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Identity and Collective Memory in Jorge Sanjinés' *La nación clandestina*

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The increasing disparity between projects of modernity and the capacity of many nation-states to cope with the rapid development of globalization has created massive changes and to some extent, convulsions inside their respective societies and state apparatus. On the one hand, we are witnessing the expanding role and presence of global institutions and corporations in isolated and marginalized societies, especially in the fields of commerce and political influence; and on the other, we observe the consequences that these changes are having in the transformation of identities and collective memories inside these societies, transformations that accelerate with phenomena such as human migration. La nación clandestina (1989), by Bolivian filmmaker Jorge Sanjinés, explores the impact of these changes in rural Bolivia, revealing a strong collective memory that struggles for both resistance and survival. This article seeks to examine the concept of collective memory and indigenous identity in the film, arguing that contemporary migration presents not only an avenue for connecting with the globalization project, but also an accelerated way of

reconceptualizing identity and the transformation of cultural traditions alongside endogenous forms of local governance.

La nación clandestina narrates the story of Sebastián Mamani, an indigenous Aymara from the ayllu (indigenous community) of Willkani in the Bolivian Altiplano. After spending most of his childhood with his parents in his native community, his mother sent him to La Paz so he could be raised by an urban family with better education opportunities. However, as years went by, Sebastián felt ashamed of his indigenous roots and decided to change his last name to Mainsman; an effort that reflects the generalized conception that foreign-sounding names constitute the golden key to open doors to ventures and other opportunities. During his stay in La Paz, Sebastián takes several jobs, including coffin maker, soldier and ultimately, as a secret agent for the Ministry of the Interior which used to repress union leaders, students, and leftist activists. It is during this period of time that Sebastián begins to experience the consequences of an involuntary 'exile' that has left him without linkages to his own community. It is only by getting repetitively drunk that he hopes to overcome his feelings of solitude and frustration, as well as that of betrayal derived from the impersonation of a cosmopolitan identity.

After spending four years in complete frustration, Sebastián decides to go back to his *ayllu* to vindicate himself. Aided by his brother, Vicente, Sebastián returns to the community where he is appointed as the *ayllu*'s political chief to negotiate in La Paz matters that affect their community. The first task Sebastián undertook was to negotiate food aid that La Paz received from the United States. However, discord sets in as divergent sectors of the community discuss whether or not to accept humanitarian aid, especially from the United States. Sebastián considers this aid very important given the precarious economic levels in the community. But his brother Vicente rejects these propositions arguing that past experience has showed that such initiatives always come accompanied with hidden purposes to undermine autonomous development. In an egotistical impulse, Sebastián decides for the community and without consulting them, permits the assistance to arrive.

Paradoxically, the dark side of this assistance did not come from the United States but from Sebastián himself. In an attempt at profiting from the deal, he pacts with a scrupulous merchant in La Paz to sell half of the food aid and divide the gains. This act of corruption is discovered by members of the community who immediately decide to prosecute and punish him. Although he was condemned to exile Sebastián ignores the sentence and returns back home to expiate his guilt by dancing the *Jacha Tata Danzante*, an ancient dance lost in time in which the dancer dances until his death, as a symbol of an ultimate sacrifice.

The film is narrated in two intertwined stories that represent different epochs in the life of Sebastián. The first, and the one that opens up the film, consists of short clips that narrate Sebastian's return to his community from La Paz. This is characterized by constant flashbacks that reminiscence his life and experiences in the city. These memories constitute the background history, or the second story, which exhibits the reshaping of collective memory and the crises that are present in both the émigré and his native community. This constant 'back and forth' produces the effect of a search for a lost identity that resembles Emily Habiby's invention of the Pessoptimist, the one who is half here, half not here; part historical creature, part mythological invention; hopeful and hopeless; everyone's favourite obsession and scapegoat (Said 2000, 26). By returning home, Sebastián seeks what Spitzer calls a restorative initiative that could end his problem and cure his affliction (1999, 90). In this regard, Sebastián is considered the most complex character of all of Sanjinés' work; in spite of being a 'negative hero' he manages to move the audience when he returns home: he is the prodigal son ready to sacrifice himself for the community in the ritual dance that leads to his death (Ruffinelli 2003, 199).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the Ukamau Group experimented with various techniques such as sequence shots and the removal of suspense in an attempt to represent Andean cultural structures. These techniques sought to locate the films within an integral, unbroken, and reflexive space (as opposed to the fragmented space of the Western cinematic and pictorial traditions) that would interact with its collective indigenous protagonists (Wood 2006, 72). With *La nación clandestina*,

Sanjinés rejects outright the notion of temporal-historical progress enshrined in Western philosophy, striving instead to create a narrative structure originating in the Andean spatio-temporal concept of the cyclical restitution of a past utopia (2006, 78). It resembles the characteristics of documentary cinema that, according to Bresheeth, concentrates on both identity and the struggle between images of self-hood and otherness (2007, 165).

La nación clandestina is framed within the socio-political context that experienced Bolivia during the 1980s and early 1990s. During that period, globalization started to become a definite marker of a new crisis for the sovereignty of nation states (Appadurai 2001, 4). Many Latin American countries adopted structural reforms with the purpose of boosting economic development and inserting the region into the nascent neoliberal project of the free market. These reforms were drafted by international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in a broader program known as the 'Washington Consensus' and were implemented in Latin America by elites that ignored concerns for the environment, the capacity to compete with foreign subsidized goods and services, and for human and labour rights. In Bolivia, these reforms were all but a conditionality to accelerate the privatization of public enterprises and to cut social programs and spending (McMichael 2004) in an effort to implement the new strategy for governance: the pursuance of small government. Moreover, Bolivia was the recipient of military aid from the United States along with other Andean countries to wage the US 'war on drugs' abroad for an increasing consumption problem that that country has inside its borders.

As a result, massive social changes occurred in Bolivia during this period. In the economy, unemployment grew out of control as state companies were privatized, rationalized, and in some cases, closed. The opening of Bolivia's economy to foreign trade exacerbated an already fragile rural economy that was dependant on cash crops. In the political context, the 'war on drugs' created massive movements of indigenous peoples from the countryside after the increasing violation of human rights that comes accompanied with military intervention. Also, the destruction of coca crops

across Bolivia left many peasants without a relatively stable source of income and traditional sustenance. People from the countryside started to consider internal and foreign migration as an alternative to provide food and income to their families. Rural indigenous peoples tended to migrate to the cities, whereas those in the cities tended to migrate to other countries such as Argentina, Chile, and Spain. State repression also increased through a virulent crusade to contain the 'red scare' of communism attributed to the mobilization of peasants and other social sectors such as students, the unemployed, and labour unions. These debates reflect the necessity to protect cultural autonomy and economic survival in some local, national, or regional spheres during this era of 'reform' and 'openness' (Appadurai 2001, 2-3). For reasons of space, discussions on the political economy of conflict are not included in this paper; rather, the focus lies on how migration affects these communities, their cultural identity, collective memory, and local governance.

In the film, the theme of migration is present in every aspect and social sphere that Sanjinés touches. Several types of migration are exposed in La nación clandestina. First, there is 'involuntary migration,' whereby Sebastián is taken out of his rural community to the capital city by his mother who wants a better future for him. Being pushed to adapt to a new environment, often harsh towards people of indigenous descent, his personal identity enters into shock as he struggles to survive and live with rejection and marginalization (Goldstein 2004). As a consequence, he denies to his indigenous roots by changing his last name to Mainsman, thus assuming a new legal identity that could allow him to participate in the life of the city without running the 'risk' of being rejected. According to Handler, a person has two different signifiers: the 'what,' which refers to physical and psychological characteristics shaped from personal experience; and the 'who,' to a web of social relations through family and social connections (1994, 35). In Sebastián's case, the pursuit of an identity as inhabitant of the postmodern city reflects his personal experience as an indigenous child that was taken to La Paz and grew with the outright rejection of indigenous roots by the local population. It also reflects his disillusionment with his native community as he progresses into alienation

and blames his original community for the misery and humiliation he has experienced in the city. This change affects his social relations, connections, and family ties with his original community as he alienates himself from his self-consciousness as an individual with indigenous past, thus denying his roots, community, and family. 'Differentiation and not distance, is the effective concept to understand not only the relations between the settlers and the native peoples, but also the changing relations between native societies and among natives and settlers' (Sider & Smith 1997, 9). 'All progress is a digression, all residence is exile' (Said 1986, 21).

Back in his community, the news of Sebastián's change of his last name is received with grief. His mother cries hopelessly as she blames herself for Sebastián's rejection of his roots. She decides to cope with it by submerging into silence and social alienation to intimately grieve her son's attitude. While silence can be categorized as a type of repression, it can be at the same time a form of survival, a desire to forget as an essential ingredient in the process of survival (Connerton 2008, 68). Silence constitutes a form of struggle within and between classes, or more broadly, among oppressed and exploited people, as well as between them and those who dominate (Sider & Smith 1997, 13). However, considering the strong communal nature of ayllus in the Andes, alienation becomes a form of social death for the person that suffers from it, drifting further into isolation and marginalization. In this context, the film suggests how the ayllu of Willkani portrays itself as a community increasingly vulnerable to foreign (not necessarily from another country) penetration and cultural transformation; resembling, to some extent, Said's words on the dynamics of the dispossession of the cultural heritage of the people of Palestine: '[it represents a] continuity for them, the dominant population; [and] discontinuity for us, the dispossessed and dispersed' (1986, 20). 'Identities are never unified and, in contemporary times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions' (Hall 1996, 4).

A second type of migration present in the film is the theme of homecoming. After spending several years out of his communal land and tired of the marginalization, exclusion and discrimination in the city, Sebastián decides to search for his roots and retake his past. Nostalgia leads him to invoke the principle that in remembering he could be thrust back, transported into the place he recalled (Casey 2000, 201). The new project of life he was envisioning was, paradoxically, contrary to his mother's wishes when he was a child; demonstrating his willingness to go back to his community and serve his purpose as an indigenous peasant with indigenous roots. This reflects the fact that this era is characterized by a search for roots, of people trying to discover in the collective memory of their history, religion, community, and family; a past that is entirely their own (Said 2000, 177). In his homecoming, the transformation of the place he encounters upon his arrival does not produce a feeling of disappointment, as illustrated by Casey (2000, 201), but an eagerness to reconstruct his identity, his family and community ties. His new role as political chief reflects an implicit tendency of the community to utilize his past experience in the city and serve the purposes important to their organization. In this way, cultures get constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed as people try to pursue their identities (Handler 1994, 27).

The reconfiguration of Sebastián's identity incorporates elements from both the cosmopolitan post-modernity and the indigenous past. On the one hand, he brings with him all the baggage of individualistic identity present in the city alongside the values of the nascent liberalization of the market that considers 'obsolescence' as an essential ingredient in its operation (Connerton 2008, 67). On the other hand, there is the ever presence of his cultural identity and the roots to which he belongs and was born. However, this syncretic identity provokes a crisis in his personality, affecting his process of cultural readaptation. He becomes an entity lost in the middle of a place that he now realizes he does not fully understand, since the values and principles that they still defend and hold contrast with the practicalities of his education in the city; and all this seems foreign to Sebastián. He easily confuses collective versus individual interests and decides to pursue his own with a clear disadvantage to his community. Ayllu members soon realize this conflict and learn that their destiny has been decided by Sebastián's individualist ambitions. Memory, both individual and collective, is not merely cognitive, it is also normative. That is, memory does not simply transmit information from the past to the present; it also transmits responsibilities (Poole 2008, 149). By providing an insight into the communal values of the Andean peasantry and indigenous groups, Sanjinés reinforces Halbwachs' argument that the idea of an individual memory, absolutely separate from social memory, is an abstraction almost devoid of meaning (Kansteiner 2002, 185).

Here enters the third type of migration, that of forced displacement and uprooting from the land. The theme of the uprooting from the land to which Sebastián is subjected recollects elements from the reminiscence of the collective memory of the ayllu and a nostalgic past that cannot be brought back and that was characterized by the collective solidarity of their people. The above is complemented with foreign penetration represented in the adoption of structural adjustment programs and the supposed foreign food aid provided by the United States to alleviate hunger in Bolivia. Upon his forced expulsion, Sebastián enters into another conflict with himself and realizes just how much harm he has done to his community and his family. In a clearly Dostoyevskian representation, Sebastián feels the guilt of his betrayal to the community and decides to plan his second return; this time, to expiate his guilt and compensate his fault. Following an ancient, but forgotten, custom in the Andes, Sebastián decides to build a carnival mask to perform that ancient dance until he dies. By dying, he seeks to demonstrate his most intimate feeling of loyalty, respect, and admiration for the culture and values he once neglected and used to be ashamed of. In this way, the expelling of Sebastián from the community encompasses in the film the broader theme of the collective and cultural memory that represents the values, livelihood, imageries, and basic elements of community-building present in Andean agrarian communities for centuries. As Lagos (1994) illustrates in her book Autonomy and Power: the Dynamics of Class and Culture in Rural Bolivia, autonomy, power, and culture in peasant villages and rural hinterlands in Bolivia are historical processes in constant transformation, reproduced, contested, and reshaped.

The collective memory has been increasingly important in ethnographic studies on rural communities in Latin America. The label "memory" aims to grasp the past we carry, how we are shaped by it and how this past is transmitted (Berliner 2005, 200-1). This is so especially with the rising political power of indigenous and peasant organizations in the high Andes that are currently expanding to other countries such as Colombia, Argentina, and Chile to claim historical rights denied for centuries. This political organization is based on both their collective memory and history, seeking to end the blatant exploitation, marginalization, and discrimination to which they have been subjected since the onset of colonialism. It is their right, especially in the face of state violence and oppression, to make their memories known and acknowledged in the public sphere; there is no longer need for it to remain merely a private matter (Werbner 1998, 1-2). In the film, Sanjinés illustrates this particular mode of political organization in two scenes: first, when the Central obrera (Central Workers' Union), peasant organizations, and teachers' unions across the country cease their day-to-day activities to join the miners' unions to protest against yet another military coup d'état. Their tactics include blockades, acts of sabotage against foreign enterprises, and collective mobilization in the city. The second mode of political organization is illustrated when Sebastián, employed as a soldier, goes to several agrarian communities to convince farmers and indigenous peoples to hand over their rifles and ammunition. But peasants reject Sebastián's request arguing that they had achieved through the use of guns the respect from gamonales and foreign intervention. The old trick employed by Sebastián of the promise from the Bolivian state for a new agrarian reform and new machinery for harvesting the land, should they hand over their guns, does not work, because peasants know very well that these tactics have been employed in the past with the purpose of disarming the peasantry and indigenous populations and later facilitate state repression and intervention. 'The classic concept of 'solidarity' as outlined by

¹ People that concentrated vast areas of land, speculated with agricultural products, and hold enormous local and regional political power.

Durkheim remained therefore unchallenged: solidarity as unconscious, filiative, seemingly natural and given' (Bamyeh 2007, 156).

These examples demonstrate their power of organization and collective identity. However, this organizational capacity of indigenous peoples and peasants does not mean that they follow a clear-cut communist or socialist affiliation. On the contrary, Sanjinés seems to criticize such overgeneralizations through a character who happens to be a student and self-proclaimed intellectual from La Paz. In his running away from the military, the student exposes two important paradoxes. The first paradox emerges when the student finds himself in the cold Altiplano without clothing and meets Sebastián in a desolated place, who is by then returning back home to expiate his guilt. There, Sebastián exposes the student's ignorance of the real conditions of the rural population when the student tries to argue that he fights for the rights of the indigenous, the peasants, and the workers. But the fact remains: he does not have a clue about their culture, traditions, and geographical location when Sebastián tries to explain the purpose of the mask he carries with him. The second paradox occurs shortly before the student is found and executed by the military: the student meets a couple of indigenous seniors who happened to be outside their house in the altiplano and as he was trying to ask for help in Spanish, his anger grew when he realized that they did not speak any word of Spanish, only Aymara, thus chastising their "backwardness" 'ignorance.'

This reveals what the Peruvian writer José Carlos Mariátegui (2004) considered earlier in the twentieth century to be the purpose of any revolutionary movement in Latin America: a movement of its own; neither a copy nor a model of any foreign ideology. The intended modernization of peasant and indigenous organization, as well as all of Bolivian society, including the bourgeoisie, based on ideologies and practices formulated or emerged elsewhere, missed the fact that in Andean societies, collective memory seems to organize around three major interests: collective memory based on myths, the prestige of the family that is expressed by genealogies, and the knowledge that is transmitted by practical formulas deeply imbued in indigenous practices (Le Goff 1992, 58).

The above example reveals the conflict and current debate between memory and history. According to Nora,

memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to appropriation and manipulation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer (2007, 146).

The historicity that is intended to be portrayed to Andean indigenous groups by outsiders seems, at best, a totalizing project that seeks to justify the modern interpretation of alienation and its opposite: integration, with the traditions of ancient societies that have been subjected to the same alienation. 'What needs to be developed are ways of seeing 'culture,' and in particular the divisions, tensions, and antagonisms within a culture, not simply *in* history but *as* history' (Sider & Smith 1997, 13).

However, as Casey argues, one critical commonality between East and West remains: place memories of all kinds, however diverse they may be otherwise, require that the place remembered serve as an enclosure of some sort, as a preservative space (2000, 212). The question of the land, which is the traditional problem of indigenous peoples in Latin America (Mariátegui 2004), continues to be the pivotal point around which all elements of memory, history, and myth meet, and from which cultural memory emerges as an objectified culture, that is, the texts, images, buildings, and monuments that are designed to recall fateful events in the history of the collective as the officially sanctioned heritage of a society, are intended for the *longue durée* (Kansteiner 2002, 182).

Globalization and the growing flow of people across and within borders have generated an encounter with the "other" and to a rethinking of "the collective" in spatio-temporal and cultural terms. This is evidenced by the constant rejection of modernity by the *ayllu* of Willkani, and it is based precisely on the collective memory that has been present and constructed through a historical, complex, and traumatic process. Memory and its representations touch very significantly upon questions of identity, nationalism, power, and authority (Said 2000, 176). It is encompassed in a

battle that has been fought by all colonized peoples whose past and present were dominated by outside powers who had first conquered the land and then rewrote history so as to appear in that history as the true owners of that land (2000, 184). In this context, the voice of the dead and their memories, myths, and histories continue to influence their decision at keeping alive their voice and cultural heritage in the midst of a cacophonous globalizing project. Dismemberment turns the living into the living dead, while the dead, with disembodiment, increasingly seem to expand their presence into the realm of the living (Werbner 1998, 4).

Globalization presents itself as a theory of the present moment, powerfully expressing that we now live in an almost, not yet world (Shami 2003, 220), to which traditional societies struggle to define themselves between a 'poetical space,' that memorable place constituted by allusions that draw specifically on memories and stir those already in the present, but dormant, in the breast of the onlooker (Casey 2000, 208). This is a place of new opportunities that would allow them to fully participate in the globalization of commerce, culture, and politics. As for the former, there is a risk of falling dysfunctional should they take refuge in an idealized past while avoiding a critical examination of and engagement with their present (Spitzer 1999, 91). For the latter, the deterritorialization reterritorialization of cultural identity (Fortier 2000) accelerates as globalization constantly changes dynamics and strategies to adapt to the pace of rapid technological changes. Paradoxically, globalization has also allowed people to consider migration, resist violence, seek social redress, and design new forms of civic association and collaboration, often across national boundaries (Appadurai 2001, 6).

The themes of migration, exile, individual identity, collective memory, and globalization have had a profound impact on the local forms of governance that have characterized their autonomy. Since globalization demands ever more participation of capital, consumers, and producers, the role of governance is critical for the expansion and consolidation of communities. In this regard, the influence over decision makers around the globe make the livelihood of communities dependent upon the economic interests of powerful elites that subdue territorial integrity and sovereignty

for individual gains. Therefore, a paradox emerges when trying to reconcile the increasing movement of people that migrate to other places in search for economic survival, included among those several indigenous peoples from communal lands in Bolivia, and the increasing power and participation of these agrarian communities in national politics. On the one hand, the exodus involves, in the majority of the cases, young people in search of a better future. This has a profound impact on cultural transmission and the preservation of roots and values since generations born in the diaspora have difficulty adopting the norms and customs of their homeland. Social memory corresponds to those community perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, values and institutions that are transmitted across generations (Berliner 2005, 202). On the other hand, migration facilitates the exchange of knowledge and technology that would allow families back home to pursue more ambitious enterprises and diversify their income. However, as consumerism increases in Latin America, these objectives are not being achieved, and migration is creating income disparities that also affect the high levels of trust and collectivity in these communities. This has been seen in Mexico, where migrant worker agricultural programs in Canada and the United States have created a vacuum with respect to governance and economic status (Hennebry 2006).

La nación clandestina is a powerful film that provides us with an insight into the changing structures of indigenous communities in the Bolivian Andes. Subject to globalization and foreign intervention, community values are transforming rapidly to adapt to the new economic and geopolitical structures. In the middle of this process are phenomena that are recurrently seen across the Andes. Sanjinés provides us with these analyses in this film through the story of Sebastián, an indigenous man that was sent to the city when he was young in the hopes of getting a better education and a brighter future. But instead, the film illustrates the contemporary crises of values and principles that ultimately affect the collective memories, history, and local governance in the *ayllu* communities.

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