Returning to Santiago: City, Imagination & Memory

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Abstract

As a result of war and state repression, exile has become one of the most significant and massive process of social and cultural dislocation of the Twentieth Century, producing diasporas of truly nomadic subject with very singular experiences of social space and time, of memory and imagination. Through the use of semiotic phenomenology as a method and the fragmentary and non-linear performance of an auto-ethnographic narrative, this paper attempts to give a situated account of the reconstruction of memory and imagination drawing on my own experience of returning back to Chile after years of exile and self-exile.

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An introduction

As a result of war and state repression, exile has become one of the most significant and massive process of social and cultural dislocation of the Twentieth Century, producing diasporas of truly nomadic subjects with very singular experiences of social space and time, of memory and imagination. Memory in this context refers to processes of individual and collective reconstruction of the past that are intimately associated to traumatic experience of political violence through which this nomadic subject is inscribed and produced as part of a social space marked by separation, lost, grief and mourning. The memories of violence and social dislocation are always memories of the abject, a traumatic location characterized by the complete collapse of consciousness and meaning; memories of suffering, the iteration of marks on the body that find themselves always in opposition to the symbolic order, on the edge of language, without proper cultural discourses to represent them (Kristeva, 1982). The abject here designates the Real in a truly Lacanian sense (Lacan, 1994), meaning by this the traumatic separation of the subject from the possibility of linguistic representation, separation through which this subject is simultaneously inscribed and produced. As for those, like ourselves, who find themselves doing social research on issues of memory and political violence, we confront the ethical and political challenge of not exercising further violence on the other when producing academic discourses where no possibility of voice has been left. As a way of recognizing the experience of abjection and trauma without falling into the representational trap of classical academic discourses, the present fragmentary and auto-ethnographic narrative of my own experiences of returning to city of Santiago after fifteen years exile and self-exile in Australia attempts to elaborate on the linguistic limits of memory through a performatic and fragmented mode of writing, as a way of deconstructing and transgressing the representational conventions governing academic writing on abjection, violence and alterity. From the perspective of semiotic-phenomenology, the concept of experience is understood here in terms of how it appears to bodily perception articulated in the forms of signs to be read,
describe and interpreted and affected by throughout the texture of social relations where a precarious sense of the self is embedded.

**Writing the other, writing myself**

Performatic writing always involves a textual movement of displacement where words are turned around and meaning reversed so as to challenge the context of violence from where they arose and acknowledge the intensities and affections that disrupt the rational rigor of dominant political and scientific narratives based on a sovereign academic self. If there is any violence in this performatic writing, it is not the totalizing violence of representation but a deconstructive violence attempting to interpret, experiment and imagine new possibilities of thinking traumatic and diasporic subjectivities by the way of expressions retrieving the possibilities of certain bodily affects (Grozs, 1994). This text therefore does not belong exclusively to me as an author; it belongs to a perceptual space where there is a transpersonal exchange between the self and the other taking place, where the agency of the “I” is displaced and fractured by social forces beyond her conscious control. In this exchange, the limit of between the private and public, between the individual voice and the collective action, dissolves through the process of narration. Each part of my story is, in Annette Kuhn’s words (1995), “at the heart of a radiating web of associations, reflections and interpretations...They spread into an extended network of meanings that bring together the personal with the familial, the cultural, the economic, the social and the historical” transforming the authority of the writing self into a culturally situated and performance artifice.

The following text then has to be understood in that context, as an in-between connecting protagonists and the observer, a repetition of others multiple experiences with a difference of my own. I am not writing simply the other, I am writing myself. My biography is scattered between the poles of intimacy and anonymity of others’ life experiences. A play of becoming permanently the other, and yet becoming more myself. As the Peruvian Marxist Jose Carlos Mariátegui (1987) described his
intellectual work, “...I am not an impartial and objective critic. My judgment is natured by my ideas, by my feelings, by my passions”. Yet there is a paradox, a lapse in my writing. No code can be repeated without being transformed through the mode of existence I write those remembrances. I cannot write the memories of the other without questioning the position where I write them from. There is a new collective enunciation bursting through but it is the enunciation of my own becoming. My cultural closeness to those memories may not put me in the same place of the Western anthropologist who, by studying non-Western peoples, naively attempts to “give voice” to the other while remaining caught in the assumptions and privileges of her/his own culture (Antonious, Robbens & Nostrum, 1995). Rather my anxiety is having to acknowledge that I am not in a position to speak of the joy and the sufferings of the other without repeating the violence against it. There may appear to be no outside. I may mingle with the other to the extent of becoming part of it. I may be caught in the web of my own critical observation as a part of the action. And yet the outside still haunts me, expels me, questions my intentions, interrogating not just the validity of my witnessing but also its sincerity. Chile is an “original” which cannot be recaptured because the actuality of my writing/telling itself is always fundamentally different to the moment when the other is acting or speaking. The barricades summon my body to write the struggle while my body no longer occupies a place behind them. The displacement is above all the unconscious displacement of my body that is already incarnated in the text (Derrida, 1978). The issues addressed by the narrator then remained conditioned by the historical circumstances the text was produced under. In this particular case, the writing is a passage towards that other, and yet a tragic departure from it brought by the experience of migrating away from my own country and language. Through that experience, the text becomes a journey into a precarious remembering of the self since the journey never confirms the foundation of the initial departure and the present of the writing remains the most absolute form of experience. I write about a struggle while I am no longer made by it but by a certain chileanness separated from Chile. My writing then becomes a
detour from Chile, a displaced writing, a minor text, an interminable walk that never arrives or return. While my encounter with the other is always in the process of taking place, writing occurs inevitably in the form of a separation from the other, a being together as a separation, a space through which the other resonates without being fully visible. If this repetition of the other is permeated by my subjectivity which transforms it by writing it, the survival of its image is never present as a totality but as fragments of that other. These fragments are a story of the discontinuities between those people I met when I was there fighting a dictatorship and those I met when I was back there researching this paper as in a passageway between dwelling and travelling. The past does not rush into the present as single whole, but as an interminable flow of traces, disappearances, forgettings and remembrances. The old story always unfolds anew. I conduct myself, as Walter Benjamin (1986) did, like a man digging, returning always to the same moments as I were turning over the same soil again and again, but always transforming the ground. I re-encounter the same world, the same images; I move signs all over, up and down with a shovel, depriving them of their early meanings; I mutilate them in single blow before they mutilate me; I flip them around and play with their significance. And yet this excavation produces new surfaces, the removal of the soil revealing even more fragments, ever deeper layers, ever deeper understandings and new places.

Like all diasporic writers, I face no other choice than to write in a language other than their own, in English, creating an irreducible remoteness between my origin and my work. Like all diasporic writers, and in fact like all the immigrants and minorities of the world one generation after the other, my very language has been forcibly affected by the desterritorialization of my subjectivity. Like writing a minor literature, I attempt to write a minor research paper that challenges the dominance of the major language and the irreparable loss of the origin by re-using the former in such a way it pushes the metamorphosis of expression even further seeking to fully embrace the affirmation of the displacement I have already been condemned to endure as a new source of potentials (Deleuze &
Guattari, 1997). According to Deleuze and Guattari, to write a minor text is always to write in the search of an outside. The outside is that constant escape from one’s own world to the other, the experience of being the margin itself, always drifting away. To write as an exile “is to have, not just one set of eyes but half a dozen, each of them corresponding to the places you have been…There is always a kind of doubleness to experience, and the more places you have been the more displacements you have gone through, as every exile does” (Said, 1988). From my own majority cultural location, therefore, to write as a minority is to write from my own outsideness, from my own queerness, from my own minor language, which is not to insist in writing in the Spanish of Chile as opposed to the English of Australia, but write as a minority with the language of the majority, appropriating it for my own minor use in order to evade and shift its codes.

**Returning to Santiago**

My first re-encounter with Santiago was from the back seat of my father’s car. Concerned with steering himself home from the airport across the desolation of the western edges of the grid, my father perceived the route from the point of view of its functionality, looking only at what he needed to look. Although my mother chatted with me - reprimanding my father each time he exceeded the speed limit, I could not divert the attention from the front window and the city which was looming up before us. Not precisely with the pristine look of a postcard, Santiago arose with the blurry verges of the Andes setting the background behind the haze of smog. On the highest point of the sky, a sun of midday that, behind the cloud of pollutants, looked more like the moon of some strange planet than a sun. Overlooking the city, the Andes were like the colossal wall of a fortress. Their heights once provided me with the sense of direction that, while living in Sydney, I have always lacked. These mountains function as a gigantic morphological signpost for people to walk the city grid without getting lost. Without any doubt, a symbolic referent that most *Santiaguinos* take for granted and which they do not miss until they experience the landscape of a different country. As it was my case, the Andes produced
those easts and wests that I never found in Australia.

Returning to the city was the spatial practice of retrieving it, of imagining it again as I left it, as I once lived it, of reordering it as I found it, of repositioning my body within it, and discovering its new practices and its new inhabitants. I was coming back to a city whose images, gestures, rhythms and frequencies were already mapped on my body (Lefebvre, 1996:174). The map that had remained folded for years within myself was now unraveled by the speed of the car throughout the midday traffic. You can take the body out of the city, but you cannot take the city out of the body.

As my father drove, the landscape of my own story blasted into a string of immediate and involuntary memories as if the entry to the city had been through a gnomonic gate. It is impossible to say where each memory began and ended since the rapid motion of the car produced a sequence of overlapping tiny reminders, a continuous flow of convergences and transitions. Each moment of the trip, each glance through the window, were many snapshots of many stories. Speed does not let room for memory, just for quick summaries of it. I saw a flow of space and I saw a flow of time. After fifteen years of absence, the daily turbulence of the city revealed all those desires once stolen and tangled up by separation. In an imaginary space marked by my own departures and arrivals, I started to think Santiago again as it emerged from the mobility and comfort of a car’s passage through it. The return to the city was the translation of the urban grid into a smooth surface where certain dwelling - that is certain way of being in the world - is subordinated to a trajectory, to a speed, to an automatic retrieval of assembled memories cutting through the horizontal and vertical dimensionalities of the urban plan (Bogue, 1993:42).

The overwhelming familiarity of the surroundings gave me the feeling that I had never left the place before and that this little trip returning home was after picking up someone else at the airport. I do not know if it was on purpose or just his habit of always going to the airport to farewell relatives going away or returning from abroad, but I felt my father was driving in reverse following same route
we travelled on that morning of August 1987 when I left for Australia. On the southern side of the avenue, there emerged the grizzled and murky buildings of the old western neighborhoods of the inner city. There were the same old facades, with their crumbling cornices whose French ornaments, once the pride of the urban bourgeoisie in the early 20th Century, were now tarnished and disfigured by smog. There were the same old facades, older than ever, welcoming me to their quarters with the same melancholic decay they had when they once said goodbye. The wide medium strip of the Alameda Bernardo O’Higgins, where I used to muck around with friends afterschool, was still a prose of gardens, statues and wooden benches, forming a spacious pathway to take a break from the crowds of commuters and street vendors swelling the walkways on both sides of the Avenue.

In his way home, my father turned south on the corner of Alameda and Vergara attempting avoid the traffic jams so typical of this time of the day. The detour on the space was a detour in the story. This section of the city was notoriously well known among the activists of my generation as a space of terror; a neighborhood of old buildings and middle class mansions once housing military facilities and police headquarters. From the moving car I glimpsed the thick iron gate of the big old house which once served as the headquarters and torture center for the secret police. Turned into a more conventional administrative facility after the advent of the civilian government, the place still gave me a cold shivering down my spine as if it were haunted by the pain, the screams and the injuries of those who were once its “visitors”. I had been there so many times before, in front of that very same gate, in endless vigil throughout the night, watching those grey vans coming in and out, waiting for news about those friends and comrades being held in its chambers of horror. With their message of accumulated grief, these streets were still part of the story of my fearing.

Suddenly a new turn to the right on the corner, a new site, a new flashing memory. We passed by the Faculty of Engineering of the University of Chile once the main stronghold of the students opposition to the dictatorship during the mid 80s. The headquarters of the student federation, the
legendary FECH, used to be also there. These were the first days of September. Spring was nearing and the campus appeared calm and clean, as in a mid semester break. No left-wing graffiti on the walls, no colorful banners draped between windows, and yet the old political vibrancies were repeating themselves in the memories of my own body. Where were now those who used to pour in mass onto the streets from this building to have pitch battles with the police at least once a week? Perhaps their bodies were transformed into successful professionals and executives, perhaps into well educated taxi drivers, or perhaps into white collar peddlers selling superannuation schemes from one workplace to another.

Driving around the O’Higging Park into Matta and then turning right again on the comer with Nataniel heading south across the dingy quarters of the Barrio Matadero. With the Gran Avenida, there emerged the municipality of San Miguel as a wide open new city. It was not too hard to notice the mark of change in the landscape of this traditionally working class suburb where I grew up. During the Popular Unity government, people used to call it, almost with mythological overtones, “the Socialist Republic of San Miguel” because of widespread popular support for the Left and the radicalism of the municipal council. Throughout this period, places like San Miguel were where the multitudes turned the dominant inscriptions of social class on their bodies into subversion. At the time, when the insurrection on the street was also an insurrection in the body, a group of helmeted workers walking throughout the city did not signify work or production, but a commanding corporeality of working class power and revolution that horrified the Chilean middle classes. Now the only workers wearing helmets I could see where the ones working on the construction of a sophisticated brand new municipal building and an elegant apartment block across the park running next to the avenue.

I had hoped that, after the “transition to democracy” started, the fierce looking statue of Che Guevara would be returned to its place in front of the Claretianos from where a tank knocked it down during the military assault on the municipality in 1973. I was perhaps five or six when I saw it for the
first time while travelling by bus with my parents to the city center. He was standing there in the middle of the park, wielding a rifle over his head with both hands, as if he were calling the rest of the world to rally behind him. When I asked my father who was the guy with the gun, he just said “el Che, un guerrillero muy famoso”. Beyond any possible ideological implication, since then Che Guevara became one of the many invincible superheroes of my childhood like Superman or El Zorro, simply signifying all those things that heroes signify for children living in a working class neighborhood. Passing now again by that empty spot left by the soldiers almost thirty years ago, I found myself repeating a gesture of my childhood, when commuting to school I used to look for the statue everyday, with the hope of finding it back in its proper place. The Santiago of my return, however, was no longer a battleground for revolutionary eschatologies and their iconographies, but a city where the Right and the Left were mingling together in postmodern fashion, losing their specific meaning and historicity, according to the totalizing logic of new political consensus.

I was not returning to the “socialist” neighborhood of my childhood. Yet in the return, the relationship between the different temporalities of the self defined the spatial sense of the arrival. I remember that I remember. The self remembers itself. The silent, and not always joyful, experience of childhood slips through the images making the familiarity of things turn, by gnomonic contrast, into strangeness. The returning from exile is a turbulent passage between the absent and the present where “what can be seen designates what is no longer there” (de Certeau, 1988:108). My memories of the city are inseparable of what I once dreamt it to be. The arrival is always an indefinite search for what is absent. Being driven throughout the City while returning to it makes Santiago an “immense social experience of lacking a place” made of an avalanche of small stories bouncing off from the surface of this new city and coming down on me like a ton of bricks, converting me into an exile after the exile. But is it not the image of the city, as Borges would say, always the image of an anachronism?

After the arrival, as the days passed by, I slowly became accustomed to my feelings of
strangeness through the familiar. I would walk a new Santiago as a foreigner in my own country. Returning to Santiago would be as if I were returning from an amazingly long holiday or tour of duty. Home was still there as it has always been. But the letter box, to use Paul Virilio’s metaphor (1986), was junked with mail of months if not years, the interior of house was dusty and stuffy, and someone had broken in stealing some of my most precious treasures. It would take me a while to catch up with all the correspondence, clean up, repair the locks and find a space of the city for me once again, and putting in the place of the things that disappeared the things that I had brought with me from abroad.

I found a city going into many different directions, departing and arriving at the same time like myself. The repetitive line of dwellings of old suburbia and the continuous vacancy of spaces of the urban periphery were now broken by the futuristic and planless juxtaposition of buildings with glassed walls, electronic doorways and new housing complexes. The old pungent and defiled city with its crippling boarding houses, abandoned factories, cheap brothels, dingy bars, and the vacant lots of land where the poorest of the poor settled in cardboard shelters to make it through winter; all that flawed modernity of the slums so common to the landscape of my childhood, was merging with, or rather disappearing behind, a high tech city of shopping malls looming like evangelical churches in the newly emerging residential areas of La Florida y Maipu.

Almost a conclusion

A friend from Australia visiting Chile during this period told me that being in Santiago was “like being within a body”, something indescribable and yet wrapping you up in such a corporeal manner that you cannot escape being filled by its pulses. Like a body, this city always knows more than what it says, but never says explicitly what you look for until it traps you and makes you part of it. So as I travelled this changing ecology of concrete, I sensed little by little the surfaces of a more profound and optimistic city welcoming me on the skin. I cannot separate the city from my body. They are both in structural correspondence with each other, sharing in common an equivalent substance of the world.
The body is the bundle of energies that makes this landscape possible. The body is the one whose motions and gestures translate and transform the signs and forces that inscribe it as a part of the city. The body is the one that turns rocks and sand into the pavement it walks on, the one which gives form to the foliage of papers and magazines it reads and the one which produces the commodities it consumes. The body is the one that darkens the day and lightens the night, the one transforming stones into weapons of freedom or houses into torture chambers for the body. The body is the point of departure and destination of power (Lefebvre, 1996; Gil, 1998). Transmitted by this process of contact and incorporation, each place stored away the energies of all those who have made this city before me, with me and after me, as if these places were gifts carrying magical powers. The spatiality of Santiago became a sacred site of rumors and disappearances, of warriors and ancestors still living in the opaque physicality of balconies, classrooms and parks. This is a city no longer signified simply by memory; it is now a force that “tells” a story in its own right, an unreadable energy signifying the world before the sign; reaching point zero in its symbolic functions; where each building, street, vehicle and body becomes a site full of material forces, desires and affects.

“There is no place –Michel de Certeau argues- that is not haunted by many different spirits, spirits one can “invoke” or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in -and this inverts the scheme of the panopticon. But the Gothic sculptures of kings and queens that once adorned Notre-Dame and have been buried for two centuries in the basement of a building in the rue de la Chaussee-d’Antin, these “spirits”, themselves broken into pieces in like manner, do not speak any more than they see. This is a sort of knowledge that remains silent” (de Certeau, 1988).

Here meaning is not the aftereffect of language, but its precondition; the place where I settle in order to designate and tell. Meaning precedes the word (Deleuze, 1990). It is the sense which exists outside the concept and is related to the events themselves. It emerges from the assemblage of bodies, images and machines, before any possible act of understanding could establish the truth or the
falsehood of the event, its stability as object or subject, or its positioning as a cause or effect (Bogue, 1993:71; Bogard, 1998). My return to Santiago provides the best example of this chaotic pre-signifying logic of sense, the constant repositioning and flowing of the self throughout the grid of the city with its overlapping temporalities, where the boundaries of the real and the imagined collapse and the events already left behind and those about to come coexist and interact with the present on the surface of the urban. The physical occurrence of returning is not a comeback, but rather a process of becoming other, where the buildings, the streets and the bodies of the city constitute material possibilities which can be realized in different manners other than remembering.

Meaning has been rolled up within the physicality of the city. Energies have been folded and made disappeared within the functionality of certain apparatuses of power. Santiago is full of places housing these potentialities, “rich silences and wordless stories” signifying the possibility of new disruptions; incorporating within their poetic a part of the space which the new urban order, with its panoptical rationalities and profitabilities inherited from the dictatorship, will never be able to reserve to itself (Deleuze, 1992). What my return to the city throughout the city ultimately evokes - and invokes- are those energies. Desires liberated from their folding; forces of the outside that disrupt and reappropriate the diagram of the urban order and turn it upside down.
Bibliography


