

# Reckoning Time

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Throughout the Americas, from Haiti to Ecuador, Bolivia, Colombia, and Chile, masses of people have taken to the streets. In broad terms, the protests speak to social inequality and perhaps, just as importantly, to the failures of democratic political representation, to political inequality and unequal treatment before the law (Luna 2019), and to significant political-institutional corruption. Structural disparities, exacerbated by decades of neoliberal policies, albeit with some modicum of “pink tide” reforms, are now on full display. Latin American citizens are speaking out, mobilizing to demand an end to social and political institutional failures, and once again setting examples for the world. Nevertheless, reactionary, coercive forces are not holding back, symbolized by the quite public presence of the military brass, declarations of states of siege, curfews, and the brutal, deadly crackdowns on dissent. In Bolivia, the military “insisted” that Evo Morales resign, and the old forces of the right have scrambled to retake the reins, threatening to undo the social and political transformations of the country’s past several years. In Colombia, protesters defied the government curfew to decry the economic conditions and the halting implementation of the Peace Accords amid ongoing murders of human rights and grassroots activists. Throughout the region, political situations remain fluid.

In Chile, the rightist government’s reactionary brutality laid bare an utter disregard for the realities of millions of Chileans, who have racked up massive personal debt, whose earnings do not meet what is necessary to maintain their families, nor to imagine a dignified retirement. The particularly violent crackdowns against angry protesters in the poorest neighborhoods has also forced a societal recognition that police brutality in these communities is not new (Aguilera et al. 2019). In an important sense, long-standing police brutality against the historically and structurally

marginalized is no state of exception (Leebaw 2011), and it is a phenomenon we in the United States know all too well.

In transitional justice parlance, what is happening in Chile can be understood somewhat euphemistically as an “unfinished transition” from authoritarian rule, both in formal legal terms and in terms of structural legacies (Hite and Cesarini 2004). Formally, and in spite of Chile’s many impressive transitional justice policies—from truth commissions to symbolic reparations, memorialization, the establishment of human rights state agencies, and judicial prosecutions—the transitional leadership failed to champion an end to the 1980 Constitution, the country’s chief framing institutional document. Pinochet’s constitution has been amended over the years to remove some of its antidemocratic features, yet as Claudia Heiss has argued, “the Constitution continues to protect the revolutionary transformative project of the dictatorship,” immune to fundamental reform given the continuing power of the dictatorship’s ideological successors (Heiss 2017, 471). In a deeper sense, the physical segregation of the poor and working-class majority, the insularity of the political class, and the harsh repression against the protests are together calling for a reckoning (Tinsman 2019).

For students of memory, Chile’s *estallido social* has resurrected the past. In placards and banners, through the many performances in Chile and around the world of legendary folk singer Victor Jara’s “El derecho de vivir en paz,” and much more, Chileans are mobilizing memory across several generations. Mapuche protesters have also joined memorial activists in the United States and elsewhere in direct actions to topple monuments that celebrate past leaders and conquerors who championed slavery and colonization (Blair 2019). We might think of the massive protests, collective assemblies, *cacero/azos*, images, and performances

that evoke the past as constellations that upend conventional notions of temporality, space, and justice (Draper 2018), as memorializations in active movement (Hite and Badilla 2019), as the heady emotions and affective dimensions of the past, as resonances and retrievals from past struggles and past experiments, toward a demand for voice, visibility, and justice in the here and now.

Darker rhetoric has also conjured the past, from President Sebastián Piñera's claim that Chile is at war, to conspiracy rumors across the Chilean right blaming international communist agents for the uprising. Moreover, the repressive forces' systematic violations of human rights (INDH 2019) provoked one colleague to capture much of Chilean sentiment in stark terms: "These beasts seemed to have learned nothing. This time they're blinding and raping people rather than killing and disappearing them." Memory studies scholars might conceptualize these many evocations and acts as a haunting, as a condition that disrupts and defies ideas of democratic politics as fine and stable, the economy as humming along, society as progressing ever forward (Gordon 2008; Miles 2015).

Students of memory studies and the Americas work both within and outside of transitional justice frames, whether they focus on testimony or truth telling, the fate of the disappeared, memorials and memoryscapes, or exhumations and forensics, to name the most prevalent examples. As an ever-growing field, memory studies can be located in sister multidisciplinary fields which themselves are overlapping, including literary criticism, border studies, gender studies, critical visual culture and media studies, architecture and urban studies, performance studies, and critical race and ethnicity studies, as well as in those disciplines that dominate transitional justice studies, namely political science and sociology.

The remainder of this essay will explore memorialization as one area of the memory studies field that both joins and extends transitional justice frames. I use a small handful of memorials and museums of memory to suggest that among memorialization's most important contributions is the way in which time and temporality are opened up to recognize the deep and ongoing

relationships connecting the past and present, beyond a notion of transition. In addition, memorial spaces are loci for debate and activism, intensely integrating transitional and social justice concerns and demands.

### **Memorials as Time(less) Frames and as Spaces of Activism**

Post-dictatorship and post-internal armed conflict memorials and commemorative sites fall fairly squarely within the transitional justice field, as major symbolic reparations that acknowledge the victims of systematic human rights violations by repressive regimes and forces of conflict. Indeed, all over the Americas, there has been an explosion of memorial and memory museum making, in large part with sponsorship, or at least financial and technical support, from state agencies.

Yet memorials also invite distinct temporalities and spatial delineations, from spectacular, acutely time-framed and concentrated spaces (for example, the 9/11 Memorial and Museum in New York City), to those in which conflicts and violence span time and geography (for example, the memorial art and necessarily ephemeral performances at the Mexico-US border). Memorials allow for representations of the past that highlight temporal fractures and nonlinearity as well as linearity, and they often question an implicit understanding of a "transition" from a past violent state to present nonviolence.

Memorial makers' approaches to temporality are highly varied. US memorialist Maya Lin describes her designs as always "factual"; her timelines as clearly delineated (Lin 2016). Lin's Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington, DC, today names 58,318 US service members who were killed or died during the war. The memorial relies on sharp lines and linearity, as the wall of remembrance also cuts into the landscape. Lin's Civil Rights Memorial sundial in Montgomery, Alabama, names 41 people killed during the US civil rights struggle. The beginning and ending years for Lin's memorials are also purposively chosen. In one sense, then, Lin's conceptions of temporality and factuality affirm transitional justice approaches that delineate fixed time frames and document a group of victims within them, toward symbolic reparation. In

addition, while the Vietnam Veterans Memorial design provoked heated conflict, once instantiated, the memorial has produced an outpouring of grief and connection across many publics. At the same time, the memorial neither questions the context of the deaths of US servicemen and women nor acknowledges the approximately two million Vietnamese who were killed during the war. While it is not the artist's responsibility to do so, the memorial instantiates a limited screen memory, masking the imperialist project itself (Sturken 1991; Nguyen 2016).

In a distinct vein, artist Lika Mutal's *The Eye That Cries* memorial sculpture in Lima, Peru, works with different conceptions of "trauma time" within the memorial design, suggestive of both the 1980–2000 internal armed conflict and the structural violence against indigenous communities over several centuries (Edkins 2003; Hite 2012). Mutal's centering of the crying Pachamama, Mother Earth, renders legible, and therefore grievable, the indigenous men, women, and children as those who composed the overwhelming number of human rights victims (Tate 2007; Butler 2004). As in pilgrimages to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, individuals and families come to *The Eye That Cries* to remember and mourn loved ones killed during the conflict, and communities gather there on commemorative occasions. Yet in spite of its projection of peace, sadness, and mourning, *The Eye That Cries* has also so apparently threatened particular sectors of the country that it has been a locus of repeated physical attack. In this sense, the serenity projected from the memorial belies the political tension and volatility surrounding those who authored atrocities. This also includes indigenous people who took up arms, and the undeniable reality that for a time in the late twentieth century, the Shining Path gained considerable purchase within the country. The memorial thus opens up a conversation regarding why there was such support for the guerrillas who indeed committed terrorism, as well as at what horrific cost.

Major memory sites around the Americas, including museums of memory and former spaces of incarceration, torture, and disappearance, serve as sites for instruction, and they invite such

conversations. Each year, museums and other major memory sites are educating hundreds of thousands of visitors regarding the past, specifying time lines, documenting the formal legal institutionalization of states of emergency and the many "exceptions" to due process and civil and political rights, and highlighting atrocious human rights violations. Moreover, even in state-sponsored museums of memory, such as Peru's Lugar de la Memoria, la Tolerancia y la Inclusión Social (LUM) and Chile's Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos (MMDH), visitors are both discovering and participating in reworkings of dominant historical narratives in relation to the ongoing present. Throughout 2018, for example, the MMDH sponsored exhibits, forums, performances, and films around the theme of "Indigenous Memories," privileging distinct time lines and atrocities from those marking the Chilean dictatorship. Over several months this past year, the museum focused on immigration to Chile. This included talks and panels, and a major exhibit, "Otrxs Fronterxs: Histories of Migration, Racism, and (Up)rooting." The two museums bring to the fore both the victims of civil and political rights during the countries' armed conflict and the dictatorship, and the ongoing structural violence of conquest, displacement, colonization, and racism against indigenous peoples and immigrants.

As a former site of atrocity, the newly opened Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama, occupies what was once a commercial warehouse for enslaved men, women, and children being readied for auction. The museum presses on visitors the urgency of collective soul-searching and a rewriting of the national historical narrative to recognize the deep legacies of slavery, particular the ongoing white resistance to racial equality, as well as the mass incarceration of African Americans. In addition, linked to the Legacy Museum is the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, a memorial to the over 4,400 African Americans who were lynched between 1877 and 1950. The memorial design encourages memorial activism, inviting those from counties where documented lynching took place to return to their homes to organize local actions to mark the sites and commemorate the victims. Since the museum and memorial opened two years ago, well over 500,000

people have journeyed to the site, in pilgrimages that are helping to open up the possibility of a US reckoning toward reworking and repair.

Grassroots memorial activists throughout the Americas are mobilizing both to commemorate victims of the repressive past and to confront ongoing civil rights, political rights, and social justice issues. In major memorial spaces, such as Chile's Estadio Nacional and Londres 38, Argentina's Centro Haroldo Conti and Parque El Olimpo, Colombia's Casa de la Memoria, and El Salvador's Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen, professionals and activists organize around gender rights, indigenous rights, immigrants' rights, and an end to violence. In addition, memorial activism is taking place in hundreds of local communities, as a form of "witness citizenship" (Gómez-Barris 2010), to recognize and mark the silences regarding the atrocious past and the relationships between past and ongoing struggles for rights.

These varied instances of commemoration would seem to trouble the notion of "transition," unless perhaps we grant that, politically, states and societies are ever in transition. Memory studies suggest ways in which the past constantly haunts and disrupts any idea of set time frames or closure. Memorial activism reworks historical narratives to urge an end to the systematic human rights violations of those who have been largely shut out, disenfranchised, and unrecognized, then and now.

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