

Cultural Memory and Citizenship

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Affirmative collective memory for the recent traumatic history of Chile, the case of *Tu Señora* by Tomasa del Real and Talisto

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Introduction

A migration is never just a movement between places, it is about a big decision caused by circumstances that are usually more or less traumatic. A major element of the life of the migrant becomes the relation she has to cultivate with those who were left behind. It is a constant exercise of memory and it is never static. While a new life is being built, the old traumas are being incorporated to the formation of this new context.

Tu Señora (Your woman) is a reggaeton song created by the Chilean artists Tomasa del Real and Talisto. The piece is a romantic duet about a man and a woman who are struggling to maintain a relationship while he is living in Stockholm and she is staying in Iquique, a city in the north of Chile.

In the context of the recent Chilean history these are not mere random places, Stockholm is a city with a massive community of Chileans since Sweden received a significant number of exiled citizens after the fascist dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet that started in 1973. Now there's around 60.000 Chileans living legally in Sweden .

Iquique is a city that has a shocking recent history of violence against women, particularly because the high numbers of murdering of women ("femicidios" in Spanish) (Vásquez Mejías 2016). A key

case was the one of the man who, between 1998 and 2001, raped and killed fourteen young girls in Iquique and Alto Hospicio, a small town in the Iquique province. Authorities and the general public blamed the victims.

In this essay I will explain how *Tu Señora*, which at first sight is a romantic song for the dance floor, is a transcultural piece with elements of collective memory. In the song, this evocation of collective memory is not evident as it is in traditional memorials or in artistic pieces that are very explicit about social brutalities and the crimes perpetrated by the right-wing authorities or the sexist Chilean apparatus. However, as generations of victims are aging, their approaches to memory are transforming too. My main hypothesis for this text is that Tomasa del Real and Talisto are proposing an approach to memory in which active forgetting is central, that these two artists are incarnating an affirmative drive and that eventually the song constitutes an instance in which the traumas of the past promote the construction of a future.

To build on this hypothesis and to understand the potential of collective memory as an artistic element I will organize this essay in the following structure: first, I will describe the ways in which memory is never static but a process that transforms temporalities, to explain this part I will use the works of Paul Ricoeur and Gilles Deleuze. Second, acknowledging the constructive capacities of memory, I will explore the possibility of using those capacities towards new collective knowledge generation and the transformation of history and art, central to this section will be the work of Michel Foucault and his concept of counter-memory. In a third section I will start the direct analysis of *Tu Señora* comparing it with the notions of involuntary memory and its relation with the creative process. Finally, I will present a set of conclusions that will help my reader understand the importance of an affirmative collective memory and the process of active forgetting as a way to confront the past and present traumas related to political violence.

Memory as a process that transform temporalities

Paul Ricoeur identifies a sequence of three stages that is used in cultural memory studies: memory/forgetting/history (Ricoeur 2011 p.475). This is a triad of elements in permanent relation that constitute not just the past but also the present and the future.

This dimension involving movable temporalities is also fundamental to Gilles Deleuze's approach to memory. He uses the concept of "reminiscences". To him, these reminiscences take part in a complex mechanism: "At first sight it is an associative mechanism: on the one hand, a resemblance between a present and a past sensation; on the other hand, a contiguity of the past sensation with a whole that we experienced then and that revives under the effect of present sensation" (Deleuze 1964 p.36).

While Ricoeur quotes St. Augustine: "*memory is the present of the past*" (Ricoeur 2011 p.476), Deleuze attempts to grasp this relation between time and memory using the idea of a "flavor". This theoretical tactic allows us to think about the reminiscence not just in terms of obvious temporalities but in the connection with an abstract otherness, with something different that has a relation with the flavor we just tasted: "Beyond a resemblance, we discover between two sensations the identity of a quality in one and the other" (Deleuze 1964 p.37)

Additionally, Deleuze uses the concept of "voluntary memory", a type of memory that "does not apprehend the past directly; it recomposes it with different presents" (Deleuze 1964 p.37).

This idea of a memory that is not a “double” of a past but an automatic configuration that happens in the present connects with the relation that Ricoeur establishes between written history and collective memory. Although he refuses to present a relation of opposition, he concedes that memory has a primordial role because of its shaping powers that intervene in our considerations of temporalities:

“Memory asserts its priority over history not only because it ensures a consciousness of, respectively, continuity between past and present and a feeling of belonging, but, on the contrary, also because it maintains the dialectical connection between what, following Koselleck, we have called space of experience and horizon of expectation”. (Ricoeur 2011 p.478)

Both authors, Ricoeur and Deleuze, propose an idea of memory as a non-static automatic invocation. Every time a past event is remembered in the present through the reminiscences (Deleuze) or flavors (Ricoeur), an operation in which the past is written takes place. This operation creates a present and, at the same time, constitutes a new horizon.

Having briefly acknowledged the connecting and constructive capacities of memory and having explained that memory is not a static double that can be conjured but an automatic exercise, in the next section I am going to explore the possibility of using those dynamic capacities of memory towards new collective knowledge generation.

Counter-memory and new collective knowledge generation

Central to Ricoeur's ideas is the notion that memory is constructed in a collective way: "People do not remember in isolation, but only with help from the memories of others: they take narratives heard from others for their own memories, and they preserve their own memories with help from the commemorations and other public celebrations of striking events in the history of their group" (Ricoeur 2011 p.476). This condition is assumed by Michel Foucault, who identifies the intention to reprogramme as what he calls "popular memory" (Foucault 2011 p.253).

Certainly that intention can be used for several purposes depending on the interests of the person or the apparatus that wants to reprogram collective memory. But in this short paper I'm not going to focus on official institutions that attempt to shape collective memory but on those single individuals who are using collective memory in their autonomous practices mediated by non-official means of production, in words of Foucault:

"It's an actual fact that people—I'm talking about those who are barred from writing, from producing their books themselves, from drawing up their own historical accounts—that these people nevertheless do have a way of recording history, or remembering it, of keeping it fresh and of using it" (Foucault 2011 p.252).

This idea adds to the concept of counter-memory coined by Foucault, this concept can be used to delineate the crucial stage of the memory process that Ricoeur and Deleuze propose which was explained in the previous section.

Foucault introduces a triadic sequence of language, counter-memory and practice. He proposes that since the nineteenth century, literature has developed a totally opposed relationship to language, transforming itself into a counter-memory; and the subjects that naturally evolve from this language manifest the history of our otherness: violence, transgression, madness, sexuality, death, and finitude. These manifestations constitute the stage of practice (Foucault 1980 p.8).

The concept of counter-memory helps us to acknowledge an aspect of the memory process that is deliberate and with the potential of transformation. In the case of Deleuze, he also highlights this aspect, he describes a conflict between memory and intelligence and uses the example of a jealous man that employs all the resources of memory in order to interpret the signs of love at his own convenience. Deleuze's text is titled *The Secondary Role of Memory*, therefore in the memory-intelligence battle, he clearly proposes that intelligence is predominant:

"It is not the effort of memory, as it appears in each love, which succeeds in deciphering the corresponding signs; it is only the pressure of the intelligence, in the series of successive loves, characterized over and over again by forgetting and by unconscious repetitions (Deleuze 1964 p.34)".

In coherence with this idea of intelligence over memory, and to detail the ways in which counter-memory operates, Foucault presents three different Platonic modalities of the process of memory and its capacities to write history:

"The first is parody, directed against reality, and opposes the theme of history as reminiscence or recognition; the second is dissociative, directed against identity, and opposes history given as continuity or representative of a tradition; the third is sacrificial,

directed against truth, and opposes history as knowledge. They imply a use of history that severs its connection to memory, its metaphysical and anthropological model, and constructs a counter-memory—a transformation of history into a totally different form of time” (Foucault 1980 p.160).

Connecting the works of Ricoeur, Deleuze and Foucault, it is possible to envision a scenario in which the process of collective memory entails agency. The individual needs to use their intelligence to participate in the exercise of collective memory. It is an active role and not a given.

In the next section I will detail the enactment of this active memory process and its intersections with the creative practice. Using as a case study the song *Tu Señora*, I will explain how aesthetic decisions can be related to collective memory in an affirmative and proactive way, away from explicit testimonial approaches.

Sensorial aesthetics in *Tu Señora*

Mundane things, as the weather, feel so central when two people who love each other are geographically distant. This is the core element of the visuality of the *Tu Señora* videoclip: Talisto is in this Scandinavian landscape, beautifully surrounded by snow, wearing lots of winter clothing to protect himself from a crude cold weather that he never experienced in Chile.



Tomasa del Real is in a desert setting of the north of Chile, far away we can see the buildings next to the beach testifying the relative wealth of the zone due to the extraction of natural resources in the mines and the drug trafficking that happens at the frontier. She just wears a small fitted top and shorts, though she needs sunglasses and a hat to be protected from the sun.



To read this piece from a critical perspective on memory, and to connect the song to elements of the recent history of Chile, it is necessary to return to the idea of flavor, this first unprompted sensation that Ricoeur describes, it is also useful to review Deleuze's definition of involuntary memory:

“Involuntary memory gives us eternity, but in such a manner that we do not have the strength to endure it for more than a moment nor the means to discover its nature. What it gives us is therefore rather the instantaneous image of eternity. And all the Selves of involuntary memory are inferior to the Self of art, from the viewpoint of essences themselves.” (Deleuze 1964 p.41).

When a reference to a Chilean in Sweden is made, the relation to the exile almost automatically sparks. The association is more immediate than in the cases of other European countries with a significant Chilean diaspora as France or Spain, there are certainly less reasons why someone from South America might want to move to such a place that seems so inhospitable with its extremely cold weather and extremely unfamiliar language. To think of a Chilean in Sweden it is an exercise of involuntary memory, an automatic evocation of a violent past and a transcultural present.

The Swedish part of the video of *Tu Señora* adopts this sense of sadness proper of the exile, there is an aesthetic decision to portray Talisto in a solitary and reflexive environment, he is not at a club in Stockholm teaching the white people how to dance (an approach that has been used by other artists of the Chilean diaspora in Sweden as DJ Méndez). Also in the song lyrics, the central narrative element is his longing to have her girlfriend with him in this new place:

Y si te pido que te vengas conmigo

Haremos lo que tú quieras

Hasta ver las estrellas

Este corazón que late fuerte es tuyo

No me busques, sólo espera

Que ya llego a tu puerta¹

¹ And what if I ask you to come with me
We will do whatever you want
See the stars
This strong beating heart is yours
Do not look for me, just wait
I will reach your door



On the other hand, the part of the song that corresponds to Tomasa del Real and which takes place in Iquique, while it also conveys the sadness of distance, the loneliness of the individual in an empty landscape, and the references to the operations complications of romantic relations between migrants (“no tengo pasaporte”² or “en la calle dicen se va a casar”³), she also introduces a visual component of explicit sexuality that comes from reggaeton culture, this component is *perreo*, which is the dancing style that imitates the sexual act.

An example of involuntary collective memory can also be found in this part too because of the cases of *femicidios* in the north of Chile, a horrific but critical reference in the recent history of violence against women in this country. For example, recently a TV series of the crimes of the fourteen teenagers in Iquique was launched and feminists groups still resent the misogyny and lack

² I don't have a passport

³ In the streets people say he's going to get married

of reaction of the local authorities, particularly the declarations of the then undersecretary of internal affairs, Jorge Burgos, who stated that the girls were missing not because of a crime but because of a voluntary decision related to their “promiscuity” (Desconcierto 2018).



Melting the ice with *perreo*

I propose that in *Tu Señora* both artists are making an “involuntary memory” exercise. In both sides of the ocean they’re actively shaping collective memory through playing in the sensorial realm described by Ricoeur and Deleuze. The strategy they adopted is in line with Michel Foucault’s problematization on how to address traumatic events using media elements (as film) that can convey the sensorial dimension more smoothly. As an example, he presents the media treatment of war as a case in which is necessary a more sensorial interaction:

“As soon as you start seeing pictures of war every evening, war becomes totally acceptable.

That's to say, thoroughly tedious, you'd really love to see something else. But when it

becomes boring, you put up with it. You don't even watch it. So how is this particular reality on film to be reactivated as an existing, historically important reality?" (Foucault 2011 p. 253)

To Foucault film provides a materiality that is very connected to this "flavor" of memory, these are the "sensuous signs" that Deleuze identifies:

"At the beginning we cannot even say where the sign comes from. Does the sensuous quality address the imagination or simply the memory?

(...)

Proust speaks of the fulfillment of reminiscences or of involuntary recollections, of the supreme joys afforded by the signs of memory and of the time they suddenly allow us to recapture

(...)

They (the sensuous signs) do nothing more than prepare us: a mere beginning" (Deleuze 1964 p.35)

To establish a relation between *Tu Señora* and the recent historical events of the exile and the sustained femicidios, allows us to read the song as an innovative take on memory, as an example of how non-direct victims can address trauma in a way that is far from traditional understandings on commemoration. Their resources are the flavors and reminiscences and their result is the beginning of something else.

A conclusion on active forgetting

To think about memory as a beginning is inspiring and it allows us to use memory as a creative resource, Ricoeur's ideas are in relation with this conception: "My preference, on the contrary, is to use the idea of collective consciousness as a working rather than as a substantive concept" (Ricoeur 2011 p.476).

If memory connects us with something different and if collective memory is a working concept that can operate as the beginning of new productions, it is possible to envision a setting in permanent modification because it will be subject to change depending on the individuals involved, their contexts, their intentions.

In the particular case of *Tu Señora*, elements of collective memory intersect with other social challenges as migration and the digital possibilities to connect and create across borders. It is a work of art that advances and defies fixed notions. This is in line with Ricoeur proposal of a collective memory that is not static and that is even subject to modification:

"We take a step forward in the dialectic between memory and history when we bring in history as a critical authority that is able not only to consolidate and to articulate collective and individual memory but also to correct it or even contradict it. To understand this critical relationship between history and memory one must introduce the linguistic medium of narrative, which memory and history share" (Ricoeur 2011 p.477).

Maybe some conservatives might find contradictory and even offensive to think about extremely painful and traumatic events as political exile and gender violence in sexualized contexts of

entertainment, however these heretic acts can be categorized as those that Ricoeur defines as an active dialectic that is permanently assembling the notion of what cultural memory is.

This idea of an active collective memory is appealing because it insinuates concrete actions but is originated in a non-physical space. To Deleuze, memory is not resemblance, nor even identity, it is the initial stage in the apprenticeship to art (Deleuze 1964 p.42). And when we move to an analysis of the artistic practice, the static activity of remembering is not the crucial element because the stage of creation has started, it is a situation related to Ricoeur's depiction of the moment in which "escapist forgetting turns into active forgetting" (Ricoeur 2011 p.479).

Are Tomasa del Real and Talisto forgetting Chilean history? Yes and no. They'll be situated forever in the context of violence proper of any young Chilean and they are not trying to erase nor escape from that past, but at the same time they're actively deciding what to forget in order to delineate a new horizon that challenges frontiers and institutional hate.

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