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DISSIDENCES

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Memory Sites: From Auratic Spaces to a Cyberspace of Peruvian Memorials

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The report of the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission was published eight years ago. Since then, Peruvian society has been struggling with uncovering the tens of thousands of crimes against humanity perpetrated by both guerrilla organizations and state armed forces. The aftermath of what has been called the “internal conflict” is still an important part of the political arena. During the 2011 presidential election the two candidates who polarized the country had important ties to the period of violence studied by the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Ollanta

Humala's record on human rights during the internal conflict of the 1980s and 1990s is still not completely clear, and Keiko Fujimori, daughter of Alberto Fujimori, now convicted for human rights abuses, promised to continue the legacy of her father (seen by some as a leader who defeated the Shining Path and brought economic stability to Peru).

Ollanta Humala won by a slight margin and promised to fight for democracy and defend human rights. However, recent statements by his Minister of Defense, Daniel Mora, used the phrase "punto final" regarding crimes perpetrated by members of the armed forces [1]. Although he has since denied an intention on the part of the government to give amnesty to perpetrators of crimes against human rights, his declarations have created great controversies regarding the position of the government on this issue. The past is very much present in Peruvian political life and these debates about the internal conflict take the shape of memory projects on the cultural front [1].

These memory projects and the debates around them articulate the past from different perspectives. They bring forth the need for a community either to acknowledge its violent history, mourn or offer reparations, or to achieve forms of closure which for some might imply forgetting or "moving on" [2]. Among the projects that foster remembrance, we can see different understandings of the labors of memory: some memory sites try to create an aura, an attempt to feel the presence of what has been lost by designing a space for reflection [3]. Some are linked to places that witnessed traumatic events [4]. Some strive to reconstruct communal identity [5].

In this paper, however, I want to pay special attention to the way every day original works sprouting up in new media such as blogs and social networks strive to inscribe memory in the actualization of the here and now. While this paper is part of a larger project that will address the different approaches to memory present in initiatives dealing with the Peruvian internal conflict, its aim is to highlight the proliferation of memory sites on the internet and to establish the specificity of the use of Facebook by a particular project entitled Un día en la memoria.

Analyzing internet sites forces us to move away from the now well-established link between space and memory. Memory studies have reflected widely on the fact that lieux de mémoire are necessary in societies disconnected from their history. In the words of Pierre Nora “There are lieux de mémoire because there are no longer milieux de mémoire, real environments of memory.” (7) In Peru, the most prominent initiative, El lugar de la memoria, has provoked numerous debates about what such a space should be, where it should be located, and what kind of collections it would include [6]. However, the internet interface could happen anywhere. It is not a matter of location anymore, and this prompts new questions about the way new technologies might help us connect with the past.

Despite the impulse to disavow the cultural and political impact of digital media, these new memory sites in cyberspace articulate alternative forms of community formation and should be given proper attention, especially when considering the evidence of the proliferation and the impact of recent “Facebook revolutions” around the globe [7]. In a strategy that differs greatly from the quiet meditation some memory sites seek, these cyberspace projects act as a “poke,” an insistent reminder that intrudes in the recipient’s current instant as both a memento and a warning that links past and present.

In her book Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture Alison Landsberg suggests that modernity, with its destabilization of traditional forms of community and their habitual forms of memory transmission, also brings forth technologies of mass communication which bridge time and space: a film, for example, can “transport” us to a different historical period or a country we have never visited. These new technologies allow for the construction of “memories” shared by large numbers of individuals who did not originally experience certain events. Although Landsberg develops her notion of “prosthetic memory” in the context of film in the United States starting at the beginning of the 20th century, it

clearly illuminates the case of memory sites on the internet. One of the things Landsberg stresses is the rupture of forms of communal life and this is still certainly one of the traits of our “globalized” societies, and even more true regarding communities dispersed as a result of a violent past: “the links between individual persons and community -kinship ties- were broken, and alternative methods for the transmission and dissemination of memories were required.” (2)

Not all of the characteristics Landsberg attributes to prosthetic memories are part of the experience of memory through the internet I describe (20). But this internet experience embodies some of the most important traits of “prosthetic memories”: they are not “natural” memories of a lived experience; they are exchangeable and commodified; they are instrumental. [8] For Landsberg the experience at the movie theater or at a museum is a form of “prosthetic memory” since it has the ability to create an interface between the individual and a historical narrative about the past: “In this moment of contact, an experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history....” (2) Landsberg finds that different media and different experiences are capable of producing “prosthetic memories.” What I suggest is that internet sites are creating this kind of interface by adhering to the utopian quality of cyberspace, exchanging the spatial site for a temporal one that links the current instant with the traumatic past.

Away from the original sites of conflicts and from spaces especially created to foster reflection, internet sites of memory around the Peruvian internal conflict proliferate and fulfill different purposes. They galvanize different imagined communities: an international community created by those concerned with human rights abuses, on the one hand; on the other hand, they appeal to Peruvians both in the country and abroad, who are interpellated by the “Never again” motto.

There is a wide variety of internet pages related to Peruvian memory projects. Almost as soon as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission started its website, other sites either connected or

responded to it [9]. Some newer pages such as <http://espaciosdememoria.pe> work as databases that map memorials around the country. Others are linked to specific organizations, such as Desaparecidos, ¿hasta cuándo?, created by the EPAF (Equipo Peruano de Antropología Forense). However, my interest in this paper is to examine the role of Facebook memory sites as initiatives that greatly differ from the traditional ideas we might have about spaces of remembrance.

The potential of Facebook in the construction of imagined communities has become evident by recent uprisings in the Middle East, but it is still largely unexplored. [10] The idea of virtual communities, nonetheless, is not new anymore. Studies on virtual communities have been circulating for almost two decades now, and their impact on global studies and on the study of different national diasporas cannot be disregarded. [11]

Facebook hosts a number of pages connected to the idea of maintaining the memory of the victims of the internal conflict in Peru. These pages include initiatives by non-profit organizations such as Equipo Peruano de Antropología Forense, as well as individual or group initiatives, such as Arte por la Memoria, or Taller de Estudios sobre Memoria Yuyachkanchik. However, Un día en la memoria seems to incarnate clearly the Facebook mechanism for basic interaction, the “poke.”

Facebook defines the “poke” as a way to say “hello” and call the attention of the “poked” user through a notification. The project “Un día en la memoria” does not exactly “poke” creating a notification, but it does call the attention of those in their contact list through periodical postings in their wall. The postings are artwork created by visual artist Mauricio Delgado Castillo. Each of the posters carry the title “Un día como hoy” and the current day to commemorate a specific event occurred during the internal conflict. For example, the heading for May 11 1984 is “One more student disappeared.” The poster carries the title “Un día como hoy,” the date, and a black and white id photo covered with red paint. The text is sparse: “Jesús Dionisio Pariona, student of the school of social sciences at Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, is detained in Huamanga,

Ayacucho. Disappeared to date.” Most of the postings use archival news photos in a collage and account for killings by either terrorist groups or state forces.

Un día en la memoria, like other Facebook pages, has a link to its blog, but it is its Facebook activity that I want to explore. The information tab for the page defines its mission:

Un día en la memoria is an intervention in the virtual public space that attempts to show the magnitude and the level of brutality created by the internal armed conflict in Peru. By compiling, exhibiting and representing the events, and using art as a platform, its goal is to go beyond the cold and abstract numbers to humanize and to highlight each case. (My translation)

In a style that evokes black light posters from the 1970s, the wall entries of Un día en la memoria strike the viewer by their use of contrasting black and neon colors. Human figures often appear as black shadows, either as victims or perpetrators. The postings document crimes against humanity perpetrated by both the armed forces and by the Shining Path. They mostly do not seem to take sides. Occasionally, there is a reference to “Fujimori’s dictatorship,” as in the posting for May 6: the Facebook wall reads “Another date to commemorate ‘la dictadura fujimorista.’” The artwork itself, however, uses a language that seems to be just stating the facts and refraining from judgment and emotion. The “poke” does not call for our feelings, just our attention. The kind of language and images used appeal to archival information and thus create a new archive of terrible facts to remember.

The postings of Un día en la memoria are far removed from the auratic space that could conjure up the presence of all that has been lost. They operate in a completely different manner, irrupting, like an uncomfortable poke, in the quotidian space of internet navigation. While Facebook is used to deliver political and commercial propaganda, and perhaps even for professional purposes, it is still considered mainly a “social network,” a cyberspace used to keep in touch with friends and

relatives, to share pictures, and trivia. People do not log in to Facebook to work or to reflect about the past. It is mostly used as a form of light entertainment, and that is perhaps why the interventions of Un día en la memoria are so powerful, because they impose the remembrance of the violence into the daily lives of the users. The retro look of some of the artwork and the fact that it commemorates tragic anniversaries every day, connect the past and the present, the lived instant with the painful history of the country.

A common question regarding memorials has to do with their intended audience. The majority of the victims and relatives of the victims of the violence in Peru were disenfranchised citizens and we may assume that they still might not have access to Facebook. In a personal communication Mauricio Delgado mentioned that there are some prints being produced and that he is requesting funds to increase the number of print copies, but he was targeting mainly what he calls the “virtual public space.” Unlike the local memorials that try to rebuild a sense of community among those closest to the conflict, these kinds of initiatives appeal to those who were not directly affected by the violence in the hope to create a sense of responsibility in an extended imaginary community.

By posting reminders of traumatic events on an almost daily basis Un día en la memoria irrupts into the comfortable routine of the Facebook users. It tells us that we cannot just “move on.”

Like other initiatives, this one has its limitations. The most obvious one, mentioned above, is that those who are disenfranchised do not have internet access and they end up being excluded from participating in this memory practice, as they are excluded from so many other experiences of citizenship. Another important limit is that one needs to be either “friends” with Un día como hoy, or be in the sphere of somebody else who sees its wall postings to see them appear in the list of notifications. This limits the Facebook audience to a self-selected group. One could also argue that

the repetitive nature of the act might result in invisibility or in numbness: how many daily massacres can we really remember?

However, every “Un día como hoy” poster forces the viewer to recognize the facts. The striking graphic art and the matter-or-fact language do not appeal to our emotions. It is not necessarily about evoking empathy, an important element in other memory projects [12]. Un día en la memoria inserts daily reminders of the extremes of state and guerrilla violence in our calendars with a simple message: “This happened. Do not forget.” The project provides us with “prosthetic memories” to make up for the memories we lack. Perhaps we knew about what happened that day twenty years ago, and forgot; perhaps we were too young; perhaps our daily experience was far removed from such atrocities. Un día en la memoria provides us with an unmistakable reminder that these things happened in our world.

While official initiatives such as El Lugar de la Memoria seemed at times to be embargoed both by debates and by the difficulties of bringing such a large-scale project to fruition, Un día en la memoria confronts us with the need to face the violent facts of recent history.

Notes

[1] “Punto final” is the name of the law signed by the Argentinian congress in 1986 to end the investigation and prosecution of people accused of political violence before 1983. In 2005 this law, along with the “ley de obediencia debida,” was voided as unconstitutional. In the Peruvian current context these declarations have created great controversies regarding the commitment of the government to punish crimes against humanity by the military (see, for example, Torres).

[2] In “The Minefields of Memory” Elizabeth Jelin reminds us how the emphasis on “reconciliation” and the idea of a time of “order and progress” during dictatorships are some of the common struggles of dealing with the past in transitional societies.

[3] In a previous paper I examined the idea of auratic space in the first installation of Yuyanapaq, the photo exhibit created by the Peruvian TRC. The desire for a space of reflection is clearly expressed in the design of the Lugar de la memoria, a memory museum under construction in Lima. For an in-depth examination of the debates around this museum see Milton and Ulfe.

[4] One particular art project dealt with the actual site of a mass grave in a very haunting way. See <http://www.micromuseo.org.pe/rutas/habanacantuta/index.html> for the exhibit organized by Gustavo Buntix and Victor Vich regarding Ricardo Wiese's intervention on the hills of Cieneguilla, where the bodies of nine students and a faculty member assassinated during Fujimori's regime were found.

[5] This need to recover the past beyond the history of violence is clear in the research coordinated by Félix Reátegui and published under the title Los sitios de la memoria: Procesos sociales de la conmemoración en el Perú. For example the mural paintings in the "plaza de armas" of Putacca include representations of myths and references to town institutions. (36)

[6] See Ulfe, and Milton and Ulfe.

[7] The phrase "Facebook revolution" has been a presence in the media in the last few months. In the case of Tunisia and Egypt, several articles try to assess the impact of social networks in political upheaval: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/11/egypt-facebook-revolution-wael-ghonim_n_822078.html?view=print, <http://www.newsweek.com/2011/01/15/tunisia-protests-the-facebook-revolution.html>.

[8] Landsberg calls the kinds of experiences she studies "prosthetic memories" because of four reasons: a) they are not "organic," but derived from a mediated representation; b) they are bodily experienced, like an artificial limb; c) they are a mass produced commodity, which she refuses from characterizing in strictly negative ways; and d) they are useful in the sense that they can produce empathy, social responsibility, and political alliances. (20-1) The internet experiences I describe share

many of these qualities, but I do not think they necessarily “move” the user in the ways some other mediated representations can, and the feelings of empathy experienced by film audiences are an important part of Landsbeg’s argument.

[9] An interesting example was a site entitled “Y después de la CVR, ¿qué?” (“And after the TRC, what?”) published by APRODEH, Asociación Pro Derechos Humanos, which included many of the reports and recommendations by the TRC, but also made a concerted effort to consign local initiatives regarding memorials around cases of violence studied by the TRC. The page Yuyarisun, estamos recordando received the INFOLAC Web Award in 2005 for the best online museum for marginal groups: <http://yuyarisun.rcp.net.pe/>. It collects testimonies of violence in four genres: drawings, comic strips, poetry, and song.

[10] After the recent uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt the media started using the phrase “Facebook revolution”: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/11/egypt-facebook-revolution-wael-ghonim_n_822078.html?view=print; <http://www.newsweek.com/2011/01/15/tunisia-protests-the-facebook-revolution.html>. Even before the events in the Middle East, Facebook had been used to promote social and political movements at a large scale, such as the “Million voices against FARC” march, which coordinated events in 185 cities around the world. However, there are no in depth studies yet about the political impact of social networks.

[11] In 1993, Howard Rheingold published the first edition of The Virtual Community: Homesteading in the Electronic Frontier. It was revised for the MIT Press in 2000. More recent studies focus on the specific experience of immigrants who use the internet to connect with issues regarding their countries of origin, like Kehbuma Langmia’s case study of the Cameroonian diaspora’s construction of a public sphere on the internet.

[12] Previously, I’ve discussed the role of empathy in the use of photography by the TRC (Saona 2010) and in the photo exhibit created by Domingo Giribaldi in collaboration with EPAF (Saona

“Las cosas”). Empathy is an important element in what Landsberg calls “prosthetic memory” and in Kaja Silverman’s notion of “heteropathic memory,” however, I believe that the kind of representation of facts used by Un día en la memoria tries to stay away from emotions to present a collection of facts.

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