
RESEÑAS DE LIBROS / BOOK REVIEWS

KSENIJA BILBIJA and LEIGH A. PAYNE (eds.): *Accounting for Violence: Marketing Memory in Latin America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

We seem to want to account for violence with the linear. Often, though, derivatives bend the curve. At Canada's new Human Rights Museum, the Shoah is worth one gallery of twelve. So, too, is the slaughter of indigenous peoples. Genocides in Ukraine, Srebrenica, Rwanda, and Armenia, however, will all be crammed into a single gallery. Several groups balked at the math. The Ukrainian Canadian Congress wants a separate gallery for the Holodomor. Meanwhile, as construction costs (and perhaps the political costs of accounting for violence) soar, the Canadian government has pulled the plug on more funding. The outer building structure is complete. As experts argue, though, over the value in gallery units of one genocide or another, for now there is no money to finish the museum. The building shell becomes a metaphor.

As genocides go, so go individual lives. In Argentina, a human life counts for about US\$220,000, the amount paid to some 15,000 families of Argentines who "disappeared" during the last military dictatorship. Yet here again, up close the linear is compromised. The government made payment in wobbly state bonds. Moreover, some killed by state terror are worth more than others. The families of Carlos Andrés Sutura and Juan Carlos Cardozo (among many victims of police killings in 1990s Argentina) received no financial compensation. At the same time, families of the victims of the 1994 Asociación Mutua Israelita Argentina (AMIA) bombing won government compensation equal to that of the dictatorship "disappeared." Recently, I tried to convince the historian Leonardo Senkman that this financial accounting put AMIA victimhood on par with that of "the disappeared." He urged caution. An AMIA life can be valued at the life of a *desaparecido* if and only one can assert the impunity of the state for each dictatorship and AMIA killing, in the failure to punish perpetrators. If impunity reigns, Professor Senkman continued, there is no accounting.

Two problems stand out as especially compelling for this fascinating and eclectic collection of accounts rendered, linking the chapters and organizing the volume. First, each author peels back layered derivatives beneath surface linearities. Second, in most cases, the chapters confirm an ultimate differential –

how academics and outsiders have long imposed on Latin Americans the terms of what does and does not constitute violence, state terror, and alternative, just modalities. In Susana Draper's "The Business of Memory" and Rebecca J. Atencio's "A Prime Time to Remember," we find the terrifyingly banal and the prosaically popular dissected as memory sites. Draper is concerned, first, with a time-passage contradiction. On the one hand, she finds among Argentines and Uruguayans a collective desire to enter a new time, severed from past dictatorial violence. On the other, she discovers that urban change in the post-dictatorial city led to a "proliferation of spaces of consumption" as an "erasure of unsettling temporalities" (p. 127). The consolidation of a new set of neo-liberal urban spaces dedicated to the crass material emerges from dictatorship values. That consolidation encourages a homogenized memory of violence.

Draper considers "mallings" (p. 132) a function of a new city that chillingly confirms the impunity of terror perpetrators never punished for their crimes. A prime example is Punta Carretas in Montevideo, which architects transformed from a 1970s dictatorship-era prison into a high-end 1990s shopping mall, replete with a kitsch aesthetic and a normalized acceptance of our being perpetually watched by security apparatus. Just as memory is merchandized through a prison's upscale renewal, so too is strong moral instruction advanced in the Brazilian *telenovela* *Anos Rebeldes*, the first Brazilian soap opera to repudiate torture and other trappings of state terror. Even so, and like the shopping malls of Buenos Aires and Montevideo, the marketing of memory is refracted through a post-dictatorship political culture that Atencio characterizes as "repression lite." "Commercial interests dictated the need to approach the authoritarian period in a way that would be perceived as neither threatening to the military nor alienating to those viewers tuning in purely for entertainment purposes" (p. 52). The military, then, is absent. Violence is toned down, "historical facts" altered (p. 53).

In his "Reading '68," José Ramón Ruisánchez Serra also traffics in "historical fact" (p. 179) – the October 1968 Tlatelolco Plaza massacre. Like Punta Carretas, the *Memorial del 68* is lodged in visions of the urban modern, so much so that it is hidden away in the bowels of a 1960s housing complex, once meant to provide modern, sanitary shelter but now in disrepair. Like shopping centers, *telenovelas*, and other memory sites, the marketing of Tlatelolco hides as much as it reveals. Despite enormous effort to "create a site where the most crucial event of the second half of the twentieth century in Mexico could be commemorated... the museum receives few visitors" (p. 181). This is perhaps the sharpest illustration of how several authors in the collection impose their notions of violence, values, and the popular on the societies they study. It simply never occurs to Ruisánchez Serra to ask what is reflected when a museum receives few visitors. Is it that

the museum does not reflect a popular sense of the massacre? Or is it that the massacre may not have been the most crucial event?

Citing a historical fact, like insisting upon a philosophical or sociological fact, is about as pedantically linear as one can get. Rarely in the volume do authors wonder about, much less account for, the popular in trying to understand violence, memory, and marketing. We don't know what subalterns saw when they walked through Punta Carretas or when they watched *Anos Rebeldes*. Is it possible that the popularity of the *telenovela* reflected a prevailing sense of repression lite, rather than the imposition of that sentiment? Here and elsewhere, contributors to the volume never raise doubts over shibboleths about consensus violence and repression – cultural regimens that many academics have helped to impose with severity. Despite the fact that throughout Latin America, for example, humour has been vital to an accounting for violence, these chapters tend to be humourless. More chilling, for Argentina and for other countries, the authors never address the crude and sometimes cynical politics behind the creation of memory sites and other marketing devices – particularly if we follow the logic of Susana Draper and other authors that post-dictatorship societies reflect violent continuities under dictatorship. A path-breaking collection in many regards, *Accounting for Violence* makes clear, all the same, that there is much work to be done on who remembers what.

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ALEXANDER EDMONDS: *Pretty Modern: Beauty, Sex, and Plastic Surgery in Brazil*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

In recent years, Brazil's prominence as a site for world-class plastic surgery has joined soccer, samba, Carnival, and the Amazon as yet another exotic image of the country that circulates internationally. Why does a supposedly less developed nation, in comparison to Europe and the United States, have some of the best cosmetic surgeons in the world? Moreover, this is not merely a procedure reserved for the rich and famous or even the economically comfortable middle classes. Altering the body by tightening skin, reducing or augmenting breast sizes and shapes, reconfiguring the nose, or reducing unwanted fat through liposuction has become standard practice for women of all social classes in Brazil, whether performed in exclusive private clinics or in publicly supported hospitals. What explains the wide-ranging popularity of cosmetic surgery? How has it become so easily available to women of lower classes? What does it say about Brazilian notions of the body, sexuality, race, beauty, and class? This exquisitely written