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Stephenie Young

*Salem State University, Massachusetts, syoung2@salemstate.edu*

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Stephenie Young  
Salem State University

How might art, in a multitude of forms, elicit collective memory in a place such as post-conflict Peru?

When the *Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, (Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación -referred to as the “CVR”), began to meet in the years after the fall of the Fujimori government in 2001, they saw an opportunity for Peruvians to create their own memory initiative about the political violence that had plagued the country for two decades (1). They hoped that this creative initiative would serve a unique community in a unique situation and ultimately stimulate a proliferation of “diverse forms of memorialization” for a general Peruvian public that may have little or no recollection of the represented events but may still be “capable of understanding and identifying with the loss” of those who are both “victims and survivors” of social trauma in their country (Saona 1-2). It is the aim of Margarita Saona in her study *Memory Matters in Transitional Peru* to look at how collective memory, art and “other forms of intervention in the cultural arena” intersect as a way to memorialize in post-conflict Peru. Two of Saona’s main questions are: How does the CVR articulate its message to the general population (and exactly what is the message that it wishes to convey) and how can we imagine and step into the memories of others? (38)

In her introduction, “Peruvian Memory Matters,” Saona carefully unpacks some reasons for why memory in Peru is something necessary and important to the population, yet also a matter of debate. She focuses on the CVR, the first of its kind in Latin America, and the way that it “would make public the truth” about what happened from 1980 when the Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso*) came on the scene until the ousting of president Alberto Fujimori two decades later. In the following three chapters Saona articulates the mediums through which the concept of “truth” in Peru is circulated through different artistic practices: “diverse forms of memorialization -photojournalism, artistic photography, artisanal paintings, public monuments, exhibits, museums, and websites” (3). Her burning question is how art can create an empathetic link between the indigenous Peruvians, who were most of the “victims and survivors of social trauma,” and the rest of the population, “who might not have actual recollection of the events” (2) but still may identify with the trauma and loss of those victims. In other words, there may be the potential for art to act as a conduit, to aid the translation of individual experiences into a national collective identity based on empathy.

In Saona’s second chapter, “Seeing Knowing, Feeling: Conveying Truth and Emotion through Images,” photojournalism is a tool that might help to “see the truth” and create a “visual legacy” (44) for Peru. She focuses on the groundbreaking photo exhibit that was sponsored by the CVR and entitled *Yuyanapaq*. This Quechua word was translated as “Para recordar” in Spanish and “In Order to Remember” in English. The title evokes a set of complications, as Saona explains, because the Quechua word was also interpreted in Spanish as “despertarse” or “waking up” by the CVR president Salomón Lerner Febres, showing the subtleties of the term (39). These photographs were to operate on many different levels as memory devices and to urge the population to “wake up”. Many Peruvians remained “oblivious” to the crimes that were committed around them, and as they stand in front of these photographs now they need to

“become aware of this terrible violence and memorialize it” (40). Through a detailed discussion about photography’s believability factor, Saona repeatedly refers to Susan Sontag’s thoughtful reflections on the medium and her well-known statements such as: “Photographs furnish evidence. . .” (52). Saona considers how photographs may evoke emotions in viewers distanced from the original scene and discusses the impactful ideas of various photo theorists, including Marianne Hirsch’s idea of “heteropathic memory,” in which “the imagination needs to bridge a distance –temporal, spatial, or cultural–with the suffering of others” (62). In the second half of the chapter Saona shifts from the CVR’s goals to a discussion about an alternative representation of violence and possibility for collective memory through artisanal paintings created about the region of Ayacucho where the worst human rights violations were committed by both sides of the conflict. For Saona, these photographs and paintings “add a layer of signification that is non-verbal” and indicate the effort to create a kind of “collaborative ethnography” of events that explore “new ways of reconstructing memory” (69, 68).

Saona examines both photography and objects in Chapter 3, “Plain Things and Names.” Here she looks at how alternative forms of representation of violence in Peru complicate the country’s on-going challenge to represent the process of memorialization for a population with a diverse experience of the conflict. Although it is somewhat brief, I found this chapter to be one of the most provocative parts of her book. Saona focuses on memory initiatives, and one in particular, a memorial sculpture by the Dutch-born artist Lika Mutal entitled “El ojo que llora,” is a compelling project about inscription and memory. Saona emphasizes how a project like Mutal’s invokes “mnemonic mechanisms,” which she explains as the “processes by which we recognize and remember actual experiences” (75). In this chapter, she also emphasizes the vital issue of the way that an object stands in for the loss of the owner of that object, but also for the absence of the body of the missing or deceased. She is able to articulate the complicated way that memory in post-conflict Peru is tangled up in the questions of how to memorialize violence (through, for example, children’s objects found in mass graves), who exactly are the victims and the victimizers, and who should the empathic aesthetics focus upon.

Chapter 4, “Places to Remember,” is not so much a conclusion to a compelling study as a captivating introduction to the future of memory in Peru and to the potential ways that we might configure spaces of memory for generations to come in this and other global zones (physical and virtual) where memory is contested. In this chapter Saona takes up the issue of “officially sanctioned spaces” of memory in contrast to, or perhaps alongside, “those that have resulted from private initiatives” (95). It is also in this last chapter where Saona, a native-born Peruvian, more explicitly implicates herself and her investment in the subject matter as a sort of collector of memory artifacts. As Saona turns her examination towards less formalized projects that are paving the future of memory for Peru, such as the role of the mainstream digital site of Facebook or the experimental and incendiary traveling exhibits of “El museo itinerante,” I find her tone less distant, less academic, and more inclusive. As she inserts “I” more often into her language, she simultaneously recounts more personal encounters with memory in Peru such as her experience of witnessing the burial of victims of the conflict and her interviews with artists. It is also notable that she includes her own photographs (as she does throughout the book) to document the lesser-known memorials that continue to spring up throughout her homeland.

Although Saona’s focus is squarely on Peru, it is easy to appreciate how the larger ideas that frame her discussion offer ways to consider how aesthetics, truth, and empathy are intertwined and intimately connected to how we understand individual and collective memory and their mutual implications. Saona’s objects of study and the way that she theorizes them also

offer ways of thinking about how other post-conflict societies are still grappling with the aftermath of violence in their countries—think of Argentina, Bosnia, Guatemala. Another strength of this book is that she draws on a diversity of sources including art, academic scholarship, journalism, and court documents not only from Latin American sources but from around the globe. Nor does Saona shy away from using some of the classic works on collective memory (Halbwachs) and trauma (Laub) to enter into a dialogue about how truth and memory are manipulated during the transitional process.

Saona ends her book by reminding us of the CVR's motto: "A country that forgets its history is condemned to repeat it" but adds her own perceptive comment that we must also consider the counterpart, "that a country that remembers its history will not repeat it" (130). Whether this is the case for Peru is yet to be seen.