

The Bicentennial turn. History overturned by memory

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In 2010 Chile inaugurated its *Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos* (The Museum of Memory and Human Rights) as part of the commemoration of the Bicentennial of Independence. This particular case illustrates the museological turn of the 21st century towards *memorial* museums, a new genre that characterizes representations of national identity.

All around the world, memorial museums, commemorative television series, monuments and counter-monuments, artistic practices and an abundant series of publications can serve as evidence of the overgrowing importance of *remembering* in the latter part of the 20th century and the beginning of the new millennium. Instigated by this process of salvaging in order to activate memory, relics and events of past and present grievances have become our new heritage, "laden with sorrow and guilt", in the words of Lowenthal (2000: 18). He states,

More and more, heritage has become distressing in character, shaming rather than laudatory, lamentable rather than lovable –what ancient Romans termed *vitae damnosa*, a damnable, crippling legacy heirs were stuck with, like it or not [...]. The past still awakens pride in origins and precursors, but victimhood occupies center stage. It is often said that history belongs to the victors; heritage is now the special province of the victims. (Ibid.)

If heritage is the province of victims, so is the present. Taken altogether, what consequence does this representation of the past and present have in the ways we, as a society, image the future? Can museums and other institutions incorporate this heritage without condemning societies to a frozen, violent time?

It is of political interest that Chilean president Michelle Bachelet closed her first term with the inauguration of the museum mention above, and not with a much needed reformulation of the Museo Histórico Nacional and its narratives of heroism (as is much desired by local academics ¹). Following the steps of Chile, Colombia will have its own National Memory Museum. This Museum is in its development stages and does not yet exist; it is part of the mandate on 'historic memory' established by the Law of Victims and Land Restitution. This Law of 2011 includes the right and duty to memory and truth as part of the symbolic reparation of recent internal conflict victims in Colombia.

Both cases can be examined in the light of what has been recognized as the 'failure' of history (Hartog) –and its museums–, and its replacement by memory and victims. If the Bicentennial of Independence in Latin American countries proved to be an opportunity to deeply examine the discourse of heroism and the consequences of the history that has been written and circulated in our countries, apparently it did not lead to a drastic change in the public uses and meanings of historical accounts, but rather a replacement with an overabundance of testimonials and an overarching importance of the present, as opposed to the past. In countries such as Venezuela, for instance, leaders such as Hugo Chavez smartly manipulated the politics of heroism to create a personal time line that linked his personal 'revolution' with what Simón Bolívar had tried to accomplish some 200 years earlier.

As far as institutional support is concerned, it also meant a transformation in the ways that national identities are represented, as was stated above. In the case of Colombia, in the context of the Bicentennial of Independence, the National Museum of Colombia (founded in 1823) inaugurated a temporary exhibition called *Histories of a cry* aimed at broadening the notion of historical participation in the 'birth' of the nation's narrative. In addition to presenting the way in which heroes are constructed in historical discourse, it included sections on the participation of women, children, indigenous groups, peasants and the enslaved and free Afrodescendants. By bringing forth unheard voices it treated traditional heritage without reverence as a manner in which to show how patrimonial images are elaborated; it also took on a critique to conventional nationalistic and commemorative stories.

Under such working foundations, other temporary exhibitions had been carried out in order to broaden the spectrum of stories and people represented by the National Museum of Colombia, thus adding to the core narrative found in the permanent exhibitions with the intention of transforming the core story. One such exhibition was *Wakes and Live Saints amongst Black, Afro-Colombian, Maroon and Islander Communities* (2008), the first result of the Museum's commitment to repair –as part of a long term project– the absence and misrepresentation of Afrodescendants in the Museum's collections and exhibitions, a reality which was demanded by scholars and community members. The exhibit mainly consisted of a series of altars elaborated by the Black people who worked with us in the research process; these represented different phases of the mourning rituals as well as altars to Catholic saints which are the result of processes of hybridization and resistance to the loss of memory brought by enslavement.

These and other projects were the precedents that led to the Museum's new plan to completely redo its permanent exhibitions (2011). This plan is still underway, and after 5 years it has opened one of the 17 permanent exhibition galleries. In the meantime a new National Museum is coming to fruition. The construction for a new National Museum of Memory will start in 2018 (to close president Santos second term) with a completely new building, collections and most importantly a new discourse on the nation. This particular Museum will be responsible for making visible the conflict the country has lived in the past decades, and most importantly, a space to pay homage to those who have suffered the conflict, and how they have resisted such upheavals.

I contend that the Memory Museum will shadow the National Museum's project, and become the primary site for the representation of the Colombian nation. Hence the title of this essay points to the way memory has replaced history and the Bicentennial became a missed opportunity or an excuse to support such transformation. I have grappled with some of these issues related to representation of national identity and conflict since my days as the Curator of the Art and History Collections at the National Museum of Colombia (2004-2012) and explored these themes in my PhD thesis in Museum Studies (2011) ². In this analysis I will present some of the findings of my research in order to highlight lessons and raise the questions that I am currently (2017) dealing with as part of my consultancy work for the National Memory Museum. My interest here is to point to the ways in which visitors grapple with sites of identity and whether we run the risk of replacing outdated narratives of heroism with stories of victimhood without deeply looking at the overall result in terms of people's experiences of nationhood.

Representation of mourning rituals

As one of the two National Museum curators, in 2007, I faced new challenges brought about current politics and the historic but absent role of Afrodescendant communities in the national narrative. Hence I decided not only to address these tasks in my work, but also to develop my PhD research facing big political questions surrounding the problems inherent in representing the multicultural nation and the conflict between unity and difference, as well as role of national museums in advancing issues of citizenship and historic reparation for marginalized groups.

In order to see how issues such as national narratives, stereotypes, representations of multiculturalism, reparation, citizenship and heritage play out in reality, I looked at the processes of production and reception around a single temporary exhibition: *Velorios y santos vivos. Comunidades negras, afrocolombianas, raizales y palenqueras* (*Wakes and Live Saints*). This exhibition constituted a conscious attempt by the National Museum of Colombia to redeem itself following centuries of making Afrocolombian communities invisible and staging discriminatory representations.

The exhibition and its title encompassed the idea of the period of mourning known as the wake and the notion that saints are alive. Both are related to ancestry as a way to conceive dead beloved ones as saints and saints as close family members, thereby integrating life worlds that are considered separate in Western societies. The exhibition, which was a collaborative effort between anthropologists, museum staff, and communities, was also a political gesture meant to include the Afrodescendant and Black communities in the narratives and processes developed by the Museum. It was meant to highlight not only a series of cultural and social rituals, but also how internal conflict has impacted these, tearing away solidarity and community ties. There was also an important ideological stance that included connections or traces of memory between Africa and Colombia. This theory was first developed by Nina S. de Friedemann who worked with Black communities in Colombia and argued that there are marks or vestiges of an African past that have been reinterpreted and recreated by Afrodescendants and that these have persisted centuries after the Transatlantic slave trade ended. This stance was nurtured by professor Jaime Arocha, who worked as part of the curatorial team for the exhibition.

In my work I analyzed the process of production and interpretation of this concrete exhibition as it impacted different constituents as well as the museum where it was held. This exhibition was chosen because Afrocolombian activists and scholars strongly demanded that the National Museum respond to claims of historical reparation and alter its current narratives and collections by means of consultation and participation. Hence, discussions around the exhibition included the issue of the representation of the history of enslavement. In this matter, the question of what to remember and what past to represent is not without conflict. One of the main themes that Black people mentioned in meetings and focus groups was the relationship between America and Africa. Enslavement is a crucial part of their history, as well as a focal point when debating acknowledgement that leads to reparation. In the case of the memories of the descendants of the enslaved Africans, their history and its portrayal in museums have been controversial.

In the analysis of the exhibition I looked at the meanings recreated by different audiences and staff members as crucial elements to foster cultural rights, because through representations groups choose to 'speak' and the national community chooses to 'listen'. Hence, the repositioning of a public sphere where dialogue and debate are promoted is an important consequence of policies of multiculturalism. Although the results from this study reinforced the idea that national museums are arenas where these processes can take place, there was also an acknowledgement of the limits these museums face in the ways they respond to multiculturalism and diverse societies, as well as histories of conflict.

In the light of present day debates on the curation of 'difficult knowledge' or 'difficult heritage' ¹, representation of enslavement can be seen as a necessary but painful feat that risks reinstating victimhood upon today's generations. Such task runs parallel to the representation of more recent conflict. In both instances it constitutes a big challenge for curators to bypass the pedagogy of horror in order to engage societies in critically thinking about conflict and violence. These are some of the questions that arise as professionals in the realm of public history and memory delve into such issues and matters that challenge settled conventions on what and how conflicts should be represented in museums and other public institutions.

Samuel Thomas in his report on fieldwork with Black communities discussed the dangers entailed in recuperation of the past:

Moreover, as has been discussed within the remit of Afro-Brazilian scholarship, an over-focus on Africa, and by implication the slave trade, and by implication the subordinate status of blacks in the nation, risks explanation of the contemporary black predicament with an over-emphasis on the past, leaving more contemporary dynamics and their contribution to the plight of blacks under-addressed and left 'by the wayside', as the force of History recuperated dominates the construction of miraculously homogeneous 'Afro-identity'. (2008: 2)

This legitimate concern is accompanied by serious questions on how to represent enslavement. Sepúlveda describes the case of Brazil and she asks:

How to show the pain of those who were forced to labor, were whipped, were separated from their families, treated like animals and submitted to all sorts of violence? [...] It is very difficult to explain terror without justifying it and, as we do this, rather than bringing past memories to the present, we provoke the more complete forgetfulness of what has happened (Bataille, 1995). These narratives of slavery hide a wound, and as such they represent an impediment to those who might try to give a better account of what has happened. (2003: 39)

There is an urgent need to tell unsettling stories, but we should also be wary of the ways in which wounds are opened, as Peralta argues for the case of Portugal: "the silencing of the past may be a productive process, enabling people and communities to move on, discarding those memories that just do not fit present practical purposes" (2009: 115). Idealized representations are also reparation and rehabilitation of a community, as well as a form of survival.

Despite the problems it raises, when I held the focus groups to discuss the exhibition and the Museum with Black people as part of my research, I directly asked participants what they thought about the history of enslavement and resistance: "Would you see this in the Museum?". Most of the people in the groups were supportive of the idea, making it clear that we had to include instances of resistance "because we survive today [...] we are a product of that resistance", as one participant mentioned. Another participant, who is a musician and part of a Black family that has been crucial in rescuing heritage, also supported this view and remarked "how they could live independently in the palenques [maroon communities] in the midst of a repressive society". Another woman said that it was important for present and future generations to see this past "so that they will also resist" and one man also linked this history to the present: "many of the regional elites are the same ones that enslaved a lot of people [...] in the worst economic conditions". There was also agreement that present-day conditions called for other forms of resistance, such as education.

Representation of victimhood always runs the risk of instituting such a condition as a permanent characteristic of a person or a community. This is why the issue of resistance is crucial. But there is also the question of context, of perpetrators and the societies that were complicit with systems of repression. If representation is a political act, what then, are the political consequences of representation of victimization in a national museum? If, in fact, we agree that representations have a role to play in advancing respect for human rights and, for instance, are crucial in processes of reparation, to what extent does the impact of the exhibition contribute to such ideals? How can we reconcile the need to tell the truth about a community's hurtful past and an imperative to include a wide spectrum of society in a conversation on rights and citizenship? What part does an organization like a museum play in extending those rights outside of its walls? And to what extent should culture or art be used in an instrumental way, for example to advance in a policy of reparation?

As redemptive history has begun to be discussed at various sites, I also wondered as I do now, how being represented in a situation such as slavery affects the descendants of those who were enslaved. Taken to its extreme, how does the representation of victims of internal conflict (including Afrocolombia communities) affect them, their families and diverse audiences? I asked myself, if the inclusion of rituals of mourning in the Museum was painful for some members of the Black community –as we discussed in the focus groups–, how would the communities react to the representation of slavery as a marker of identity?

Historic reparation and responsibility

Are national museums places that can include difficult political contexts and histories of the painful past because communities are demanding these changes? What happens when national museums try taking on these views? In the case of the Afrodescendant communities, looking at the past is painful and conflictive, but also urgent and necessary, especially as we devise the ways in which this past can illuminate the present. Despite laws and other judicial tools, the political, social and economic situation of present-day Black communities has not dramatically improved. For diverse victims of recent internal conflict (counting displaced people, its around 6 million persons), their past needs to be acknowledged but we also need to understand that the past does not solely determine our present or future. As I stated above, past grievances cannot be used to simplify the way we understand societies. It has become common discourse in Colombia to say "this is a violent country". Surely we have been marked by a long internal conflict, but if we do not examine this statement carefully we are closing all doors to the principle of change and non-repetition. How then can a National Museum dedicated solely to this conflict engage visitors in a broader debate about our own country?

There is no formula and there are no predictable positive results, but recognition of the past is a way to make visible the undesirable forms of the former times that continue to exist in the present, as well as the differences between past and present. We know that real change has to come from an all-encompassing policy that cannot be cosmetic but rather aspire to transform all spheres of social life.

Anthropologist Jaime Arocha who was part of the production team of the *Velorios* exhibition asserted in 2008 that exhibitions and representations of national narratives are crucial to processes of reparation:

Yes [these exhibitions can be a part of a process of reparation], but only if they are part of a larger effort. What we did is important in this sense, but we need more. To have a group of people [at the inauguration] with a fist up in protest for the situation of the Black communities is a landmark [...] an important symbolic act. Even the video with the contexts, the fact that the museum had a video that confronted official policies regarding palm harvest, monoculture, mining, which are an integral part of this government, and to have left that implicit inquiry regarding the environment and the people, that's very important [...].

The problem that one highlights is that the museum is not the nation, and this museum cannot respond for national policies; it can make great efforts to support reparation but what if the national scope is against it? Even inside the Ministry of Culture, if the Minister goes to the exhibit for just a few minutes it's because she does not care for such reparations. In the interviews she has given, it's obvious that she is only interested in a cosmetic multiculturalism [...].

If future reconciliation starts with the acknowledgement of violent history, then museums can be part of a larger effort. The test remains to make culture more political so that it can encompass the realms that communities have to deal with:

[H]istories and current practices of racism, oppression, disempowerment, and without ignoring histories and practices of resistance, affirmation, creativity, and agency, and without removing all possibility [...] of the very hope that is required for agency, activism, and change. (Edelstein, 2005: 15)

Citizenship and conflict

The ability to promote wide change from within the museum is inextricably related to what the public perceives is the main role of these institutions. In the interviews conducted for my PhD research, amongst 45 interviewees, 18 people mentioned issues related to the social and political realities of the country and Black communities such as the paramilitary, palm enterprises (which usurp land), construction of roads that threaten ecosystems, mining, poverty, work conditions of semi-enslavement, armed conflict, food scarcity and displacement. But when asked directly about the national museum they would like to construct, only five responded with direct allusions to the country's history of violence. A young lawyer who was visiting the exhibition because he had gone to the Pacific coast recently replied:

This issue of the disappeared, the massacres, I don't know if a national museum should hold what is bad about its country but undeniably, as a Colombian, [I think] we should have a gallery of the massacres because at some point we should be conscientious of what has happened and what is happening, just as the Germans have their Holocaust Museum [sic].

What this extract points to is the challenge of representing a nation where visitors have an image in their heads of groups that have confronted their differences (economical, political, ideological and criminal) but means of annihilating the other. Clearly, this reality contrasts with the notions of a national museum showing what is 'good' about a country, showing not only praise but present-day heroes. In the light of the new institution called the National Memory Museum, we should raise the question about keeping narratives of the nation in different containers. What *nation* will visitors perceive at the National Memory Museum and what nation will visitors engage with at the National Museum of Colombia?

We could ask whether representations of the painful past create a dichotomy in representing the nation. In the particular case of the exhibition being discussed, for the production team, *Velorios* was not solely about ancestry. It had a political intention as well, which was made evident in the videos shown in the museum. The first showed the routes of the transatlantic slave trade. The second summarized the contexts of economic, social and violent processes that are altering the rituals seen in the exhibition and that deeply affect the communities. Hence, we tried to create a space within the exhibit to balance the 'cultural' (as in aesthetic production) outlook on the communities, combining it with a political criticism to other social agents, including the State.

The National Museum of Colombia staff supported being able to discuss and include political and social contexts that include conflict between groups or between groups and the State. Most did not think the museum's role was to denounce but rather to leave visitors to make up their own conclusions. The Director also acknowledged that the museum could not avoid these topics, but that representing present-day conflicts was problematic because of the lack of historical distance and because the museum financially depends directly upon the executive branch of government, hence lacks independence, a challenge that remains true for the new National Memory Museum when it comes to represent certain actions of the military or politicians that were a storefront for the paramilitary.

For Black participants in the focus groups, there was an immediate relationship between representing Afrocolombians in the museum and tackling issues related to politics and armed conflict, especially because of the role it has had in the process of displacement and the destruction of the memory of these groups. For a physical education teacher, the museum should hide nothing and should show what the country is. Another respondent considered the effort to include politics important because there has been an attempt to homogenize and make invisible what is politically different. Many of the participants in the focus groups were impacted by the images of displacement and violence because they know that this causes the impossibility of carrying out the rituals that are so important in the cosmology and functioning of these communities.

Lessons and new questions for a National Memory Museum

As the years go by and I look back on both the *Velorios* exhibition and the thesis, I have to admit that there are more questions than certainties. I still defend exhibitions as one of the mechanisms to put forth reparation of communities that have been victims of different crimes, whether they are State sponsored or not. What I'm still not certain about is *how* to elaborate these representations in the public realm so that they are 'useful' for societies. Showing images or objects is not enough because simply knowing about the past will not have direct consequences over the future. As Erica Lehrer and Cynthia E. Milton point out regarding curatorial practices around difficult knowledge, "in an age saturated with media images of human suffering and ever-dramatizing technologies for their dissemination, simply making people face the horrors humans are capable of perpetrating seems to have lost some of its galvanizing force" (2011: 1). Regarding the representation of past wrongdoings, it has become more complicated for museums as issues of ethics of images, objects and stories become subjects for debate.

Then there is the issue of truth. Though one can think about including a wide array of voices, when it comes to human rights, there are principles that cannot be relativized. Despite a museum's wish to keep away from an 'official' history, museums are still regarded as truth holders and keepers. Difficult questions posed by Reinhart Koselleck (2011) have to be answered: Who is to be remembered? What and how to remember?

Most likely, visitors to the new Memory Museum will expect to find a story that will tell them what has happened in the country in the last decades. The complexity of such narrative can be perplexing as expectations run high. Whose truth and to what ends should it be shown in a National Memory Museum? Only the victims? How about perpetrators and under what circumstances? And the State, whose role in internal conflict has not been fully clarified? Can we only tell a one-sided story? And most importantly: how to tackle the role of society at large. What about witnesses, no questioners? Or people in the capital cities that have little knowledge of the realities that peasants and communities have had to face in the last decades? There is no question that these exhibitions are a 'difficult' for audiences because they challenge the visitor's expectations thus causing negative feelings on the spectator. These negative feelings or emotions can also be the result of the possible complicity or the identification with victims, perpetrators or bystanders (Simon, 2011).

There are other pressing themes relating to curatorial developments such as the way in which audiences are asked to participate (for instance, *From Memory to Action: Meeting the Challenge of Genocide* (FM2A), an installation at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). As Roger Simon notes, "Exhibitions of difficult knowledge are seen as informing a citizenry about historically significant events and serving as a stimulus to actions that would guard against the re-occurrence of such violence" (2011: 198). But in order for there to be a stimulus to action, one would have to seriously develop a pedagogy that would be both respectful of the suffering and survival of others, as well as demanding of those who are spectators of these stories. What should be the role of the museum in this matter? Should the museum only commemorate or attempt 'working through' mechanisms (in the Freudian sense) to try to pick apart the past and point to causes of structural violence and not simply tell a story of suffering?

A recent study on memorial museums by Williams (2011) describes the differences between these and history museums. The former have a commemorative aspect, which turns them into sites for mourning, interlarded with sacred places with little or no space for debate. The latter should be the places where history and memory are debated, its causes and effects evaluated. There is interpretation, contextualization and criticism, which might seem disrespectful to victims or their families in the context of representation of tragic recent events (for instance, the cancelled International Freedom Center at the WTC site). These differences seem to be at the core of the project for the new National Memory Museum of Colombia as well as the National Museum's project of rethinking its role in the 21st century. On the one hand, there is a need and a judicial mandate to tell the story of internal conflict in Colombia; on the other, there is a need, I believe, to move away from the pedagogy of terror, identification with martyrdom and suffering and involve national audiences in serious debates about our roles as Colombian citizens (even if distant) in the past, present and future.

To go back to our initial example, the Chilean Memory Museum does not engage with history before 1973 (the Pinochet coup), severing ties between memory and history. The historical narrative is relegated to the Historic Museum, where the narrative ends on September 11, 1973 with the relic of president Allende's broken glasses. Can we bring back history into museums in order to illuminate memory? Will the two National Museums in Colombia build their own walls around their territories of what is 'good', what is 'bad' about the nation, what is historical and what is memorial?

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[1] See Olaya Sanfuentes (2014). Hora de un nuevo guion para los museos históricos, in *PAT magazine*, (Chile), 58), fall: 19.

[2] Cristina Lleras (2011), *Towards New Narratives of the Multicultural Nation: Negotiating Difference in the National Museum of Colombia* (PhD diss., University of Leicester). All quotations from audiences and staff are taken from the written thesis.

[3] In the same line of thought, difficult knowledge is a term now widely used, coined by D. P. Britzman in the late nineties to "signify both representations of social traumas in curriculum and the individual's encounters with them in pedagogy" (Pitt & Britzman, 2003).