelven, no entendíamos qué pasaba porque no escuchamos abrir ninguna celda, miramos por el agujerito de la puerta . . . y vemos a la *bicha* y la inspectora (no recuerdo el nombre pero era esa que era mala como una yará) con el Niñito Dios en la palma de la mano. Resultado: sancionadas sin la mísera hora de recreo, sin cartas, sin visitas, por pornografía, ¡¡¡porque habíamos modelado el Niñito Dios desnudo!!!

It was during one of the years of the most severe prison regime . . . when we had to be inside the cell 22 hours a day and we only had an hour to go to the inside hallway and to shower. . . . Well, on the third floor we were preparing to celebrate Christmas. We decided to make a nativity scene and put it on the floor at the end of the hallway; every cell prepared a figurine, which we made with breadcrumbs and saliva. . . . Among all of us, we put it together with the permission of some

guard. . . . It turned out beautiful. We had gone to mass and asked the priest to bless it. He came, he blessed it. Everything was fine. We were inside the cells when we heard the footsteps of the guards, going to the end (of the hallway) and coming right back again. We didn't understand what was happening because we didn't hear them opening any cells, we looked through the peephole . . . and we saw the guard and the inspector (I don't remember her name but she was as bad as a *jarará* snake) with the baby Jesus in the palm of her hand. The result was that we were punished: no miserable hour of recess, no letters, no visitors, accused of pornography, because we had made a nude baby Jesus!!!]

While there is no direct evidence that Bellavigna encouraged our punishment, given his authority and leverage with prison officials, he could have asked for lenience, especially because it was Christmas time, when families planned visits to the prison. Instead, his participation in the ritual triggered the cruel punishment.<sup>27</sup>

6) *The segregation between Christian inmates and those of other faiths, curtailing any possible ecumenical solidarity*

Blanca Becher recalls,

Recuerdo cuando vino a darnos misa monseñor Calabresi, con otro cura (superdenunciado, pero yo no recuerdo el nombre), fue para Pascuas. Pedí permiso para ensayar y dirigir el coro para esa misa. Obviamente las autoridades lo negaron, por lo que fui a a hablar con San Fachón, quien lo desestimó absolutamente por tratarse de mí –judía–, cómo iba a dirigir el coro de la iglesia. No obstante ello, a escondidas, fui dándole el tono de la misa criolla a cada una de las compañeras que integraban el coro, por supuesto, siempre a escondidas, ayudándonos por tornillos, letrinas, en el momento de la ducha, de la fajina, como se pudiera. El día de la misa, me puse al frente de las compañeras cantantes y el coro salió: ¡perfecto! Se produjo un silencio en la capilla, donde se escuchaban las voces de las compañeras. Una vez terminada la misa, me mandaron a buscar: el jefe de seguridad junto a Bellavigna, quienes querían saber cómo habíamos hecho para ensayar, les contesté que fue un milagro. Al instante partí para los *chanchos*, sancionada durante varios días. Nadie nunca me va a sacar la satisfacción de ese día.

I remember that Monsignor Calabresi came to say mass with another priest . . . it was for Easter. I asked permission to rehearse and to direct the choir for that mass. Obviously, the authorities denied it. I went to talk to San Fachón, who disregarded the idea completely, asking how I, a Jew, was going to direct the church choir. Despite all this, I went about secretly giving the right tone to the Misa Criolla,<sup>28</sup> directing all the *compañeras* who were in the choir, always in secret of course, speaking through the tiny holes around the screws that attached our beds to the walls, through the hole in the latrine, talking in the showers, when we were out of the cell for our chores, whenever we could. The day of the mass, I stood in front of the singing *compañeras* and the choir performance turned out . . . perfect! There was a

deep silence in the chapel, and you could hear the voices of the *compañeras*. Once the mass ended, they came to look for me (the Chief of Security along with Bellavigna), they wanted to know how we had rehearsed, I answered that it was a miracle. I was sent presto to “the pig pen,” punished with isolation for several days. No one will ever take away the satisfaction I felt that day.]

This priest who used religion as a tool to dominate us was most likely aware of our resistance strategies. He undoubtedly knew that religious practices were for many of us tools to break the isolation imposed by the regime. In my particular case, I would request to be seen by the Rabbi, not because I was a practicing Jew but to be able to receive information from the outside world, to leave for an hour my cramped cell, and to let my family know that I was in good spirits.

On one dramatic occasion, Mirta Clara resorted to religious practices to protect the life of her newborn. Surprised by her passing reference to her son’s baptism in *Nosotras*, I wrote her asking for clarification. A practicing psychologist whose testimony and struggle have been instrumental in the recent trials against the military officers, Clara explained,

En mi caso no venía de una formación religiosa sino política. A partir de que nos propusimos el libro *Nosotras*, escribí la petit historia que cuento sobre El Chaco y sobre Juan, lo hice posteriormente a la prisión, por eso no tiene correspondencia en cartas del libro. El tema del bautismo fue un recurso que encontramos como para convocar al Obispo y un cura porque estábamos incomunicadas y nos pareció que de esa manera logramos que vinieran los dos curas y ayudábamos a registrar a Juan que no tenía inscripción legal en ningún lado. La misa fue permitida tardíamente en el comedor de la alcaldía y fuimos cercadas por un centenar de milicos que nos vigilaban los movimientos desde las puertas como desde un balcón superior, en septiembre de 1976. Pero el cura fue posteriormente a la Unidad Nro. 7 de Resistencia y contó en la misa que habían bautizado a Juan, mi compañero estaba ahí y pudo enterarse de algo más de la vida de Juan ya que no sabíamos casi nada unos de otros. (personal communication)

[In my own case, my background was not religious but political. After we decided to work on the book *Nosotras*, I wrote the little story where I tell about (the prison in) Chaco and Juan. I wrote it after prison, so there is no related letter about it in the book. The issue of baptism was a recourse to summon the Bishop and a priest since we were incommunicado and we thought that this way we would be able to bring in two priests and that would help to register Juan’s birth, which was not legally registered anywhere. The mass was approved at the last minute for the dining room of the prison and we were surrounded by a hundred military men who checked our movements from the doors and a balcony, on September 1976. But the priest went afterwards to the Resistencia Prison (U7) and said in a mass there that he had baptized Juan; my *compañero* was there and he could learn something else about Juan’s life since we knew almost nothing about each other.]

Hundreds of children were born in captivity while their mothers were held in secret detention camps. Many of these babies were appropriated by the military or prison officials and raised by them or given for adoption to their own acquaintances. In my particular case, I did not know what the military had done to my daughter for the five months I remained disappeared.

These traumatic experiences, and the subsequent separation from our children only remedied by prison visits where we were deprived of physical contact, are not at the center of *Nosotras*. Instead, the book performs a collective identity that seeks to empower us by stressing our high level of political involvement and commitment. Because religion was used as a tool to disempower the women prisoners of Villa Devoto through the psychological warfare carried on by prison priest Hugo Bellavigna, it could not become an instrumental aspect of the collective identity performed in the book.

When the process of editing the book took place, our political context had radically changed from that of the mid-1970s: justice was finally on its way, political circumstances were totally different. By the time of its publication in 2006, the question remained of how the former prisoners of Villa Devoto could have benefited by highlighting their spiritual beliefs or their previous militancy in Christian Base communities. Since the distilled essence of that struggle was solidarity, and the prisoners' beliefs and practices had been so diverse, to perform a collective identity it was necessary to resort to the elements that held truth for all the women involved.



Drawing of a scene in a cell. Sent by Norita to her family. From *Nosotras, presas políticas, 1974–1983* (reproduced by permission of Nuestra America).

## TO ENTER THE BOX OF LETTERS

To participate in that project, I needed to have the strength to deal with my box of letters. Those were the hundreds of letters to my family that I had written from prison, that my mother had kept in a fat box that I had transported to the United States in the late 1990s. “Estoy mirando mi caja desde aquí,” Alicia Kozameh tells me on the phone after reading a draft of this article; “Está en el closet, bien cerradita. No la he vuelto a abrir desde que me la devolvieron cuando publicamos *Nosotras*.” [I’m looking at my own box from where I stand. It is in my closet, neatly packed. I have not opened it since I got it back when we published *Nosotras*.] And then she shares her



experience of having reunited with the box after a *compañera* transported it to the States, so Kozameh could select letters for the book, “La primera vez que la abrí, levanté un cartón de la tapa y lo cerré porque sentí una especie de brutal olor a Devoto” [The first time I opened it, I lifted one flap and I had to close it because I smelled that sort of brutal odor from Villa Devoto]. The stress of going back to the memories in those letters, her doctor confirmed, triggered the symptoms of a cyst in her pituitary gland, a cyst produced by the prolonged prison stress and for which she was medicated for twenty years.

In my own case, to reread those letters awakened the deepest wound left by my experience as a political prisoner: the separation from my little daughter. In her poem “O Infamous Window,” she, Ruth Irupé Sanabria, revisits the humiliations our children suffered in Villa Devoto. She concludes, “And I don’t remember / one word or story / you ever give me; / I take you home / in pockets no one can seize — / I take you home/with my eyes” (24). When Ruth was in her twenties, several years before the publication of her collection *The Strange House Testifies*, I had tried to return the letters to her. She just made a distancing gesture with her hands. I should have known better.



I kept the letters in a corner of my office until the birth of Dylan, my first grandson. Then, I decided to compile the children's poems and stories I had written there, and publish them for him. To that end, I found research assistants with the skills to sort through them, find the poems and the children's tales, and type them. The box has now been tamed into two big folders where the letters sleep in their plastic sleeves.

Writing about *Nosotras* in a scholarly way provided enough distance for me to go back to them. I even took one of those sleeves to the workshop in Hawai'i that launched this special issue of *Biography*. It was the first time since the late 1970s, when I mailed them from Villa Devoto, that I read that couple of letters. Decades later, in that safe windowless conference room somehow sheltered from the beauty of Mānoa, I could only talk about the box. And as I dealt with my pain, I departed from my planned presentation. I neglected to discuss the material difficulties in fully implementing here the research approach I call *co/labor/actions*.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, my emotional sharing prompted feedback that left me somewhat confused: My colleagues suggested that I should write more about myself. They gave me all kinds of green lights to shed the scholarly attire. I now realize that I had failed to explain the way intellectual engagement helps me deal with pain. But what made me really uneasy after my presentation, was that I had forgotten to pay tribute with a minute of silence to Blanca Becher, who had died the week before. Perhaps Blanca, the miraculous choir director, the challenging *compañera*, would not have liked the silence. After all, it was she who had said, "We want to tell how we survived with joy and collectively."

Concealing God and our pain, concealing with our creativity the triumphs of baleful postcolonial practices, we resist. "Había como ochocientas personas en la primera presentación del *Nosotras*."<sup>30</sup> En la fiesta después de la presentación," Alicia Kozameh's voice on the phone gets excited, "cada compañera que había contribuido al libro fue nombrada y le devolvimos una caja con sus originales" [There were about eight hundred people at the first book presentation for *Nosotras*. At the book party afterwards, each *compañera* who had contributed to the book was called and given a box with her original documents and letters].

A couple of months ago, my daughter Ruth asked me if I could possibly part with some of my own letters to her. She wanted to make a memory box. Not trusting any post office box with those memories, I took them myself when I visited her before Christmas. I also took some childrens books for Dylan and his two little sisters, Dulce and Danika. They will have to wait a bit more until *bobe* Alicia gives them her own book. Meanwhile, I embrace my role as insider/outsider committed to disseminate this other text about one of my many identities: *Nosotras, presas políticas*.

## NOTES

- AUTHOR'S NOTE: Research assistance and translation of Mirta Clara's survey provided by Susana Aho. My gratitude to Dr. Kavita Panjabi at Jadavpur University in Kolkata, where the first version of this paper was presented; to Dr. Jennifer Abe, who introduced me to the work of Martín-Baró; to a Loyola Marymount grant that allowed me to travel to Argentina for research purposes; and to the architects and participants of the *Biography* seminar for their precious input.
1. For extensive information in Spanish about the book, reviews, activities, and original documentation about Villa Devoto and other detention centers during the dictatorship, see "Cárcel de Villa Devoto," on the website created by the former political prisoners Presos Políticos Argentinos.
  2. Beverley's term to allude to a testimonio "made up of accounts by different participants in the same event" (28).
  3. For an extended discussion of the role Liberation Theology, the Sacerdotes para el tercer mundo (Movement of Third World Priests), and the Comunidades cristianas de base (Base Communities), played in resisting dictatorships in Argentina, see Michael Burdick's *For God and Fatherland*.
  4. In a report sent from prison authorities to a judge who was evaluating the possible release of a political prisoner, this excerpt from a survey form is included (*Nosotras* 276): "¿Ha mantenido correspondencia? (Sí.) ¿De quiénes? (Madre y hermana.) ¿De qué naturaleza? (Afectiva.) ¿La atienden? (Sí.) ¿Quién contestó? (Las mismas.)' Observaban nuestro apoyo afectivo y a la vez investigaban a nuestra familia. . . ." ["Has she corresponded with someone? (Yes.) With whom? (Mother and sister.) What kind of exchange? (Affective.) Do they take care of her? (Yes.) Who replied? (Both of them.)" They observed who was supporting us emotionally and they did surveillance on our family]. The translation of this and subsequent quotes from *Nosotras* is mine.
  5. For further discussion of this concept, see my article "Disclaimer intraducible."
  6. For a discussion of the role of faith and religion in *Del otro lado de la mirilla. Olvidos y Memorias de ex Presos Políticos de Coronda. 1974-1979* [The Other Side of the Peephole. Forgetfulness and Memories of Men Former Political Prisoners in Coronda], see my essay "The prison walls cry and we laugh': A Collective Testimony by Argentine Genocide Survivors."
  7. To be aware of the multiple filters and sifters involved in the process of writing *Nosotras*, it is useful to cite Harlow's observation in reference to Gramsci's letters from prison, which also applies to the correspondence from Villa Devoto: "The letters . . . had immediate reading receivers: their addressees, to be sure, but the prison censor as well, who, following prison regulations, rigorously reviewed all prisoner correspondence" (21).
  8. The junta in power claimed to protect what it called the three pillars of our society—God, Fatherland, and Home—while disappearing nuns, priests, and lay workers, taking control of the national territory by force, and destroying thousands, if not millions, of homes through widespread executions, disappearances, kidnappings, and forced exile.
  9. The translation of the book title provides a glimpse at the negotiations involved in crossing the language bridge: the noun "women" is implied three times (in the feminine word endings) but never written there.

10. Beguán is currently an officer with Argentina's national Ministry for Justice and Human Rights, where she directs one of the three units of the Truth and Justice Program, currently involved in witness support for the prosecution in the trials against military officers charged with genocide during the years of the dictatorship.
11. Gilmore prefaces "A Map for Getting Lost," her provocative introduction to *Autobiographics*, with this epigraph (1), Winterson's question from *Sexing the Cherry* (8).
12. She refers to books like *Del otro lado de la mirilla*, by former political prisoners from Coronda, Sillato's anthology *Huellas: Memorias de resistencia (Argentina 1974–1983)*, and *Eslabones: Crónicas, relatos, poesías, cuentos, ilustraciones*, a collective anthology compiled by the Asociación Ex-Presos Políticos de Córdoba through a gestational process similar to the one for *Nosotras*.
13. As Barbara Harlow states about the works she studies in *Barred*, every one of the formats used in *Nosotras*, "with its particular positioning of prison and determination of the significance of prison, partakes to some degree in certain features of the testimonio, a genre that developed out of the recent history of Latin American military dictatorships. The testimonio stands at once as a personal statement of struggle, a political indictment of oppression and exploitation, and a documentary of systemic abuses of human rights" (46). Although I agree with Harlow, I argue for the term "testimonial texts" instead of "testimonio" when referring to these works, since "testimonio" is better defined by John Beverley as a long account by one individual, with the emblematic book being *I Rigoberta Menchú, an Indian Woman from Guatemala*, in which Menchú is interviewed by Elizabeth Burgos-Debray.
14. Argentina is also the Latin American country with the largest Jewish population, and it has been argued that a disproportionately high number of those victimized by the regime share my ethnic origin.
15. According to Viviana Beguán, Mariana Crespo "tenía una formación cristiana familiar y también una militancia al lado del padre Mugica en las villas" [came from a Christian background and preparation and was active with Father Mugica in the shanty towns] (personal communication). "The church does not only speak of the salvation of man but also of his liberation," declared Mugica, who was assassinated in 1974 by the Alianza Anticomunista Argentina (AAA) [Anticommunist Argentine Alliance]: "The priest who does not speak of politics is in limbo or some other part, but not on earth" (qtd. in Burdick 152).
16. Michael Burdick writes that in 1968 "a new generation of Catholic clergy endorsed the proscribed Peronists and contributed to their eventual reintegration into political life. A renewed synthesis of Peronism and Catholicism also developed, this time under the rubric of left-wing nationalism. The movement of Priests for the Third World best exemplified the religious left, dominating the religio-political sphere and polarizing the Argentine church for the next decade" (5–6).
17. As I've noted, Harlow refers to two patriarchal models imposing themselves on Third World women's experience. The scarcity of women as role models in this list illustrates the impact of a male-centered revolutionary experience.
18. Note that the word "militante" does not carry the same connotation as an aggressive fighter as the English "militant."

19. This passage illustrates Leigh Gilmore's observation that "the distinction between self-representation as a political discourse and self-representation as an artistic practice is less important than their simultaneity of function in a particular culture and for specific audiences" (xiv).
20. I have examined the lack of self-referentiality in testimonial poetry in my article "Textual Strategies to Resist Disappearance and the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo."
21. In the introduction to her anthology *Huellas*, Sillato writes briefly about *Nosotras*. She spells out the complicity of the Catholic Church with the repression.
22. Montoneros and ERP were the two largest political organizations who resorted to armed struggle as an instrument to resist the dictatorship.
23. Father Ignacio Martín-Baró, a Jesuit priest, prolific scholar, and activist, was assassinated on November 16, 1989, along with five other Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter, by the Atlacatl Battalion of the Salvadorean armed forces. On the anniversary of the massacre, massive demonstrations take place to demand the closing of WHIN-SEC (Western Hemispheric Institute for Security Cooperation), the recycled version of the infamous US military facility known as the School of the Americas (SOA), where members of the Battalion had received training.
24. Msgr. Angelelli's death in 1976 was promptly dismissed as a car accident. Recently, the investigation was reopened and General Videla is one of the accused. At the time of his death, Angelelli was transporting evidence on the recent assassination of two priests from his diocese (see "Videla a juicio"). For a list of other priests assassinated in those days, see Burdick (205).
25. I am referring here to what Hodge and Kress label the semiotic plane, "implying some semiotic event(s), linking producers and receivers and signifiers and signifieds into a significant relationship." It is the context of the mimetic plane, "implying some version(s) of reality as a possible referent" (262).
26. This implies the existence of a solidarity pact. I argue that when dealing with testimonial texts, like *Nosotras, presas políticas*, the reader does not abide by what Philippe Lejeune has brilliantly identified as the biographical pact, which generates in the reader a yearning to take a detectivesque approach, checking and challenging the versions of the truth presented in autobiographies (14). Instead, a solidarity pact is created between the reader and the autobiographical subject.
27. I include this episode in a play I am co-writing with Judith Weiss, about our relationships with our children through letters, while in jail. I have been working on "Paper House" intermittently for the past twenty-two years.
28. Composed by Ariel Ramírez, this version of the mass song is written in Argentine vernacular to the tune of South American folk music.
29. It would require that all consulted *compañeras* in Argentina have input on revised versions of this paper. To that effect I would need to translate it for them, which is materially impossible in terms of its publication schedule.
30. The book has been reprinted several times. Its Italian edition, published in 2008 with the title *Memoria del buio* and a long descriptive subtitle that does not include the word "political" but alludes to resistance, is currently out of print.

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