



Vol. 8, No. 1, Fall 2010, 397-407
www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Review/ Reseña

Michael J. Lazzara and Vicky Unruh, eds. *Telling Ruins in Latin America*.
New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009.

The Political, Aesthetic, and Ethical Responses to Ruins in Latin America

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How can we explain that at the center of the project of modernity lies a pile of ruins? Modernity, with its wars, its mechanized visions of progress, its consumption, is nurtured by destruction, the constant demand to keep constructing, to keep looking ahead, propelled by its storm. Ruins invite us to remember, and that ethical imperative becomes a political standpoint in Latin America. From the Inca ruins of Machu Picchu and the Aztec ruins swallowed by the modern landscape as in el Templo Mayor and Tlatelolco, to commemorative sites such as Chile's Villa Grimaldi and its hidden bodies in ruins, that remind us of the many *desaparecidos* in Latin America, ruins have always a story to tell.

Jean Franco suggests that contemporary Latin American reality challenges us to reconsider our notions of community, identity and subjectivity “from fragments and ruins” (*The Decline and Fall* 190). In response to this quote, Michael Lazzara and Vicky Unruh present their collection of essays, *Telling Ruins in Latin America*, as one that “forcefully argue(s) that ruins are dynamic sites... palimpsests on which memories and histories are fashioned and refashioned. Ruins, for these authors, do not invite back-ward looking nostalgia, but a politically and ethically motivated ‘reflective excavation’ (Unruh, “It’s a Sin” 146) that can lead to a historical revision and the creation of alternative futures” (Lazzara and Unruh 3). The ruin as a palimpsest of sorts reveals the multiple cultural connections and intertextual allusions prevalent in most of the texts, films, performances, architectural and archeological projects, and cultural debates discussed here. The contributors’ analysis and critique of progress reside in how “ruins challenge modernity’s imposed narratives” (8), and one of the central premises of the book is that the ruin as “a merger of past, present, and future, and as a material embodiment of change—offers a fertile locale for competing cultural stories about historical events, political projects and the constitution of communities.” (1) Lazzara’s and Unruh’s introduction serves as an excellent theoretical backbone for the volume, and it clearly sets the tone for the central questions and issues that connect the multiple, diverse chapters of *Telling Ruins*.

The book is structured into four parts. The first one, “What Are We Doing Here? Ruins, Performance, Meditation,” intelligently incorporates and tackles the ethical dilemmas posed by cultural products that ruminate on ruins, like *Telling Ruins* itself. The authors of these essays distance themselves from an aesthetics of ruins that aims at a restorative project and its preservationist agenda, in dialogue with Svetlana Boym’s definitions of a restorative versus a reflective nostalgia. Diana Taylor’s “Performing Ruins” is a superb way of initiating the reader, almost taking you by the hand, into this journey through various ruined sites, from the *glorious ruins* of Mexico’s el Templo Mayor and the *dark ruins* of Chile’s Villa Grimaldi to the *renovation ruins* of Colombia’s art group *Mapa Teatro* and their performance *Testigo de las ruinas* on the destruction of El Cartucho, an

impoverished community. Giorgio Agamben reminds us that one of the meanings of witness is someone who lives through an event and feels the need to give his or her testimony of their experience (15). *Telling* their story becomes an ethical imperative. Taylor's essay is a performance on performance that enacts the necessity to bear witness, as we readers become spectators, and in some way, actors of our own fictional trips to Mexico, Chile and Colombia. However, she carefully poses uncomfortable questions on voyeurism and tourism that need to be asked when one visits Villa Grimaldi, a torture center, guided by a victim of torture of the Pinochet regime, whose tour is a performance of trauma, which transforms the memory site into one that suddenly seems to have a voice, a face, a body we can touch. Those dark ruins of Pinochet's dictatorship are placed in a parallel scene to the performance of the Colombian *Mapa Teatro*, and their critique of the way the government demolished a whole community in the name of "progress and beautification." Here I can't help but remember mid-nineteenth century Paris and Baudelaire's critique to Haussmann's visions of progress, where the poor are also treated as waste. Modern ruins, as I have argued in *Cities in Ruins: The Politics of Modern Poetics*, in contrast to Baroque and Romantic ruins, are the products of war and progress, and therefore, they elicit a political response to the site. The only thing I would add on Taylor's essay is that the term "glorious," used to describe el Templo Mayor, should be questioned further since the historical gap between the past and the present doesn't erase the legacy of sacrifice and torture that would also make the Aztec temple a *dark ruin*.

Francine Masiello's "Scribbling on the Wreck" and Daniel Balderston's "Oh tiempo tus pirámides: Ruins in Borges" analyze how ruins provoke an ethical and a political meditation on history's fragmentary nature and a nation/site in ruins, in their readings of Gorriti, Sarmiento, Melville and Borges. Masiello's conclusion to her essay signals the elements that link the antique and the modern ruins, and triggers what Walter Benjamin would call a historical awakening: "From the site of the Roman Forum to the burning steel of the World Trade Center, ruins are about the history of ruining others... In short, ruins awaken us to collective thinking that takes us to the frontier of action." (37) Although in contrast to the

nineteenth century authors she discusses, in Borges, as Balderston explains, the frontier of action takes shape in reading the ruins of the future, where relics are reimagined and the “past is always invented.” (45)

Part two, “Whose Ruins? Ownership and Cross-Cultural Mappings” reflects upon polemic claims to national and cultural ownership of ruined sites through diverse mediums: from the perspective of Argentine documentary filmmaker Andrés Di Tella’s essay on his film *La Conquista del Desierto* to María Rosa Olivera-Williams’s discussion of the tango’s heterogeneous nature, and to Rubén Gallo’s study of the failures of the architectural reconstruction of Mexico City’s Tlatelolco and its housing project. This second section also begins with a splendid text, Sylvia Molloy’s “Translating Ruins: An American Parable,” that links the United States’ invention of itself as a nation using the common colonial practice of stealing the ruins and the historical remnants of Latin America’s cultural closet. John Lloyd Stephen’s writings on his travels to Yucatán and Central America are vexing, to say the least, and Molloy eloquently demonstrates how his ideological appropriation of the term America underlines the US imperialist agenda:

The monuments were elsewhere, in the other America, or rather the other *of* America... South America, Spanish America, Latin America, in other words, America-not-quite-America. The process then was to establish a continuity between the two through a strategic Americanness that would allow the United States to have its American ruins through ideological annexation, material transfer, and cultural translation... (55)

Molloy’s critique of how the ruins in Mexico and Central America were treated as commercial commodities is in tune with Regina Harrison’s and Sara Castro-Klaren’s take on Peru’s ruins, in Machu Picchu and in Cuzco respectively. Harrison discusses Machu Picchu’s history of explorations, from Hiram Bingham’s 1911 encounter with the site to Pablo Neruda’s *Alturas de Machu Picchu* and Che Guevara’s visit through Walter Salles’s film, *Motorcycle Diaries* (2004). I find particularly relevant to point out the abuses of the tourist industry when it comes to Machu Picchu, and Harrison explains very well, at the end of her article, how the ruins and the Inca trail have been advertised and become a “cool” tourist destination, specially for the high income, New Age pilgrims, who flock to the site

looking for peace of mind among stones. On the other hand, Castro Klaren's insightful analysis of the "archaeological poetics of evocation," responds to nineteenth century pilgrims, concentrating on Sir Clement R. Markham's (1830-1916) books on his travels to Peru. She reflects upon the construction of archaeology as a discipline and Markham's need to authorize and authenticate with first hand experience the cultural interpretation of Peru's ruins and treasures.

When we think about ruins, we tend to visualize a broken column, a building, or set of monuments destroyed by time, nature, war, or neglect. They tend to remind us of the past that seems distant and forlorn, and yet present, like a ghost, in the marble head without a nose, or the city in ruins without its inhabitants. However, as modern ruins testify, there are many ways of defining a ruin. In his essay on his cinematic project, Di Tella contextualizes the Argentine military campaign to exterminate the indigenous population of the *pampas* between 1878 and 1879, and presents us with skulls, photographs, and a broken and yet intact peace treaty, as the eloquent ruins that tell the story of "the death of a community." Modernization is a project that in its constant construction and reconstruction leaves the ruins as its footprints. In connection to Boym's "reflective nostalgia," Olivera-Williams argues that tango as a ruin is "a textual body that, like archaeological ruins, reveals the fragmentary layers that constitute it" (96). Both Olivera-Williams and Rubén Gallo read in ruins metaphors of a failed modernity. Gallo's sharp, even witty critique of Mario Pani's modernist housing project in Tlatelolco, reminds us of the political, economic, and social significance of ruins. Mexico City has been destroyed and reconstructed several times since the sixteenth century, and one could add that even earlier on, if one thinks of the many layers that constitute the Templo Mayor. Pani's ambitions made him envision modern architecture as one that turns its back on the past and on the Aztec ruins that were found on the site. As Gallo persuasively argues, Pani's project facilitated the student massacre of 1968 since "architecture is a means of exercising control," (113) and its faulty construction also increased the number of casualties in the 1985 earthquake. Therefore, the architectural ruins of the past are once again intermingled with the very modern ruins of

the present, product of political repression and corruption—literal and metaphorical earthquakes.

Bodies in ruins haunt the political and historical memory bags of Latin America in the last few decades, as explored in the third part of the book, “The Ruins of Fragile Ceasefires: Scenes of Loss and Memory.” Lazzara reflects upon the spectacle of Pinochet’s death and the divisiveness of Chilean society, where one could find people condemning him as a murderer and others who paid homage to his legacy with the chilling Neo-Nazi salute. Lazzara offers a compelling account and analysis of the media use and representation of Pinochet’s very bloated body in ruins, the partial and conservative take on the “pros” and “cons” of his legacy, the funeral, and President Bachelet’s decision of not granting him a state funeral. The inequalities rampant in Chile are, he argues, the “ruin” of Pinochet’s regime, and just as Diana Taylor’s and Nelly Richard’s essays on memory sites and their penetrating questions on Villa Grimaldi, these texts would be valuable readings in a class that studies Pinochet’s dictatorship and Chile’s debates on collective memory. Nelly Richard’s brilliant essay makes us rethink how sites of commemorating *los desaparecidos* can truly reach the goal of making us remember the dark past of torture and crimes against humanity, while making us uncomfortable, while embracing the fragmentary, and the ruins they represent. She contrasts Villa Grimaldi and the General Cemetery to the moving “Wall of Memory” created by Claudio Pérez and Rodrigo Gómez in Puente Bulnes, formed by tiles with 256 photographic portraits of missing people during Pinochet’s regime, and a few blank spaces of missing tiles: “a counter-monument that, by calling attention to what is unfinished, pending, and in suspense, opens the fissures of remembrance toward the always unresolved debate between memory and its narrative inscription” (182).

In his reflections on the “culture of memory,” Andreas Huyssen underscores that “it is important to recognize that although memory discourses appear to be global in one register, at their core they remain tied to the histories of specific nations and states...the *political* site of memory practices is still national, not post-national or global” (16). *Telling Ruins* is clearly a book about the construction of memory through political,

historical, and aesthetic projects. Its chapters are detailed and specific in their aim to contextualize each national scene. Jill Lane and Leslie Bayers present the various ways of dealing with Peru's violent past. Lane discusses *Yuyachkaní's* powerful performances and the transformative nature of ruins that awaken the spectator, who finally sees how from fragments and recycled rags, emerges the Peruvian flag. Is it a symbol of a nation in ruins or a symbol of hope? Leslie Bayers studies Peruvian poet Marcial Molina Richter's *moving* (in every sense of the word) visuo-verbal poetic text, "La palabra de los muertos o Ayacucho hora nona" (1991). Her analysis of this poem, which responds to the violence of the recent civil war between the government and *Sendero Luminoso*, centers on how it establishes a dialogue with both avant-garde poetics and Andean cultural practices. Just as Bayers explores how the poem plays with Spanish and Quechua—for example with the multiple meanings of "AYA"—Sandra Messinger Cypess's "Tlatelolco: From Ruins to Poetry," examines how famous Mexican poet José Emilio Pacheco's poems to Tlatelolco echo the Nahuatl poetry on the Spanish Conquest and its effect on the memory of the Aztec community. Therefore, the ruins of the present, the product of war and "modern progress," clearly recall the losses and the injustices of the past, the ruins of the Inca and the Aztec empires. Similar to Gallo's discussion of the massacre of Tlatelolco, Messinger Cypess situates Pacheco and Marcela del Río's poems as cultural and political responses to the abuses and the intention to erase from the collective memory the unforgettable events of 1968. These Peruvian and Mexican poems are not written against history but are filling its gaps: as Pacheco's poem suggests, alluding to the Nahuatl *icnocuícatl*, "our inheritance is a web of holes." (170) These poems are making history and speaking against an official history, a national story that tries to erase those alternative voices. Part three closes with an excellent analysis of Argentine writer Gustavo Ferreyra, where Idelber Avelar explores how his subjects embody "the idea of *subjectivity as ruin*." (184) Avelar's key concept of *neoliberal ruins*, "ruins left by the destructive utopia of privatization," presents the protagonists of the postdictatorship literature as ruins among ruins, trying to survive the new entrapments of the capitalist jungle.

Part four, “Ordinary People: Inhabited Ruins, Precarious Survival,” enters the stage with Vicky Unruh’s evocative analysis of a series of films such as *Fresa y chocolate* (1993), *Madagascar* (1994), *Habana—Arte nuevo de hacer ruinas* (2006), and *Suite Habana* (2003), and narrative texts by Antonio José Ponte and Abilio Estévez. Unruh brings to the book the presence of the Caribbean, crucial in *Telling Ruins in Latin America*, specially because in contemporary Cuba ruins have a latent political significance and the obsessions with ruins can be read either from a counternostalgic critique, as proposed by Ponte, or from the creativity and recycling of ordinary people who try to survive in a ruined political and social landscape. Rolf Abderhalden Cortés and Victoria Langland take us to Colombia and Brazil respectively to show us how “ordinary people,” displaced citizens, or mobilized students take extraordinarily creative initiatives to salvage their sites of memory. *Telling Ruins* offers diverse and broad ways of defining ruins in Latin American cultural studies, and the three essays in this section are mainly the ones that ponder the sexualized body in ruins.

It is exciting to review a book that is so closely related to one’s own investigative project. For me, the most valuable contribution of any scholarly work lays in its ability to make us rethink our own readings and discussions of other works that are not easily intertwined. I was not able to include in my book *Cities in Ruins* a discussion of how Luis Cernuda’s poetry can be connected to Arturo Arias’s essay in this volume. After reading it, however, Arias’s essay made me revisit my own discussion of Spanish poet Luis Cernuda’s texts as counter sites that can be read in light of what Arias has called “ruinous heterotopia.” Let me be clear. Arturo Arias’s essay makes no reference to Cernuda’s poetry, as he concentrates in a thorough and fascinating discussion of the work of Colombian writer Fernando Vallejo. In his analysis of Vallejo’s novels, Arias borrows Foucault’s term *heterotopia* to argue that “ruinous heterotopia” “undermines nostalgic Westernizing myths of origin and ‘home’” (Arias 229). What I found intriguing is how Arias’s provocative reading of Vallejo’s novels, and his notion of “ruinous heterotopia,” can also be useful when we read Cernuda’s homoerotic imagery and his poetic subjects, who

feel out of place, misplaced, marginalized from the urban “home,” or homeless like the clouds, as in the case of his poetry book *Las nubes*, the product of his political exile. Although Cernuda’s poetry may not be easily connected to Fernando Vallejo’s novels, Arias’s conclusion illuminates what Cernuda might be trying to achieve with these ghostly figures: “Vallejo’s polyrhythmic texts denote an endless combat between the ruins of modernity’s heteronormative matrix and the yearning for freedom and transgression that postmodernity inscribes on queer subjects” (239). The body in ruins in these texts is also symptomatic of “the ruins of modernity’s heteronormative matrix.” The representation of queer desire in the urban space is a form of transgression that leads to Cernuda’s subjects to become ghosts, spectres, shadows, death-like figures, yearning for freedom; and this reading is fuelled by Vallejo’s critique and challenge of a patriarchal discourse and its heteronormative masculinity. Thus, Arias’s chapter, among the many excellent essays of this book, can be taught in courses that examine the relevant questions triggered by Queer Studies in the Latin American cultural sphere.

To conclude, Diamela Eltit and Sandra Lorenzano remind us how texts and films that capture and hold on to the memory of the disappeared are closely connected to reality, and that the ruined bodies are not mere metaphors but *real* victims of violence. Diamela Eltit’s outstanding essay discusses how poor women have been labelled as prostitutes and their ruined bodies constrained to a deterministic narrative. She explored how Chilean Augusto D’Halmar’s classic *Juana Lucero* (1902), Beatriz García Huidobro’s *Hasta ya no ir* (1996) and Gonzalo Justiniano’s film *B-Happy* (2003) make us rethink these social roles in diverse ways. Eltit’s text acquires a particular power when she *tells* us the story, the thriller of Alto Hospicio, where the disappearances of fourteen women from 1998 to 2000 are the product of both a serial killer and an indifferent state, negligent and prejudiced against poor women. Just like Eltit, Sandra Lorenzano uses her reading of Carlos Sorín’s film *Historias mínimas* (2002) to reflect upon *telling*, moving stories, and the voices of *Memoria Activa* and *Memoria Abierta*. The final essay of the collection asks the reader to think how “the role of memory from Latin America transcends the limits of theoretical,

academic discourse, and moved us into the ethical realm, as Benjamin proposed” (250).

As you may conclude after reading this review, I recommend that you go out, buy or order for your library *Telling Ruins*, read it, study it, and teach it. The only thing I missed is a stronger presence of the Spanish language. Even if they had provided an English translation, as Leslie Bayers does when she quotes the poem in Spanish, having quotes in both languages would have been preferable. However, the twenty-one essays in this book are beautifully written, meticulously edited, and carefully intertwined. *Telling Ruins in Latin America* brings together a formidable list of scholars, artists, and thinkers from Latin America and the United States to think about ruins and the role of memory to portray modernity's failed versions of progress, and how Latin American vibrant cultural projects reshape the ruined landscape by facing and voicing its cracks and holes.

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