Article

MEMORY STUDIES

Memory sites: Visiting experiences in Santiago de Chile

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Abstract

Studies on Chilean memory sites have focused on the spaces created to remember the human rights abuses carried out during the dictatorship. However, the ways in which people experience and appropriate these readings of the past have received scarce attention. In this article, we explore how individuals who were not victims of human rights abuses experience two memory sites in Santiago, Chile: *Villa Grimaldi* and *Londres 38*. Following the premise that memory emerges as a product of semiotic and material assembling materialized in the interaction between sites and visitors, we analyze the relationship between the memory sites' suggested readings of the past and the experiences of the public. We argue that this experience allows visitors to connect past atrocities with broader social discourses circulating in Chile in the form of abstract knowledge. This requires visitors to assume a position in relation to different historical accounts, allowing specific reconfigurations of collective memory to emerge.

Keywords

collective memory, experience, materiality, memory sites, visiting

Introduction

Social science research on memory sites often references the work of the French historian Pierre Nora (1984), which emphasizes how the political elite uses memory sites as a way to legitimize

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their exercise of power and to privilege certain forms of collective memory over others (Young, 1999). This focus presents memory sites as a material expression of a political, national, and imperial identity (Winter, 2010) distanced from the memory of the actual experience, and whose ultimate purpose seems to be the representation and reproduction of subordination.

In contrast to these studies, this article presents the results of research that analyzes the uses and interpretations of these sites by people who are distanced from the political elite. We emphasize the relationship between the versions of collective memory made available at the memory sites and the visitors' interpretations and feelings; in other words, what the public experiences when visiting a site (Scott, 1991). The decision to focus on the visitor's view point comes from an interest in learning about how collective memory is dynamically reconstructed as visitors experience the sites designed by human rights advocates. In this sense, the proposal of the site interacts with the people who visit it, which in turn generates an experience of the past *in situ*.

The study of memory sites in Chile has centered on the analysis of various sites created to remember the human rights violations carried out during the Pinochet dictatorship (1973–1990). Previous studies have demonstrated that the creation of these sites—mostly led by human rights organizations—was developed without an articulated policy, producing a fragmented landscape of memory (Aguilera, 2015; Collins and Hite, 2013) or what Piper and Hevia (2013) call an archipelago of memories. Nevertheless, some argue that the sites do share certain common elements (Aguilar, 2000; Collins and Hite, 2013; Lazzara, 2011; Piper and Hevia, 2013).

For human rights victims groups, the sites' direct connection to the memories of the dictatorship has converted them into a key reference of recent history, as well as a platform for the commemoration and construction of stories about the past (Lazzara, 2011; Piper and Hevia, 2013). These spaces—museums, memorials, monuments, plaques, monoliths, and so on—seek to remember the past in order to not forget what happened, and in that way, these reduce the possibility of its reoccurrence in the future (Aguilar, 2000; Fernández, 2007; Winn, 2014). The sites' creators offer a reading of past events based on a particular arrangement of objects, lighting, signage, and spaces. In this way, they generate a framework that offers the visitor a particular version of what happened. In consequence, the sites serve, in the present, as a denunciation and reminder of Chile's recent conflicts. They seek to impact democratic social relations by producing memories of the past that are oriented toward the present and the future (Schindel, 2009).

Although studies about Chilean memory sites have explored the reconstruction of collective memory made possible by these sites, the ways in which visitors experience these spaces and appropriate their readings of the past have received little attention (Veneros Ruiz-Tagle and Toledo Jofré, 2009). In this article, we explore the experiences of individuals who visited two memory sites in Santiago, Chile—*Villa Grimaldi* and *Londres 38.* Our methodological approach included accompanying individuals during their visit to a memory site and inquiring about the different feelings and thoughts they experienced while there.

Our analysis of the process of memory construction is based on the premise that memory emerges as a result of the semiotic and material assembling that occurs when the visitor interacts with the objects and spaces. This process incorporates both hegemonic and normative discourses about the past, as well as elements of change or rupture that transform the subject (Basu, 2011; Guggenheim, 2009).

Memory sites in Santiago, Chile: a dialogical approach

In order to understand the visitors' interpretations of the different memory sites, we employed a qualitative methodology and an *ad hoc* method of data production denominated interactive dialogic accompaniment (Espinoza et al., 2013). This method consists of two moments: first, the

participants visit the site accompanied by a member of the research team. They talk about their points of view, feelings, and impressions of the experience. Second, once they have finished visiting the site, the participants partake in a group conversation in order to share their experiences and elaborate stories of memory together. This part follows the triangular group methodological framework (Conde, 2008). Whereas the first stage (the visit) aims to deepen the interaction of the participants with the space and the objects, the second stage (the group conversation) makes possible the construction of collective memories based on the experience of the visit. The analysis presented in this article is based on the data gathered from both stages of the process.[1]

The participants were selected based on the criteria that neither their family nor they were direct victims of human rights abuses during the dictatorship. Likewise, these individuals could not belong, or have belonged to, any political party or human rights association. This was to avoid the discourses of these particular groups, which have been addressed elsewhere (Aguilar, 2000; Cornejo et al., 2013; Klep, 2012; Piper et al., 2013; Piper and Montenegro, 2008). Considering that a significant part of Chile's current population was very young or unborn, and for this reason did not experience the military coup and the ensuing dictatorship, we selected individuals from different generations in order to include the largest variety possible of narratives about the experience of visiting a memory site.

We conducted a total of 24 accompanied visits and 8 triangular groups at two different memory sites: *Londres 38* and *Villa Grimaldi*, former centers of detention, torture, assassination, and forced disappearance. The first site—currently called "Londres 38, Memory Space"—was a secret detention and torture facility in the Metropolitan Region that belonged to the National Intelligence Directorate (DINA). It is a two-story building located in the center of Santiago that remains relatively intact. The geographical location of the site symbolizes the operational centrality of the violence during the dictatorship, as well as its development as both a clandestine and an open site. At the same time, the human rights organizations managing this site seek to configure collective memory around the recovery of the political projects of the victims of human rights abuses (Lazzara, 2011).

The second site—currently called *Villa Grimaldi*, Park for Peace—is a park constructed over the ruins of the detention and torture center "Cuartel Terranova" (Terranova Barraks). It houses multiple commemorative spaces and objects, as well as information about its operations during the dictatorship. When rebuilding the center, the purpose was to re-semanticize the Villa into a park, maintaining some traces of the original building after it was taken apart (Klep, 2012; Lazzara, 2003; Violi, 2012). Currently, the site's objectives include facilitating reflection through experiential and conceptual activities as a mechanism for understanding the field of human rights (Veneros Ruiz-Tagle and Toledo Jofré, 2009).

It is important to note how the sites differ. *Londres 38* is a building located in the center of the city, whereas *Villa Grimaldi* is a park on the outskirts of Santiago. Moreover, as Lazzara (2011) points out, most of the spaces in the *Londres 38* are empty in order to promote flexible and diverse readings of the site, as opposed to narrow and closed interpretations that can occur when visitors are confronted with specific objects. At *Villa Grimaldi*, both the park's landscape and its memorials serve as beautifiers that promote peace, consensus, and reconciliation among Chileans (Klep, 2012; Lazzara, 2003). Nevertheless, both places seek to actively involve visitors as a key agent in the creation of meaning. Following the tendencies of contemporary museums, they aim to stimulate empathy for and identification with human rights abuse victims (Andermann and Arnold-de Simine, 2012; Lazzara, 2011).

In this article, we present some of the analytical results from the total data, particularly that which demonstrates the semiotic and material dimensions of the experience of visiting a site. We also highlight how the participants link their experience by relating the past to the present.

Furthermore, we make reference to the participants' assessment as a result of being able to visit a memory site and how the sites create an understanding that allows them to partake in the stories of the past told there.

The experience of visiting a site and the emergence of memory

Current studies about the process of generating collective memory have strongly criticized the essentialist, and at times intra-psychological character, of the approaches used to analyze the phenomena of remembering and forgetting (Brown et al., 2012; Kidron, 2012). These studies emphasize the constructed character of all social memory (Vázquez, 2001). From this perspective, memory is the result of a collective construction (Bartlett, 1932; Halbwachs, 1992; Middleton and Brown, 2005; Middleton and Edwards, 1992; Piper, 2005; Vázquez, 2001) and a social practice that contributes to the production of what we call the past. In this sense, memory is understood as a mode of action—or a social, political, and cultural practice—that is symbolically constructed and characterized by its interpretative and relational nature.

Unlike the notion of postmemory (Hirsch, 1997, 2001) that focuses on displacement and vicariousness of the second generation that modulates the unbridgeable distance that separates the survivors' memory from the born after, we understand memory as a social action for interpreting the past. Drawing from this theoretical framework, the idea that memory is "somewhat" likely to be transmitted (from generation to generation or capable of generating "secondary witnesses") is misleading. Understanding that memory is the result of a collective construction, as stated before, focuses on the ways in which meanings of the past are generated. A process continually realized in the present with concrete effect on how we construct reality.

The symbolic force of memory lies precisely in its ability to produce subjects, relationships, and social imaginaries (Piper et al., 2013). Through the collective practices of remembering, subjects recreate past events over and over to the point that some versions of the past acquire the status of reality (Sharim et al., 2011). Memory becomes an articulating center of social life through its ability to construct the past and explain the present. It also serves as a pillar of identity and as an articulating axis for current political practices grounded in power relations and resistance (Piper, 2005; Young, 1999).

Memory sites are spaces of enunciation about the past that express the view point of those who promote them (Achugar, 2003). If, on one hand, they tell the story of a particular historical and political situation, they also contribute to the dynamic creation and transformation of collective memory (Violi, 2012). At these sites, certain narratives are established and assembled according to the spatial arrangements and elements contained there: the location of the sites, the objects exhibited, and lighting, among others. Laura Basu (2011), drawing from the Foucauldian concept of *dispositif*—understood as the constellation of heterogeneous elements within a system and the relations between them that produce a particular tendency—proposes the notion of "dispositifs of memory." These *dispositifs* establish particular meanings and identities associated with specific political, social, and cultural orderings that, in turn, become sites for the transformation and proliferation of these identities.

Memory *dispositifs* produce a dynamic of enunciation/interpretation of meanings that favor the construction of imaginaries and historical–cultural referents; the appropriation or creation of symbols, stories, values, and beliefs; and at the same time, the formation of subjectivities and social identities (Basu, 2011; Maceira, 2009). In this sense, the experience of visiting memory sites opens up a process of interpretation and re-interpretation of their meanings, which may or may not correspond to the intended message of the site.

In his work on *Villa Grimaldi*, Lazzara (2003) discusses how the park presents different stories and meanings as a site of enunciation of the past. While the landscape beautifies the space, its

elements recall the atrocities that happened there. The stories offered about the space—derived both from victims' personal experiences and literary representations—enable visitors to imagine the atrocities from the sharpness of a survivor's individual memory or as represented in the conflictive problematization of fiction. In his analysis of *Londres 38*, however, Lazzara (2011) shows how the tour avoids a simple and uniform narrative, seeking, in contrast, to produce a flexible and open account according to the interests of the visitors. Taylor (2010) introduces another element when she recounts her visit to *Villa Grimaldi* guided by a survivor, whose story heightened the intensity of her experience. The author suggests that the performance of the guide encourages and gives life to the space, creating a much more complex experience than that provided solely by the place and its objects.

These studies build on the argument that visitors take an active role in their relationship to the symbols, objects, and spaces associated with an event that he/she did not experience first-hand but rather become familiar with through the particular configurations and arrangements of the site. In the memory sites studied here, the meanings they communicate amplify, reinforce, or contradict the meanings circulating in other spaces, partaking in a wide network of practices and mediums that communicate different versions of Chile's recent past. This interaction has the ability to mold—to a certain point—the processes of political subjectification of the individuals who visit the sites (Andermann and Arnold-de Simine, 2012). Meaning is generated, therefore, through the particular arrangement of the objects within the space, the movement of bodies through it, and the different significations of the past made available through the social body.

In this way, far from a logocentric interpretation that reifies the word as the primary form of representation, it is important to consider the predominant role of objects and spaces in articulating the visitor's experience at memory sites (Guggenheim, 2009). The objects presented in these places encapsulate trajectories of human–object relations that hold the past in the present for a particular community. However, objects do not simply offer an open door that links us to the past; rather, their power to connect the past with the present stems from their contingent and situated relationship to the act of remembering, as well as the configurations articulated at memory sites (Brown et al., 2012). In these cases, objects are situated within determinate frameworks, histories, and human spokespersons who provide them with social life, and who in turn require the object's materiality to achieve temporal and spatial permanence (Vandenberghe, 2002). The objects serve as live repositories of the past by acting out a human–object relationship that recovers history through the sensorial, visceral, emotional, and lived experiences of the individual who remembers (Turnbull, 2002). They serve as "portable places" that transport individuals to different sites and times (Kidron, 2012).

Hence the importance of exploring the ways in which different subjects interpret and relate to the objects. It also speaks of the importance of employing a semiotic–material approach to analyze the relationship between memory sites and the stories their visitors narrate about the experience of touring a memory site. Based on his study of the megaliths of Malta and the objects, spaces, and knowledge formed there, David Turnbull (2002) affirms that a monument's spatial configuration generates a determinate narrative in the visitors who experience them:

> An account which would enable the explanation of the materiality, discursivity and performativity of knowledge/space needs to combine narratives, bodies and movement in the linking of people, practices and places. Discursive accounts tend to leave out bodies, material accounts tend to leave out spatiality, and performative accounts to leave out knowledge. What then is the link to knowledge? Knowledge is itself deeply imbricated in space, travel and movement. (p. 135)

In summary, the particular arrangement of objects and spaces of memory sites carries a symbolism associated with certain representations of the past. Thus, the visual and sensorial contact with

the objects, coupled with the visitor's experience of moving through the memory site, produces a context—a *dispositif*—that privileges certain versions of the past. However, the suggested interpretation of this semiotic–material arrangement is open to different readings based on the particular experience of the people visiting the site.

Meanings and materialities of memory sites in Santiago, Chile

Site visits demonstrate the ways in which the object's positioning within the space—and the space itself—strongly influences the visitor's experience. At the sites, the narratives of human rights abuses are exhibited in plaques and other written and verbal signs that indicate what happened in a particular place. They are also exhibited in other esthetic and spatial elements, such as lighting, coloring, symbols, and the positioning of certain objects at the site. These elements create a frame of intelligibility for understanding the objects and materials exhibited in the space, encouraging the visitors to feel and make meaning of the site. In the following excerpt, a man clearly affected by the experience of visiting a memory site talks about how the reproduction of the cells strikes him and connects him to the feelings of those who were imprisoned there in the past:

> **07M-VG-3060:**[2] I mean, it all strikes me, it all does, the cells really struck me, to see, to verify physically what the cells were like, because one reads the cells and they say 1x1, 2x1. Clearly, the cell (he quickly indicates with his arm the cell area) stood out to me, it stood out. And like I was telling you at the beginning, so many people were here, and the sensation of, of abandonment they all felt. You don't know if they were going to get out …

The materiality of the place creates a remembrance that appears to bring the visitor closer not only to the events but also to the feelings of those who suffered the experience of imprisonment: the disorientation, anguish, and helplessness they must have felt. The man specifically alludes to the measurements of the cells, measurements that take on meaning in relation to the bodies that were there and that highlight, in his story, the materiality of an experience brought into the present via the recollection of vivid corporal images. In this way, the object—the cell in this case—generates a bridge that connects lived experiences with the visitor's emotions.

In the specific case of *Villa Grimaldi*, authors such as Violi (2012) affirm that its reconstruction as a park creates a distance between the atrocities of the past and the act of remembering them in the present. She claims that this attenuates the experience by concealing traces of the past, which, in turn, weakens the emotional effect. She asks, "is it possible to maintain and transmit memories of past atrocities while moving away from direct representation of them, and from an explicit aesthetic of 'realism of horror'?" (Violi, 2012: 60).

In the research conducted in this study, however, we were able to confirm that *Villa Grimaldi* did in fact provoke strong emotions in its visitors. In the previous excerpt, we observed how the objects presented at the memory site created a bridge between the visitor and the individuals imprisoned there. In a similar fashion, the following story demonstrates the emotional involvement of a visitor as she moves through the site. Although the site does not explicitly reference the horrific human rights abuses that happened there, therefore "attenuating" them, what the visitor feels and experiences indicates a connection between her discomfort and her rejection of what happened there:

> **09F-VG-3060:** (She moves toward the plaque next to the Tower and reads) "Extermination" (She contracts her face, looks quickly at the Tower and walks toward the plaque in front of the Memory Room). That […] nothing, what can I say, it's as if (she sighs, shakes her head and sighs again). No, I don't like this situation. No, I don't feel comfortable, it's really tough. I don't, I, you see, it [the plaque] doesn't say anything

provocative, I mean it doesn't go into detail, but once you read extermination, once you read torture, once you read that they tortured people with cars, by hanging, it's as if … it's horrifying and that was, well, let's say, I mean it is … No, I think it's, I think it's atrocious, it reaffirms what I've believed for a long time […] (she begins to speak louder and faster) You see, it's easy to forget, one always tends to forget, I mean, not because you don't know what happened, but in the end, it takes you back to the place where you …

Although the violent acts are not described in detail, the very objects and explanatory signs serve as "portable memory" (Kidron, 2012). The objects stimulate interest, and also horror, in the visitors and unite the past to the present, converting the visitors into participants of the story. The visitors refer not only to what they see but also to what they imagine based on what they see: What the object evokes in their thoughts and feelings. In this sense, the experience of remembering is a result of the interaction between the visitor and the objects exhibited at the site, and thus goes beyond the configuration of the space itself. The interactive dialogical method used in this study strengthens this process by calling upon the visitors to talk about what they have observed during the tour, and in this way, requires them to reflect on the objects and inscriptions observed there. In the former excerpt, the visitor's repudiation of the acts is evident. Even though violent images are not shown, she represents and expresses her discomfort upon reading the inscription by connecting discourse and experience with "what she has believed for a long time." For her, the space "brings her back to what happened," challenging her, in this case, to link her memory to the Tower of Extermination—a word that does not leave her indifferent as she materializes the memories of state-sponsored torture during the military dictatorship. We observe once again that the object— and the meaning explained in the sign—serves as a bridge to memory and an invitation not to forget Chile's recent past.

In this sense, the lived experience of the visit creates tension—a tension of both continuity and rupture—with other discourses circulating in the social body. The sites serve as a witness to the past that penetrates the present experience of the visitor. The act of visiting appears to intensify a series of sensations and meanings that bring the visitors closer to events of the past— events that while generally known via the circulation of discourses in Chilean media—acquire a greater sense of clarity and precision following the visit. The following excerpt from a young woman demonstrates how the experience of visiting *Londres 38* connects and completes certain versions of the past:

> **13F-L38-1518:** Um … even so, it's been really interesting to have visited parts of this house and to learn more. Um, after having been here I feel a little more complete, because of the knowledge, because I wasn't directly familiar with the period of the dictatorship and my parents hadn't told me anything, so it was easier [to learn] through books and documentaries. But to see it this way in images, to be in the very same place where torture happened, opens up another reflection, an additional reflection … to want to know more about what happened.

In this case, the visitor is a young woman aged between 15 and 18 years who was not alive during the dictatorship. For this reason, the experience of interacting with this space, as she explains, allows her to understand what happened from a lived knowledge that is more complete than the information presented in books or other mediums. In this way, earlier discourses are integrated with ones that are produced during the visit, an operation that results in the concretization of memory. As we have stated, memory sites serve to activate stories and previous experiences that become plausible in the precise moment of the visit, filling in the empty spots left by other mediums. They solidify, thus, a certain version of the events which positions human rights abuses at the center of that past. This narrative version is not shared in the first person but reconstituted and felt through the visit. Despite the sites' different characteristics, our study shows a commonality among

those generations born after the dictatorship: Their visit to a memory site grants credibility to their knowledge about violence during the dictatorship. At *London 38*, which unlike *Villa Grimaldi*, displays no objects, it is possible to conclude that what gives strength to the experience and credibility to the memory site itself is its significance as a location where human rights violations occurred. At both sites, there are texts that highlight what happened in certain areas or explain how these areas were used. This not only facilitates the recognition of the past events but also the ability to assess the severity of these events, as observed in the following excerpt:

> **14M-L38-1518:** It says there on the map that these were the rooms of, um, of torture, where the wounded were. It's quite shocking, I mean, normally one doesn't think they're going to be in a place where this happened … one is not accustomed to places like this … I mean it's like thinking that at some point something like that happened, to assimilate, one doesn't think that they're going to visit a place like this.

For this young man, the experience of touring the site produces a concretization of memory, associating past events with spaces, objects, and signifiers unknown to him up until now, rendering them images of his own. Much like the examples of other young people who did not directly experience the dictatorship, this concretization allows them to associate images with events made familiar to them through other people—events that were almost always experienced abstractly and as someone else's. As these narratives exemplify, the visitors engage with different discourses that are made manifest through sensations, spaces, and objects related to past events. As Andermann and Arnold-de Simine (2012) sustain, the interaction with memory sites has the ability to generate processes of subjectification by calling on the visitors to position themselves face to face with the stories that occurred there. The power of the violent acts exhibited at the sites does not leave the visitors indifferent. It challenges them to reconfigure their understanding of the past by juxtaposing their previous beliefs with the actual experience of visiting the memory site.

This experience is often narrated as a process of coming closer to what really happened, allowing visitors to feel they are experiencing an authentic narrative. As we have seen, the experience of visiting the site transforms the position of many of the participants by rendering previous information into reality, opening up the possibility of understanding what happened by feeling it in their own bodies. This generates sensations, reflections, and knowledge that allows them to comprehend the stories shared there. The organization of the site's objects, spaces, and locations makes the visitors feel as if they are facing the true version of history. The surviving objects and buildings make it difficult to doubt their veracity. In an exchange between a woman and the researcher who accompanies her during the visit, the woman alludes to the process of constructing the truth as she comes into contact with the space:

> **09F-VG-3060:** I think it's like, like the need to, to not know what really happened. Which is like, like the need, I mean, to avoid it, to avoid making it visible or real, in the end, something that really did happened, and … and that one would prefer to forget, even though one didn't directly experience it, one prefers to forget it, let's say. I think it's like, I don't know, I don't know if I'm able to rationally express the feeling, I mean …

> **R:** Of course, you feel you would prefer to forget it, I mean, to not know of it, or it makes you …

> **09F-VG-3060:** No, I mean, one is aware of it in some way or another, you know. Um … but to address it like this, so … or to come into contact with these topics so closely, um … it's really hard, that's it, it's really hard. And, I feel terrible because of this (she laughs nervously), the truth is difficult for me.

> **R:** Do you feel that coming to this space brings you closer to that?

09F-VG-3060: Of course, of course.

R: More than reading or seeing a documentary about it, for example?

09F-VG-3060: Yes, yes, yes. Even if one watches the documentaries and all, and it makes an impact, and one feels closer and all, it's not the same as being in a place like this, I don't know, it's as if in some way one feels like a participant in the memories of, of reality, of a reality made much clearer in truth.

As expressed by this participant and others, the visit allows them to encounter the past, acquiring the ability to imagine what "really happened" and to finally understand the events. A tension occurs between remembering and forgetting. The person wants to forget, to leave behind the atrocities, but the place interpellates them, placing the memory site's story at the forefront of their memory. This is possible because the materiality of the space seems to "contain" the memory of what occurred, telling the visitors about what it witnessed there. Therefore, the spaces "impose" themselves on the visitor, moving them along an experiential path full of information, values, and feelings. The objects and sites visited are attributed the status of "real": for having played a part in Chile's recent history and for having survived, in many instances, those who owned them—in the case of the objects—or those who used them—in the case of the spaces. The memory sites, specifically in relation to spaces where violent events occurred, operate in and of themselves as proof of those realities (Piper and Hevia, 2013). As we have seen, the sites do not leave their visitors indifferent to a past that some would prefer to forget:

14M-L38-1518: It's as if the suffering that happened here, the suffering, of so many people, as if … it's as if, even though it's not captured physically, one can feel it, because if one didn't know what happened here, well, they would find the place in bad shape and all, but I mean it expresses, it expresses the pain that was here, the desperation, the anguish of the people. All of them, all their fears, the uncertainty too, I think, because no one really knew what would happen to them … also the worry because they weren't alone, I mean they had families too and … desperation because they knew that no one else knew they were here … and moreover they were … they were erased just as this whole place conveys.

Although substantial information about the dictatorship circulates in Chilean society—either through videos, photographs, movies, novels, school books, or other mediums—for the majority of the participants, the visit to the memory site was the first time they came face to face with objects and spaces designed to remember the human rights abuses of Chile's recent past. As they state, the visit allowed them to face the past and partake in the creation of a collective memory that, as the excerpts show, not only affected the individuals imprisoned within the site's walls but also their family members and Chilean society, in general. The assembling produced in the memory sites through the inscriptions, the arrangement of the objects, and the appearance of the rooms and spaces, generates a composition that gives veracity to certain versions of the past. At the same time, the assembling has the ability to transmit a series of negative experiences associated with the political imprisonment and torture that occurred there, including fear, pain, despair, and uncertainty.

These accounts are transmitted to the visitors, who, in turn, draw from the social body's available discourses and their own experiences in order to situate themselves and recompose a narrative and lived experience of the past.

Conclusion

Based on the premise that memory emerges from a process of collective construction (Halbwachs, 1992; Middleton and Edwards, 1992; Vázquez, 2001), this study analyzed how certain versions of

the past are created via the experience of visiting two memory sites in Santiago, Chile (*Londres 38* and *Villa Grimaldi*).

On one hand, these memory sites—sponsored by human rights organizations—provide determinate readings of the past that contribute to the establishment of a narrative about the events that acquires the status of historical truth. These readings articulate themselves in relation to diverse social discourses, some of which are contradictory, struggling to establish themselves as the correct version of what happened. The *dispositifs* of memory (Basu, 2011) are associated with certain political, social, and cultural arrangements that encourage those who visit them to position themselves in terms of their political view and identity. Likewise, they urge visitors to think about the present as a continuation or consequence of the events narrated at the memory sites.

On the other hand, the visitors—in this case people whose family nor they were victims of human rights abuses—carry and transmit an array of discourses that circulate in Chilean society via different mediums. In the dialogues established between the memory sites and the visitors, the diverse discursive elements render the interpretation of the experience useful for understanding the multiple forms of collective memory that emerge in this context.

In the first place, the experience of visiting encourages the creation of images and feelings that bring the visitor closer to the experiences of human rights victims of the dictatorship. This closeness envelops the participants in an experience that not only informs but also allows them to experience and feel the historical events. This is expressed through allusions to different bodily sensations and feelings—for example, rejection or discomfort—that surface during the visit. The participants' stories prioritize, on one hand, their ability to identify with those who were tortured, imprisoned, disappeared, and killed at the sites, and on the other, the feelings of pain, anguish, and helplessness. Thus, the space interpellates the participants' previous positioning regarding Chile's recent past. It challenges them to change some aspects of that positioning, contributing to the transformation of the relationship of the visitor with the past. In this sense, memory emerges as a concrete semiotic and material articulation: the arrangement of the objects serves as a stage that encapsulates the visitor in the present and produces, in turn, knowledge and emotions about Chile's recent past.

Second, the concretization of memory allows participants to connect real images with historical events previously experienced solely as distant and abstract discourse and knowledge. This was particularly the case for those participants who were more distanced from human rights abuses, among them the younger generations. The experience of visiting a site brings them face to face with these previously acquired discourses in new ways, anchoring these memories, as the young woman stated in the previous excerpt, in concrete locations, objects, and sensations. The previously held discourses are integrated with those that are produced during the visit, thus resulting in new configurations of collective memory. The power of the site visit transforms the position of many of the participants as it turns the stories read in books into a reality. This places the visitors in a space of enunciation from which they express the ability to understand and feel for themselves what happened. This concretion of memory is hard to question when taking into account the evidence offered at the memory sites. Through the victims' experiences, the visitors take on an ethical position against human rights violations; they do not, however, engage in a critical analysis that may allow for more complex approaches to emerge. This contradicts the claims of the directors of the memory sites themselves, who seek the active involvement of the visitor (Lazzara, 2011).

In this sense, and third, the objects and spaces exhibited at memory sites summarize certain versions of the past, granting them permanency and veracity. In this way, the objects and spaces serve as enunciative agents of what happened, and as proof of an unquestionable truth. However, from our perspective, it is important to emphasize the constructed nature of this "truth," as we seek to

understand the constructive mechanisms of memory, the intersection of site and visitor, and how this juncture gives rise to particular reconfigurations of collective memory.

The study of memory sites as an assembling of diverse elements results in a perspective that, in addition to considering the discursively constructed nature of collective memory (Vázquez, 2001), seeks to understand the semiotic–material relationship established during the visit between the participants, objects, and spaces. By utilizing this approach and considering how the visitor's body and feelings are shaped by the site's objects and spaces, we were able to trace how the process of memory concretization is rendered into an unquestionable and undoubtable truth. This unquestionable truth, in turn, serves to strengthen the human rights organizations' version of memory in relation to other accounts circulating in the Chilean context. As Lazzara (2011) concludes, the creation of memory spaces, which not only encourage debate, discussion, and reflection but also allow for an independent public that does not merely accept what it is told, is still a distant horizon.

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Notes

1. This methodological approach does not seek to describe the participants' different sensations, thoughts, or emotional responses but rather to pay attention to the process of meaning making that occurs during the visit. The objective is to explore the specific reconfigurations of collective memory that emerge through this experience. In accordance with a theoretical approach that views collective memory as a dynamic process (Violi, 2012), the aim is to learn about the ways in which certain versions of the past acquire plausibility in the moment of the visit and how this process contributes to the establishment of these versions as the "truth" regarding Chile's recent past.

2. The nomenclature used to identify the quotations follows the following pattern: Participant Number + Gender—Site—Age Range. For example, 01F-L38-1830. Participant 01 Female—Londres 38—Age Range 18–30 years. M indicates Male and R indicates Researcher.

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