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**Plotting the Past in the Present: Reflections on the UCA in Post-War El Salvador**

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*A glass display of Padre Rutilio Grande's shirt wore when he was executed (Sala Memorial UCA).*

Let's begin with an image, a photograph of a *guayabera* shirt in a glass display that generates a strong affective response, a moment that Roland Barthes terms "punctum" (65)<sup>1</sup>. The photograph was taken at the Sala Memorial de Mártires at the Universidad Centroamericana "José Simeón Cañas" (la UCA) on a research trip to El Salvador in May of 2012. The *guayabera* in the photo displayed on a mannequin torso belonged at one time to Padre Rutilio Grande, a priest that was murdered by paramilitary soldiers in the years leading up to the war in El Salvador. In the photograph, the bullet holes that pierced his body look like innocuous blackish blue ink stains. I imagine the gray shirt to have probably once been a dark navy color in a style similar to those I saw many men wearing outside the glass panels of the Comalapa International Airport just days before this picture was taken. It's likely that a once lively blue has now faded to gray from the effects of bleach, line drying in the tropical sun and time. Given the slipperiness of representation it goes without saying that there will always be a gap between even the most faithful and ethical representations of memory and the historical person, event or artifact.

This particular photograph represents a twice-removed link to the past; an image of the preserved shirt that Padre Grande died in with only a synechdocal relationship to Padre Grande's person, life and murder. Yet, in what should not be dismissed as an unfortunate defect of the photographic image, the snapshot captures a present day onlooker's experience of that object; a dazed expression, reflected in the display glass, floating eerily over one side of the shirt; behind her the memorial plaques of other church leaders killed in El Salvador are mirrored. As Roland Barthes noticed, the piercing impact of a photograph is an effect of the photograph's duality; the unexpected juxtaposition of two discontinuous elements that do not belong to the same world (58). In this case, a staged artifact from the past and the subject's experience of the past in the present.

This article explores how the subject reconciles an external narrative of collective memory with personal memories that may or may not fit into dominant historical frameworks. An analysis

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<sup>1</sup> In *La cámara lúcida* Barthes develops the twin concepts of *studium* and *punctum*: *studium* denoting the cultural, linguistic, and political interpretation of a photograph, *punctum* denoting the wounding, personally touching detail which establishes a direct relationship with the object or person within it.

of the UCA as a memory space provides a concrete example of how individual memories intersect with larger political processes both for those who experienced the war and also for younger generations, like UCA students with few or no personal recollections of the armed conflict of the 1980's.<sup>2</sup> Key to this discussion is the work of Maurice Halbwachs, Steve Stern and Elizabeth Jelin on collective memory, and in particular, their work to establish the relationship between individual memories and collective processes of memory. Halbwachs' primary thesis is that human memory functions within collective social frameworks, particularly those of family, religion, and social class. It follows then that different social groups adhere to different collective memory frameworks. Steve Stern posits the existence of rival dominant memory frameworks that he terms *memorias emblemáticas* ("emblematic memories") that go beyond the view of collective memory as a homogenous totalizing account. In this discussion of dominant memory frameworks, it is not my intent to minimize the role of individual agency in memory, but rather to emphasize the interplay between private memories and the social context of history. Moreover, as Elizabeth Jelin is careful to assert, the notion of "collective memory" becomes problematic when it is thought of as a dominant entity that is separate from individual memories. Jelin details a complex dialectical relationship of individual and collective memories as the product of discursive exchange:

Lo colectivo de las memorias es el entretrejido de tradiciones y memorias individuales, en diálogo con otros, en estado de flujo constante, con alguna organización social –algunas voces son más potentes que otras porque cuentan con mayor acceso a recursos y escenarios– y con alguna estructura, dada por códigos culturales compartidos. (22).

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<sup>2</sup> The link between collective memory and public space has been well established by Michel de Certeau who describes the city as a text that narrates a linear historical discourse of social and cultural cohesion. I think that focusing on the spaces where private memories intersect with public processes will illustrate the clever tactics that individuals use to navigate collective memory much the same way as they invent ways to physically navigate public space in the city. In the city, roads function as a framework that organizes movement, but people still make shortcuts, use space in unauthorized ways, and develop other tactics for navigating space. I think that people navigate memory frameworks in an analogous way.

Furthermore Halbwachs asserts that collective memory is not merely a passive compilation of individual memories, but that personal recollection is socially determined:

Collective frameworks are, to the contrary, precisely the instruments used by the collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society. (40).

According to Halbwachs, memories, whether individual or collective, are not simply recollections, but rather reconstructions evoked by present day situations and contexts: “ [...] we appeal to our memory only in order to answer questions asked of us, or that we suppose they could have asked us” (38). Halbwachs, Stern and Jelin coincide then in this idea, that collective memories function to position private memories within a meaningful social framework.



*An UCA alumni who studied under the Jesuits considers the UCA museum display that reconstructs the outfits the Jesuits wore when they were executed.*

Since their death, the UCA has been a place to remember the lives leading up to and including the night of November 16<sup>th</sup> in 1989 when the Jesuit professors, their housekeeper, and

her teenage daughter were roused from sleep by members of the Salvadoran special forces, led down a corridor outside of their dormitories to a grassy area, and executed.<sup>3</sup> To this end, the UCA maintains a museum, a chapel where the remains of the priests are laid to rest, and a rose garden. A small monument engraved with the names of the Jesuits marks the area where they were executed.

The UCA is a clear example of what Steve Stern categorizes as a “nudo de la memoria” or a memory knot. The memory knot is a person, an event, a date or a place that bring up the past in a way that interrupts the present and that functions as a bridge between the private and public:

Sean negativos o positivos, estos son nudos que interrumpen los flujos y ritmos “normales” que constituyen un mundo de hábitos y reflejos cotidianos. Rompen la normalidad que no necesita mucho pensamiento o mucha memoria conciente. Nos exigen pensar, sentir, atender. (13).

Stern describes the most effective memory spaces as those that have a direct connection with the past, which creates a sense of the sacred (ver 14). The memory of the Jesuit massacre has been maintained in the same place where the historical referent occurred which gives the space the unique “aura” that Stern describes. In contrast with other historical sites, the UCA memory space emerges organically in a complex social and historical context and resists becoming a “knowable” object tied to a particular frozen narration of the past. Individual and group identities continue to be formed in this historic “place.”<sup>4</sup> For example, when I visited the UCA, the University was in session and the *Jesucristo Libertador* chapel, which houses the remains of the Jesuits, was an informal space primarily used by students who freely came and went. Students reflected quietly in the pews or played guitar and sang on the floor. Some wandered in the back of the chapel taking in Roberto Huezo’s drawings of tortured Salvadoran men and women, a version of the *Stations of the Cross* that Padre Ignacio Ellacuría decided to display there years before his death. Many of the students appeared to be in their late teens or

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<sup>3</sup> The murder of the Jesuits is held widely as a “last straw” that brought the government and military under much international scrutiny and pressure to negotiate the peace that ended the war.

<sup>4</sup> See more on Marc Augé’s concept of anthropological “place” in *Non-places*.

early twenties and were too young to have had their own memories of the armed conflict and the decades of repression that led to the war. Yet in order to make sense of their quotidian space, the piercing images within the chapel engage the students of today in an organic way with the tortured bodies of the past.



*Two of the fourteen images from Roberto Huezo's Stations of the Cross at the UCA Chapel.*

Roberto Huezo's *Stations of the Cross* (1983-1984) is provocative; in the place of typical images of Christ carrying the burden of the cross, Huezo's fourteen drawings feature the tortured bodies of Salvadoran men and women. These images can be read as a metaphor connecting the suffering of the Salvadoran people with that of Christ.<sup>5</sup> Huezo's *Stations* drawings confront the

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<sup>5</sup> Father Ignacio Ellacuría, one of the Jesuit martyrs, made the decision to hang Roberto Huezo's *Stations of the Cross* in the chapel, an action of silent resistance against the institutionalized repression and violence during the war.

viewer not only with an abstract international concept of human rights violations, but also with the immediacy of physical pain and the vulnerability of the human body to violence. The drawings show hands and mouths tensed in pain and bodies in contorted positions with visible wounds that induce the viewer to imagine the horrors that left them in such a state. Huezo's *Stations* thrusts the viewer into a reflection on personal memories of torture and violence. Younger generations without personal memories of the war still can easily identify with the corporal focus of the drawings, with the visible pain and the threat of ultimate destruction of the body.



*A garden in memory of the Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter on the UCA campus.*

The rose garden is another memory knot within the UCA space. Here, the husband of the two women killed with the Jesuits, cultivated a rose garden in their memory in the space where the Jesuits were executed. For those who have a sense of what happened from personal memory, from oral sources or from the scores of photographs showing the executed Jesuits laying face down in this area, the rose garden can be a powerful invitation to remember. The bright crimson flowers bring up an awareness of the blood that was spilt here while at the same time, giving

hope that something beautiful can grow in a place so charged with violence. Yet, the very nonrepresentational nature of the rose garden allows individuals to experience the space without being required to interpret the past in a pre-packaged way.

### **The UCA since the democratic transition of 2009: Plotting the Past in the Present**

Since winning the presidential election of 2009, the administration of Mauricio Funes has made a concerted effort to draw the UCA space into the folds of official memory. In his first year as President, Mauricio Funes recognized the Jesuits with the Order of José Matías Delgado's Illustrious Gold Cross Medal, the greatest honor that the state bestows on individuals. During the ceremony in the Presidential Palace, Father José María Tojeira, the then Dean of the UCA, remarked that this was the first time that the Salvadoran government acknowledged the value and contributions of the slain priests and their commitment to Salvadoran society. Tojeira also congratulated the FMLN government for paying homage to the Jesuits, an act that he characterized as symbolic and necessary for Salvadoran society (ver Moreno). In May of 2012, the UCA became an official tourist site promoted by the Salvadoran Department of Tourism (ver Solito).

Despite its efforts to officially recognize the history of the UCA, the FMLN government has been criticized repeatedly by the American Commission on Human Rights and by various local human rights organizations for failing to pressure for the abolition of the 1993 Amnesty law that prevents prosecution for cases of human rights violations during the war including the murder of the Jesuits. In light of this Benjamin Cuellar, director of the Human Rights Institute of the UCA (IDHUCA), questions the true intent behind these symbolic measures:

La Orden Matías Delgado fue para los padres jesuitas y el decreto dice que fue por "sus contribuciones al país". ¿Y sus colaboradoras? Ellas, también víctimas, no fueron tomadas en cuenta en ese reconocimiento. Eso no fue un acto de desagravio para las víctimas, eso fue, para este gobierno, como hacer una marca registrada del caso jesuitas, como se ha hecho con la figura de Romero o la de Katya Miranda. (Quezada s.p.).



As Cuellar points out, creating official history also sanctions forgetting; there is a silencing of the past inherent in the construction of emblematic memory. From this point of view the public recognition of the Jesuits as heroes emerges, not as a passive opening of memory, but as a conscious effort by the state to draw the UCA space into a hegemonic frame of memory that provides a moral and ethical justification for their position and underscores the end of the 20-year reign of the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA).



*The UCA Museum displays the Jesuits' recognition with the Order of José Matías Delgado's Illustrious Gold Cross.*

My intention is not to suggest in any way that there should not be a public recognition of the Jesuits and the history of the UCA, but rather to point out how memory is deployed as part of a larger political process of state sponsored memory. Recent debates about the image of Roque Dalton provide a useful contextualization of this dynamic. In his victory speech President Funes demonstrated his affinity with Roque Dalton's ideals when he declared, “llegó el turno del ofendido” appropriating a title of one of Roque Dalton's books of poetry, *El turno del ofendido* (1962). Funes quoted from the book: “Ahora es la hora de mi turno / el turno del ofendido por años silencioso / a pesar de los gritos.” Yet, associating themselves with Roque Dalton has

proven thorny for the Funes administration because members of the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP), one of the left wing organizations that morphed into the FMLN, have admitted responsibility for the assassination of Roque Dalton. Ironically, Jorge Meléndez, one of the people accused of Dalton's assassination, is Head of Civil Security in the FMLN government (ver Andréu).

In light of the accusations against Meléndez, the Dalton family has criticized the government for what they argue is a hypocritical appropriation of Roque Dalton's name and image. President Funes' public response has been that Dalton's legacy belongs to the entire nation, not just to his family: "Dalton ya no es de los hijos ni de la viuda, es del pueblo, es la esencia de nuestra expresión cultural, no es patrimonio particular." (Abarca s.p.). In this example, as in the case of the UCA Jesuits, the state's effort to plot the past in the present day context obscures ongoing contradictions and creates new silences.

Additionally President Funes' unveiling of large public murals in 2011 at the MUNA (National Museum of Anthropology) and in 2012 at the CIFCO (International Convention Center) have sparked highly polemical memory battles. According to Funes, the murals symbolize a concerted national journey toward a full recuperation of memory. Yet both murals have been met with heavy criticism from members of the right and left. Many Salvadorans argue that the murals only present a one-sided view of the past especially in terms of the role of the wealthy, of politicians and of the military (ver "Funes devela"). While the murals clearly represent an opening of public space to memories that were previously excluded from the official record, they also shut out selected memories; memory from the perspective of the right, the memory of human rights violations committed by the left, and memory that is still too polemical to display publically.

Today memories of the war of the 80's that had been previously silenced during the ARENA government are increasingly becoming part of a hegemonic framework of memory. Undeniably the memory promoted by the FMLN opens a public framework for re-encountering the past for many people whose private memories of the war had never before resonated with

hegemonic historical narratives. Official recognition of Roberto Huezo's Vía Crucis at the UCA, for example, means that torture has a place in a public memory framework. The experience of torture becomes part of the discourse of history that can be uttered by someone who experienced it and acknowledged by those who did not. As discussed earlier, Halbwachs and Stern have shown that memory is determined by present day social contexts. Additionally much of the recent scholarship on memory in El Salvador is critical of socio-political deployments of memory. For example, Ralph Sprenkels characterizes memory in postwar El Salvador as a "militant memory" in which history is politicized to such an extent that it becomes propaganda (273). José Alfredo Ramírez argues that competing versions of memory of El Salvador's most recent war cannot be reconciled while ignoring the perspectives of other social groups (ver 106). In a similar way, this article shows that state recognition of the UCA today cannot be interpreted as a passive opening of the past, but rather is suggestive of a reconstruction of history that promotes a specific narrative of national identity that is in accord with the current politics of the state.

In this article I have used the UCA as a case study to explore how individual memories intersect with larger political processes in the Salvadoran post war context. As a result of the FMLN "recuperation" efforts, memories of the UCA, the Jesuits, and other figures associated with the left have become part of an emblematic framework of memory. Still, the UCA remains a memory knot tied organically to individual memories and experiences that are detached from historical narrative and remain outside of history. In a memory space like the UCA individuals reconcile their own personal encounters with the past with increasingly more dominant versions of state sponsored emblematic memory. I would like to conclude by returning to the photograph with which I began. How does memory function in the legacy of war and in light of the democratic transition of 2009? I invite you to look closely at her expression. Does it reveal the melancholy of having a private memory distorted and fragmented by an external representation of the past? Maybe. Probably. But one could also argue that hers is an expression of astonishment upon seeing that a private experience has taken on profound collective meaning; that the personal has become historical.

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