Amy Conger's Double Exile

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This story is still in the making, after so many years. My aunt Amy Conger died in March 2023. Following her passing, I traveled to Santiago in May to meet some of her friends from the time she lived in Chile. I brought with me some of her ashes, to leave in her beloved adopted home. It was a life-changing moment for me, as I came to learn so much more about Amy and was able to confirm much of what I had suspected but which she had never directly told me.[1]

Amy died fifty years after the brutal military coup in Chile, which ultimately affected approximately thirty thousand people through execution, detention, torture, and/or forced exile during the Chilean military regime's seventeen years in power (1973–90). In 1974, one year after the 11 September 1973 military coup, Amy was detained, held at the notorious

1 I called Amy my "aunt" although she was really a cousin. She was my mother's first cousin, and as I didn't have any aunts or uncles of my own, she became my "aunt." There is a tradition of Amy Congers in my family; in my case, Conger is my middle name. I am very grateful to the people I have met who knew Amy and who have helped me put together the pieces of her experience. In particular, I want to thank Carlos Torres for sharing stories of Amy's life in Santiago, and for showing me memorialized and unmarked places/spaces where Amy spent time. Indeed, my time spent in Santiago in May 2023 was invaluable. I also want to thank Lynnie Westafer for sharing her knowledge and stories, including the extensive in-person interviews she conducted with Amy in early 2023. I could not have compiled this history without her help and support. I also thank Amy's dear friends from Santiago, including Silvia, Dago, Patricio, and Yvonne, and her dear friends from Riverside, California, especially Jane Carney and Rob McMurray.

War Academy of the Chilean Air Force (Academia de Guerra de la Fuerza Áerea de Chile, or FACH) detention center, and tortured by the Chilean military while living and working as a photographer and art history professor at the Universidad de Chile in Santiago (1971–74).

In fact, Amy was more fortunate than many. While she was detained, she was forced to sign a statement claiming that she was a traitor to Chile, her adopted home, but as a foreigner and US American, she was released thirteen days after her detention in October 1974 and expelled from Chile. Most Chileans were detained for much longer; many never reappeared. Their "disappearance"[2] became essentially permanent, although some family members and activists continue to refer to them as disappeared rather than proclaim them dead. This is in part because their remains were never found, and in part because their loved ones refuse to end a chapter of history that post-dictatorship governments have often tried to conclude or forget.

Amy survived. She returned to the United States, where she immediately began advocating for herself and on behalf of Chileans, whom she viewed as victims of the military dictatorship. Through her public advocacy, she became a political pawn once again, this time in the context of Cold War politics and US foreign policy. She was politically savvy and incredibly strong. Contacting other US Americans who had been detained by the Chilean military, she entreated her contacts to help her tell her story to the media. It all happened fairly quickly: in late 1984 and 1985, she appeared on the national network NBC's *The Today Show* with Barbara Walters and on historian and broadcaster Studs Terkel's radio show.[3] Liberal *Washington Post* journalist Jack Anderson (1974; 1975a) wrote about

2 It was due to the wave of military authoritarianism in Latin America in the 1960s through the 1980s that "to disappear" became a verb. As people were "disappeared," with no trace of their whereabouts, the concept has become a standard part of many languages. In the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, for example, "to disappear" means "to cause (someone or something) to disappear; a) to abduct and kill or imprison (someone, such as a political dissident) while withholding information about the person's fate"; https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disappear.

3 I do not have access to a copy of the *Today Show* segment.

her case, arguing that Amy was a victim of US foreign policy in Chile. His conservative counterpart William F. Buckley, in turn, published op-eds in the *Post* rebuking Anderson's claims. He referred to Amy as an American communist who was suspected by the Chilean Intelligence "of being Mata Hari" and who deserved to be detained (1974).

Importantly, in 1975, Amy joined a group of US citizens, including Terkel, who filed a lawsuit against the US Department of State, including against then–Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, charging the US government with crimes against humanity for their support of the overthrow and assassination of democratically elected President Salvador Allende and the subsequent Chilean military coup. She testified to the US Congress about her experience of detention (Kennedy 1974). Unsurprisingly, they did not "win" their lawsuit. The lawsuit did, however, help block additional funding for Chile that the Senate was then voting upon.[4] For a short time, her story symbolized the strong ideological Cold War divide within the United States, including the fear of Cuba's "domino effect" in the region; that is, the fear that communism would spread throughout Latin America and threaten US democracy.

Through all of this, I now know, Amy suffered. When I was young, I remember watching her on *The Today Show* and thinking what a strong, impressive person she was. Amy rarely talked about how she felt about her experience, but for years she feared retaliation while living in the United States. I first interviewed her in 1984, while still a college student. I visited my older and much admired relative at her brother's house in Los Angeles, and we talked at length. She told me about the years after

4 As Amy Conger states in a draft letter she prepared on 11 February 1975 to share with multiple US political leaders, "On December 4, 1974, Sen. Kennedy presented an amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1974 to cut off all military aid to Chile because of the terrible violations of Human Rights which are presenting occurring there.… This bill was passed as amended in the Senate and subsequently in the House of Representatives where, additionally, the total amount of economic aid was diminished from approximately $60 million to $25 million for the same reason." Following Jack Anderson's story about Amy's case, Amy's testimony to the US Congress, and the group lawsuit, the US government significantly cut funds to Chile. See also Anderson (1975b).

her return to the US and her worry about being followed. She adopted a German Shepherd as a form of protection, and she made sure she had a network of friends in her local community who kept an eye out for her and helped support her. Once, when she traveled to Mexico City to give a talk about her experience in Chile at an Amnesty International conference, she recognized a US American intelligence agent outside her hotel room. She heard someone fumbling with keys and trying to get into her room so she barricaded the door with a large piece of furniture. She was eventually able to leave and asked people from Amnesty International to move her to another hotel. She believed the intelligence agent wanted to assassinate her. This fear of being persecuted never dissipated. In an interview Amy gave to a journalist family friend in early 2023, she said she never stopped looking in the rearview mirror of her car even then, forty-nine years after her initial detention in Chile.[5]

Amy was forcibly exiled from Chile, but she was displaced in her own country as well upon her return. She was blacklisted, and for several years, she faced difficulties finding a job, including as a professor. In Chile, she had witnessed atrocities that her own government had helped manufacture. She made an intentional decision to stay and join the wide range of Chileans who resisted military disappearances, detentions, torture, and executions. She was a strong believer in human rights and enamored by Chile's democratic socialism. She joined the resistance, which, at the time, included anyone opposed to military rule. In her case, she worked with MIR (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria, or Revolutionary Left Movement), a movement to the left of Allende's socialism that supported the Allende administration, worked toward the redistribution of wealth, and opposed US and other forms of western/northern imperialism. MIR was one of the most repressed political movements by the military junta; many MIR members were victims of state violence, although it was also a relatively resilient movement (Amat 2023). Once Amy began to witness the military repression, she made a conscious decision to remain in Santiago and work with

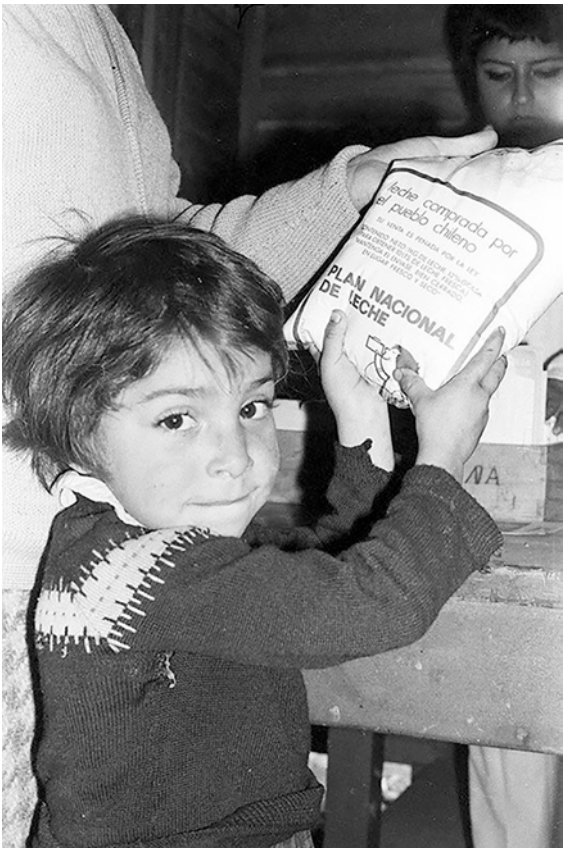
5 Interview with Amy Conger by Lynnie Westafer; personal communication with Lynnie Westafer, 14 July 2023.

others to resist military and state violence. She continued to work at the Universidad de Chile, which was taken over by the military soon after the coup. Almost all professors at the university were fired. Amy was one of eight professors who remained on staff, perhaps because the military initially believed a US American would be a safe person to have on staff, perhaps even an ally. And yet, in September 1974, a year after the military coup, Amy was detained in front of her house, bringing her resistance to a halt. She was handcuffed, blindfolded, and forced to walk from her house to the military vehicle with her shirt raised over her head, a common practice by the military to humiliate and dehumanize people, often in the view of bystanders. After her detention, she was deported and then forced into an "inner emigration," a kind of exile within her own country.

It is very possible that her photographs of Chile in the early 1970s were one factor leading to her arrest and detention. Indeed, her photos powerfully reflect the revolutionary fervor of the time. The photo included here ("Untitled"), of a young child drinking milk—benefiting from President Allende's milk distribution program in poor neighborhoods—has been widely circulated in Chile and particularly in social media during the past few years. She is rarely credited for the photo despite the fact that it has come to represent a key historical moment and reflects a sentiment of hope that is alive in the national memory today.

Amy did not publish many of the photos she took in Chile until about twenty years later, after the dictatorship fell and it was safe to publish photos of people who may have been retaliated against by the military had they been identified. When Amy was detained at her home in the Bellavista neighborhood in Santiago, she hid many of her photos in her oven so the officers who detained her could not find them. Some were damaged, others were smuggled out of the country, yet others she was able to keep and restore.

Figure 6.1: Amy Conger, Untitled.



Source: Amy Conger, *Bienvenido to Nueva Havana: Santiago, Chile 1972–1973*. Telluride, CO: Nolvido Press, 2010

In many ways, Amy protected me from her history. She didn't tell me about her involvement in MIR. But putting the pieces together, in retrospect, I see how she carried the memories with her, even though she compartmentalized that experience as a way to survive and also possibly to protect those around her. Her dog Lumi was named after a well-

known female leader in MIR, and a friend and comrade of Amy at the time, who was executed by the Chilean military. Amy's forced displacement remained with her for the rest of her life, even though few people around her, including her own family and some friends, really understood what she had experienced, been part of, and witnessed.

When Amy died, she left her possessions to friends of hers from all walks of life. What was most important to her was her art, her photography, her books, her writing and publishing (she published several books on photography and was working on a book on her extensive Chilean *arpillera* collection when she died), and her friends.[6] She had lifelong friendships with her Chilean friends from the early 1970s. She returned to Chile two or three times after the dictatorship ended, where she saw old friends, some of whom had also been detained, tortured, and exiled. She remained close to the grown children of her close comrades who were orphaned following the execution of their parents. She communicated regularly with a Chilean friend who now lives in Mexico City, another who now lives in Buenos Aires, and another in Quito, Ecuador, remaining close to them until she died. After having collectively gone through such a traumatic experience, this group of friends and adopted family was forever bonded. I felt this myself when I met her friends this year.

I found out Amy had died when I was at a conference in Quito. I opened Facebook during a break in my hotel room and saw a photo of Amy posted by a former Chilean graduate student of mine at FLACSO-Ecuador who had returned to Chile to live. She posted the image of Amy as a way to acknowledge the many untold histories of people who suffered from the military dictatorship. It's amazing how memory is retold through social media in such powerful ways. This year (2023), a half

6 *Arpilleras* are a type of folk art created largely by women in Chile to document the political violence at a time when assembling in groups of more than two people was not allowed, according to military law. As a result, *arpilleras* have become a powerful source of storytelling and memory surrounding human rights abuses in Chile.

century after the coup, there have been many commemorative events acknowledging those who were executed or disappeared and sharing stories, such as this one about my aunt, with Chilean publics. I cried in my hotel room as I prepared to give a talk about contemporary right-wing attacks on "gender ideology" at the conference.

This photo of the young child drinking milk is emblematic of the much broader historical moment Amy captured in her photography from 1971 to 1974. She captured the soul of a nation hopeful for better lives for the majority, not just for the privileged few. More than her material possessions, Amy loved her photos—and photos in general—that capture the affective dimensions of people's lives, suffering, and care.

Amy Conger's legacy will continue. In bringing some of her ashes to Santiago, I brought part of her home to her adopted home. With the help of a dear friend of hers, her ashes will be placed in the MIR Memorial Mausoleum at the General Cemetery in Santiago. Perhaps ironically, it is easier to talk about her story now than it was when she was alive. This, then, is just the beginning of a much longer story in the making. I will continue to learn from her as my ancestor. And she will guide me and many others as we continue to navigate politics, seek forms of repair, and imagine a more just future.

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