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The Political Art of Memory in Latin America

Víctor Vich and Alexandra Hibbett

Translated by Luke Urbain

Today, memory is understood as a contested field in which practices, discourses, and representations aim to install a new social imaginary.¹ In Latin America, it has also become a central paradigm for the production, consumption, and evaluation of cultural representations that aim to have a positive social impact by representing violent pasts: to dignify victims, address trauma, grieve, confront authoritarianism, consolidate democracy, promote human rights, and achieve new conditions for social justice. This understanding of memory as ever-incomplete and constantly under review confronts every kind of heroic narrative, triumphalist discourse, and practice of denial that would otherwise foreclose lived history.

The so-called memory boom described by Andreas Huyssen, Anne Whitehead, and others can be observed in nearly every Latin American country. It consists in three dynamics. First, the rise of international human rights and processes of transitional justice have encouraged the creation of various truth commissions and memorials.² Second, social and victim-based organizations have found effective ways of sharing the truth about what happened and demanding reparations. And third, many intellectuals, following repressions and failures, have suspended their leftist militancy and realigned themselves as human rights academics or activists.

Political violence throughout Latin America has been an extreme sign of the failure to construct just and egalitarian nations. Despite this similarity, the histories of each country have varied strongly. Political violence in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil, where state terrorism was by far the main cause of human rights violations, contrasts with contexts like Peru, where a fundamentalist group directly confronted the population, and democratic governments responded in the worst way possible. In Guatemala and El Salvador, violence was fundamentally directed at Indigenous communities, while the Colombian case stands out due to both its extremely long duration, and the decentralized complexity of its multiple actors: guerillas, armed forces, paramilitaries, and drug traffickers, among others. Also of note for their length are the dictatorships of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic and Alfredo Stroessner in Paraguay, both of which lasted more than thirty years. To speak of memory in Latin America thus entails attending to contextual differences as well as to the threads or knots that connect this heterogeneity.

While undoubtedly memory discourse has mobilized parts of the political sphere, and above all different activist groups, in advocating for important legal proceedings, the cultural

sector's role in raising this flag as an instrument for social change should not be ignored. In almost all these countries, the production of symbolic representations has been not only abundant but, in many cases, decisive in advancing certain political agendas. Films, documentaries, poetry, novels, visual interventions, performances, theater, music, and memorials have come to play a key role in the renewal of Latin America's historical and political discourses.

In what follows, we discuss the main issues that memory cultural production has engaged with: the status and role of victims, the dynamics of trauma and grief, and the defense of human rights as part of a process of social democratization. We then consider today's new and emerging voices in memory cultural production, and lastly we evaluate the possibilities and dangers implicit in the memory paradigm. The memory works in which we take interest here are but a small sample of the many that aim to change hegemonic languages, bring about new political visibilities, and propose unprecedented strategies for representing the collectivity.³

The Victim

In recent decades, the victim burst into the Latin American political sphere as a new social actor. Beyond offering evidence of the horror of violence, the victim quickly became a sign of a structural flaw in the model of the postcolonial nation. The emergence of the victim has been decisive for new constitutions, innovative policies, the protection of human rights, and diverse forms of reparation.

In Latin America, victims have not just taken to the streets. A countless number of symbolic representations, produced by them or by others, have also made them visible social actors and helped amplify their previously silent voices. The emergence of the *testimonio* [testimony] genre was key to this process. This new discursive form challenged traditional literary genres and eroded fiction as literature's central category, while it simultaneously began to serve political functions. *Tejas verdes* (1974), by the Chilean Hernán Valdés, marked the beginning of what many other Latin American testimonies would do: narrate what official history ignored and show how violence cruelly desubjectivizes victims, reducing them to their bodily suffering.⁴ On the other hand, over the past few decades, many directly affected populations, migrant associations in cities, and Indigenous groups have used their own artistic languages to give accounts of their experiences. Examples include *arpilleras* [textile images] in Chile or the series *Piraa causa* [Who Is to Blame?] of the Sarhua community in Peru. Hence, testimony and testimonial arts have emerged as symbolic and political reconstitutions that question the role of the state while also denouncing the limited access some groups have to representation in the public sphere.

Due to its value as proof, capacity to extend communal empathy, and inexhaustible power of suggestion in the face of unrepresentable horror, photography has also been decisive in the representation of the victim on the continent. Despite its asceticism, photo-identification, used early-on by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, became the most convincing image of (and weapon for protesting against) forced disappearances. Later, the exhibition *Yuyanapaq* [In Order to Remember] (2003–) in Peru was a milestone in Latin America, exposing how the country's violence was inseparable from the social exclusion of large, principally rural, and Indigenous populations.⁵

At the same time, many testimonies have inspired fiction that represents the experience of victims and aims to encourage empathy in previously indifferent audiences. For example, the novel *Los ejércitos* [The Armies] (2007) by Colombian Evelio Rosero offers an overwhelming representation of violence from the perspective of a bewildered victim. The conflict is

presented as the chaotic sum of incomprehensible forces, where there are no guiding ideologies on any side. This novel makes the responsibility of several actors clear—the guerilla forces, the army, drug traffickers, paramilitaries, a corrupt civil government, and a church paralyzed by fear. In addition to suffering in the flesh, the victim is witness here to the total deterioration of social bonds.

While the vast majority of these works consider victims from a national perspective, Chilean Alfredo Jaar's work is different insofar it puts the topic of violence on an international stage. Jaar's highly publicized works have represented everything from the Rwandan genocide and clandestine torture sites in Afghanistan and Thailand to discrimination against migrants in the United States and Europe. "Geometría de la consciencia" [The Geometry of Consciousness] (2010) can be seen in the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos in Santiago. Through the play of light and dark, the silhouettes of five hundred people who were disappeared during the Chilean military coup emerge on a basement wall, creating an effect of endlessness and universality.

The centrality given to the figure of the victim, however, has also had its disadvantages. On one hand, the victim versus perpetrator binary has, in certain senses, been an obstacle to the historical comprehension of profoundly complex facts; on the other, the victim has often been inserted into colonial tutelary practices. Thus, many representations tend to create a "pure" victim, devoid of agency and complexity, which in some countries has become entwined with racial stereotypes. This fails to acknowledge the importance of their struggles before, during, and after the conflicts, as well as the grey zones in which many acted. It must also be said that states have often promoted the mere inclusion of those affected in institutions designed without their participation, without attending to cultural difference and without considering their political interests.

Beyond these problems, the emergence of victims and their different representations has been fundamental to obtaining legal victories, symbolic reparations, and changes in aesthetic and symbolic languages. Perhaps the most important evidence of their impact has been the incarceration of many perpetrators, including former presidents.

Trauma

Symbolic representation has an essential role in the face of trauma—trauma defined as the destructive effect, on the subject, of a violence that exceeds the limits of the representable and whose force is felt long after the event. In Latin America, many representations have insisted on the violent past as insurmountable and on the permanence of negativity or failure, and are thus constant reminders of the limits of all possible reparations. As is well known, trauma has a temporality of its own in which the past, so to speak, does not pass. A dimension of the past is never fully assimilated nor completely resolved, and therefore can always return. A poetic example of this is *Nostalgia de la luz* [Nostalgia for the Light] (2010), a documentary by Patricio Guzmán. In it, the unknown stories of human remains left by the dictatorship and found in the Atacama desert are connected with astronomical insights on the origin of the universe attained in that very same desert through powerful telescopes. Mothers and family members looking for something on earth are the counterpoints of scientists looking toward the infinite universe. The local and the cosmos, space and time, the past and the future, the political and the metaphysical become indistinguishable.

The Argentine film *La historia oficial* [The Official Story] (1985) approaches trauma as a way to denounce both past violence and the present status quo.⁶ In it, Alicia is forced to recognize not only her country's history, but also her own personal responsibility for it: she was

an accomplice in the adoption of a child stolen from militants who were murdered by the dictatorship. By the time Alicia is capable of recognizing what really happened, it is too late. Horror is not directly represented here; the unrepresentable trauma is insinuated in small allusions that culminate in a profound critique not only of the dictatorship, but also of the bourgeois family.⁷

An “aesthetics of negativity,” which hinges on the faults, silences, and failures of representation itself, has been fundamental to making trauma visible and political.⁸ The poetry book *Carta abierta* [Open Letter] (1980) by Juan Gelman, addressed to his disappeared son, introduces a lyrical language that collapses under the weight of phonic repetition, thus bringing to the fore the return of an unbearable loss. In the same vein, the poem “Cadáveres” [Corpses] (1982) by Néstor Perlonger uses a negative aesthetic to denounce what official discourse denies. His strategy consists in taking what was then a familiar phrase—“there are corpses”—and repeating it *ad nauseam*, thus uncovering the interstices of dominant truths and insisting on what they tend to hide.⁹ Similarly, during Pinochet’s dictatorship in Chile, *La escena de avanzada* [The Advanced Scene] staged various interventions at the margins of existing political and artistic institutions; from these places, they proposed new, eristic symbols of social resistance. Whether through experimental writing (Diamela Eltit), performance (Carlos Leppe), photography (Carlos Altamirano, Eugenio Dittborn), or intervention in public spaces (Colectivo Acciones de Arte or CADA, Lotty Rosenfeld), this group of artists sought to give a political account of the trauma of the coup, interrupting the inertia of the everyday in order to challenge established consensuses.¹⁰

Under the same paradigm, the work of Regina José Galindo, a Guatemalan artist who stages harrowing performances in which she makes herself vulnerable to the numerous instances of violence, is noteworthy. In one of these, *Quién puede borrar las huellas* [Who can erase the traces] (2003), she submerges her feet in blood before walking barefoot from the Constitutional Court to the National Palace of Guatemala, leaving a trail of bloody footprints that make visible the systematic violence suffered by Indigenous Mayans and ignored by the ruling classes of the country. Her performances—now seen many thousands of times on YouTube—force their audiences to confront trauma and assume the role of witness.

Other artists have chosen to represent trauma through the dynamics of grief. If all trauma implies a process of desubjectivation, grief is, on the contrary, an attempt to cope and to process. The poetry of Raúl Zurita can be interpreted in this light. His rhetorical strategies—spatial metaphors, syntactical ruptures, dynamic verbs, use of various grammatical persons, fragmentation of the poem, decomposition of the utterance, use of choral voices, and a prophetic tone—trace the outlines of unrepresentable trauma while at the same time responding to it. This is a poetry that dismantles “coherent” national discourse and constructs a redemptive view of history. In Zurita’s verses, the individual gives way to the community and art recovers a mythical dimension.

As Dominick LaCapra explains, collective grief refers to the process through which repressed memories are partially accepted as part of a community’s unending effort to liberate itself from its traumas. LaCapra emphasizes that certain cultural initiatives—critical, self-reflexive ones that are sustained over time—help cope with trauma’s repetition and, modestly, contribute to social change.¹¹ An example of this is Ricardo Wiese’s intervention in Peru (1995), which consisted of painting ten human-sized *cantutas*—Andean flowers that represent, in this case, university students murdered by soldiers—in the place where the bodies were hidden. The symbolic inscription of death within a solemn public ritual constituted an act of mourning. The paintings gave form to what was lost, and they were also a statement against disappearance and impunity in Peru.¹²

The work of Colombian sculptor Doris Salcedo has also been guided by the need to represent loss and to grieve. Her images, ever loaded with an unsettling silence, suggest an intimate experience with the pain of others. Objects dislocated from the everyday emerge as symbolic traces of forgotten histories. Her installations in the streets of Bogotá and in many cities around the world reveal the effects of violence and work to mend the social fabric through acts of community. Works like *Plegaria muda* [Silent Prayer]—tables arranged like coffins, from which leaves of grass emerge—offer an image of the possibility of reconstructing life after violence.

Latin American cultural objects have thus represented trauma in order to make a politics of and with it. The insistence on an endless negativity and on the impossibility of representation, or the focus on the process of working through, restoring, and resubjectivizing, both take on important political functions. Ultimately, the former critiques the idea of linear, homogenous temporality, hence destabilizing official heroic, triumphalist narratives and questioning superficial peace deals or the innocence of reparation programs. The latter, for its part, seeks to elaborate and process pain or, more precisely, to relocate it in another chain of signifiers to construct of new routes toward a different future.

Democracy

Memory cultural production has always been linked to social movements that struggle to radicalize democracy. Even though it is not clear that cultural production and social action come to constitute a unified whole, each has in some way marked the conditions of possibility of the other. Memory is a field where theoretical and symbolic concerns are articulated and in which cultural actors, political initiatives, and organized activism converge.

The places of memory that have multiplied across the continent are important in this sense, as they articulate cultural representation with forms of activism, functioning as mechanisms for pressuring states into taking responsibility for the past. Many sites have been created to show how nation states were unable to control complex processes of violence and to demonstrate that state agents often became perpetrators who systematically violated human rights. There are places constructed at the very scene of the violence, such as Villa Grimaldi, a detention center on the outskirts of Santiago de Chile, or the Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA) in Buenos Aires. There are, of course, memorials, such as the Memorial da Resistência in São Paulo, the monument *Tortura nunca mais* [Torture Never Again] in Recife, Brazil, and the Memorial de recordación de los detenidos desaparecidos [Memorial for the Remembrance of Disappeared Detainees] in Uruguay. There are plazas and parks, such as Parque de la Memoria in Buenos Aires, and, of course, there are places that were created in order to offer new narratives of the violent past, examples of which are the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos [Museum of Memory and Human Rights] in Chile, the Museo de la Memoria (MUME) in Uruguay, and the Lugar de la Memoria y Reconciliación Social [Place of Memory and Social Reconciliation or LUM] in Peru. Today, places like these are multiplying across the continent, and are often connected with public educational programs as well as diverse forms of activism. At the same time, they are the disputed terrains of a variety of conflicts over memory.

Many collectives have shed light upon the horror of what happened through their tireless interventions in public space. The group *Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio* [Children for Identity and Justice and against Forgetting and Silence, or HIJOS] began to have a large impact in Argentina through the performative occupation of public space. Its members approach passersby and ask: “Do you know that you live next to a torturer?”

Do you know that while you were cooking *milanesas* people were being tortured in these parts?” Known as *escraches*, these events—in general organized close to the home of the torturer—make collective trauma visible, demand punishment and reparation, and engage the idea of “family heritage.” These actions have helped reinvigorate activism and the methods through which memory is transmitted from one generation to the next.¹³

In other cases, theater companies have worked alongside the fight for memory. For more than fifty consecutive years, Teatro La Candelaria has staged the history of Colombia in many collective works. In this same vein, the group Yuyachkani has become one of the most important references for current Latin American theater through a heterodox theatrical method and tireless commitment to representing the constitutive antagonisms of the Peruvian nation. This group has taken its creations to the streets in protests and to accompany official proceedings, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. These examples show that the study of memory in Latin America entails recognizing how various types of actors are articulated simultaneously across artistic and political arenas.¹⁴

New Voices

Victims, organized civil society, and artist collectives have been the principal actors in memory discourse. In their footsteps, others have created spaces to share their experiences. On one hand, politicians, soldiers, and other powerful groups have begun to appropriate some of memory’s tropes to give an account of events using their own paradigms and in their own interests. In Central America, many former guerrillas or writers who participated in governments that took power in the wake of violence have written memoirs that differ from traditional testimony because of their extreme individualism, because they were not produced from a position of subalternity, and because of their authors’ critical distance from their past roles. The texts of Ernesto Cardenal, Giacomina Belli, Sergio Ramírez, and Humberto Ortega are well known in this regard.¹⁵ In Peru, the army produced its own report on what happened, titled *En honor a la verdad* [To Tell the Truth], and also financed the production of a film, *Vidas paralelas* [Parallel Lives] (2008). At the same time, a captain, Carlos Enrique Freyre, has published novels whose circulation is growing.

Furthermore, today it is increasingly recognized that violence was and is gendered. Initially, most memory works depicted the past from a male perspective, which made it hard to understand its gendered dimension. Many new initiatives, however, account not only for the fact that women suffered terrible acts of violence during the conflicts—sexual violence, forced pregnancy, the abduction of their children, captivity, enslavement, obligatory abortion—but for the fact that violence’s entire logic is intimately related to deep-rooted ideas about virility, heteronormativity, and the role of women. Currently, several works denaturalize the *machista* discourse that sustained many crimes and abuses. For example, *Roza tumba quema* [Slash and Burn] (2018), a novel by Salvadorian Claudia Hernández, shows the unequal impact of the war on several generations of women, and reveals the connections between this violence and the roles assigned to the sexes.

On the other hand, the generation of the children of both victims and perpetrators has begun to unsettle the now-classic forms of cultural memory. Much of their work has tended toward autofiction and has experimented with hybrid discursive forms. The documentary *Los rubios* [The Blondes] (2003) was directed by Albertina Carri, the daughter of disappeared parents. It deconstructs the idea of univocal truth, including about the ostensible emancipator or revolutionary. By conducting interviews on the life of her parents, mixing in episodes of stop-motion animation, and showing the director’s discussions with the film’s production

team, the documentary renounces the idea of gaining complete access to the past, preferring the ludic and aesthetic gesture of confronting a complex mourning process with a creativity devoid of cynicism. The perspective and innovations of the new generation thus devise new tools to face the future, beyond the notions of blame and innocence.

Two Peruvian books also stand out for bringing new voices to the memory debate. *Los rendidos* [The Surrendered] (2015) by José Carlos Agüero is a text that, in its discursive decentering and self-consciousness, and in its mixture of testimony and academic essay, acknowledges the multiple angles from which political violence has yet to be addressed. By censoring his parents (who were members of Shining Path), distancing himself from any fundamentalist ideology, and at the same time denouncing numerous state, activist, and aesthetic practices, this text destabilizes the notion of the innocent victim to make room for that of the guilty victim. Meanwhile, *Memorias de un soldado desconocido* [When Rains Became Floods: A Child Soldier's Story] (2012), by Lurgio Gavilán, breaks with established narratives while elaborating the surprisingly varied positions he himself occupied during the violence. A member of the subversive group the Shining Path, a soldier, a member of the clergy and, lastly, an anthropologist who decided to tell his own story, Gavilán's voice undermines any simplistic division of friend and foe, hero and perpetrator.

Final Thoughts

In the fight for memory, one of the foremost dangers relates to what Jacques Rancière has called the “ethical turn,” which describes how today's ethics has begun to take the place of politics, and how past and present are being depoliticized within a neoliberal consensus. In memory productions, this has entailed a perspective that focuses on understanding actors as mere “victims” and depicts all attempts at social change as inevitable “catastrophes” that should be consigned firmly to the past. Within the ethical turn, memory does little to challenge the post-political consensus that limits the possibilities of the future to reforms within the status quo.

In this sense, many have noted how memory can end up as an aestheticized form of forgetting, and others have highlighted the importance of linking memory to collective actions for political change.¹⁶ It may be said in good faith that this theoretical and political problem results from having treated the past as *memory* as distinct from a *history* laden with antagonisms and political struggles, and connected to the present. For this reason, many actors today insist that memory cannot be a purely ethical ideal, but rather a discourse that, while warning against repeating past violence, also participates in long-term political struggles. The danger of memory in Latin America lies in some of its discourses promoting defensive, rather than proactive, proposals, and that its interventions end up sidelining all political risk.

In this vein, it seems key that economic relations, which are so crucial in the determination of social injustices, do not remain on the margins in our discussions on memory. Today it is clear that neoliberalism cannot have a clear conscience. Not only does it aggravate social inequalities, but it is itself the result of the brutal repression of its many dissidents. Memory, thus, implies insisting upon the construction of alternative political projects. Undoubtedly, one of the great traumas that we have inherited in Latin America is the failure of ambitious—yet urgent—projects of social transformation.

Notes

- 1 Jelin, *State Repression and La lucha*.
- 2 Truth commissions in Latin America have included the following: Comisión Nacional para la Investigación de Desapariciones Forzadas (Bolivia, 1982), Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición

- de Personas (Nunca más, 1984) (Argentina); Comisión Nacional de Verdad y Reconciliación (Informe Rettig, 1991) (Chile); La Comisión Nacional sobre Prisión Política y Tortura (Informe Valech, 1994) (Chile); Comisión de la Verdad de El Salvador (De la locura a la esperanza, 1993); Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (Los hechos hablan por sí mismos: Informe Preliminar sobre los Desaparecidos en Honduras, 2002); Comisión de la Verdad y la Reconciliación (Informe final, 2003) (Perú); Comisión de la Verdad de Panamá (La verdad os hará libres, 2002); Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación (Colombia, 2005–2011); Comisión de la Verdad y justicia (Informe, 2008) (Paraguay); Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (Guatemala, memoria del silencio, 2009), Comisión de la Verdad (Informe, 2010) (Ecuador).
- 3 We are including, in the category of *memory work*, works produced both during and after conflicts. Although earlier works sought to denounce present day violence rather than to remember it, they nevertheless have henceforth become tools for post-conflict memory.
 - 4 Rigoberta Menchú's very influential testimony undoubtedly captures her experience of violence, but it is a narrative that goes beyond her victimhood and has played a part in many different academic and political discussions.
 - 5 Clearly, the social origins of victims are different in each country and the types of violence unleashed upon them are varied. In some places, they were mostly leftist militants; in others, radicalized social groups; and in still others, rural Indigenous populations.
 - 6 Puenzo's *La historia oficial* was the first Latin American film to earn an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, which is suggestive of the impact it had in forging memory discourses and imaginaries internationally.
 - 7 Tomlinson, "Mapping," 218.
 - 8 Wajcman, *El objeto*.
 - 9 Palmeiro, "Locas," 19.
 - 10 Richard, *Márgenes*.
 - 11 LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust*.
 - 12 Vich, *Poéticas*.
 - 13 Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*.
 - 14 According to Lazzara, memory studies loses its relevance when it loses its connection to a social movement.
 - 15 Mackenbach, "Narrativas."
 - 16 On memory as aestheticized forgetting, see Osborne, "Truth," and Traverso "Melancolías." On the need to link memory to political action, see Lazzara, "The Memory Turn," 26.

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