

sites in the district of Rivadavia *banda sur* (all the names mentioned in the article are pseudonyms). The fieldwork for this project was made possible by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Comments

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Gastón Gordillo's marvelous "Ships Stranded in the Forest" is something of an ethnographic treasure hunt. The trail stretches from the foothills of the Andes to the remote far east of Salta Province, "the very edge of geographical space," down dirt roads and neglected paths. Along the way, numerous informants goad his curiosity with their tales of the steamships left high and dry in the landlocked middle of South America. Some claim that these vessels date from the colonial era and were once loaded with gold destined for Spain. Others tell him of gypsies who have scoured the hulks until only ruins remain.

Such legends conjure an image worthy not only of Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* but also of García Márquez, who tells us early in *A Hundred Years of Solitude* (1998) that José Arcadio Buendía once stumbled across "an enormous Spanish galleon" in the jungle. "Speechless with fascination," the future founder of Macondo notes that "the whole structure seemed to occupy its own space, one of solitude and oblivion." Many years later, when José Arcadio's son comes across this same ship, all that survives is "its burned-out frame in the midst of a field of poppies" (16).

Gordillo's own search seems to reveal even less. Literally at the end of the road, as he finally reaches what remains of the once mighty Bermejo River, "there were no visible traces of anything that could have been part of a ship." The anthropologist's disappointment is palpable: "I was hoping that a few feeble traces would still be visible." Ultimately, in what is another familiar South American narrative of failed quests, he admits that "the semiburied remains . . . eluded me." This is the ruin as the Lacanian "*objet petit a*": the loss that generates desire.

Hence the tenor of the article: ruination here is associated overwhelmingly with loss, dereliction, disappearance, disappointment, phantoms, loneliness, abandonment, nostalgia, negativity, and so on. It is only fitting that even the last physical vestiges of these fabled ships should have crumbled into dust or sunk into the mud. The ruins have themselves been ruined. All that is left is a carefully husbanded absence: "Only the memory of that debris remains."

But is that really all? Remember that in his haste to arrive

at his destination, at least once Gordillo admits that he has missed what should be most evident. On his first visit to the town of Rivadavia, he has to backtrack as he realizes that he "had driven through the town's six streets and reached its eastern edge." Likewise, might ruination not be what we pass in the search for what we believe to be hidden elsewhere? This is the ruin as Poe's purloined letter: what is unexpectedly in plain view.

In Rivadavia, what is in plain view is a ship's boiler, placed firmly in the town's main square, "a 2-meter-long metal structure resembling an engine of sorts." Its solid materiality goes without saying, as if it "spoke for itself and did not need the written word to articulate what needed no explanation." The boiler is solidly and irrefutably real ("Real," Lacan might say) and unphantasmatic. It is "the region's historical center of gravity." Moreover, when Gordillo asks about the ships, everyone points to this artifact: here it is, they appear to be saying; look no further. Yet Gordillo rather dismisses this ruin, seeing it as a failed monument that testifies only to the "futility" of the claim to "an unceasing state of becoming" (Riegl 1982 [1928]:38). The monument's immobility indicates its uselessness: "stasis is death," he quotes Virilio as saying; the fixity of the once mobile boiler summons up "a negativity tangled with the shattering of [its] capacity for movement." But is its very permanence not a sign of life? This part object still works; it is still a machine that draws together all the various elements that make up this otherwise desolate region and sustains them. After all, the real shock is that this long-forgotten town (unlike its onetime neighbor, Villa del Carmen) should have so long outlasted the broken promises of modernization. The slogan "going nowhere" is a testament to its people's endurance. No wonder "elderly people in Rivadavia transmit a sense of resilience not devoid of pride."

To put this another way: ruins are not simply fragments of an absent whole. They are (perhaps more importantly) also surplus, excessive, surprising evidence of what endures despite the odds. Ruination is not just death, loss, and absence; it is vitality, survival, and insistent presence against all expectations. Ruins, provoking the imagination of a García Márquez or the equally creative memories of the Chaco's inhabitants, surprise because they manifest a positivity where there should be nothing but negativity, a presence where there should be absence. Perhaps Gordillo found his treasure after all.

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By analyzing ruins of the conquest of the Gran Chaco as

sociohistorical configurations, Gastón Gordillo's article undertakes the suggestive enterprise of examining the interpenetration of space, history, decline, and subjectivity. Drawing on theories of negativity, the author intertwines phantasmagoric debris of ships and monuments erected to commemorate them with past and present interpretations of assorted past and present agents. The result is a thought-provoking ethnographic and historical account.

As several analyses have shown, the archaeological imagination—entangled with past, nation, and civilization building—has played a major part in the use of magnificent ruins to incarnate a valued (trans)national or local we or romanticized internal others. Thus, one of Gordillo's most telling achievements is focusing on almost invisible hints and humble memorials located in a peripheral region to prove the extent to which peripheralization is not simply a power-laden process but mainly one that is key to center building. Moreover, while magnificent ruins testify to the existence of the past in the present, debris performs the parallel task of signifying and weaving past and present in and through forceful absences—in the case study, that of a progress that for some local people is always about to come. Therefore, approaching “modernist development as a cultural-political project ideologically built on downplaying its capacity for failure and dislocation,” Gordillo's study illustrates one of its most paradoxical effects in some local and official memories that seem to assert again and again, “Modernist projects have failed. Long live modernist projects!”

In this regard, for criollo subjectivities forged vis-à-vis narratives of progress, debris mostly evokes, through the nostalgia of towns once promising and now near demise, buried treasures and an indomitable, nowadays ghostly river. Instead, for Wichí memories, debris rather promotes the longing for another chronotope, the one preceding the time when the ships arrived to subdue and transform them into a labor force. But even more interesting, people's current narratives in Rivadavia can also emphasize the town's signs of recovery these days, as evident by the population increase, the novel connection to the regional electric grid, and the construction of a gravel road allowing buses from Orán to come three or four times a week. This is interesting indeed, for as Gordillo shows, many of these recent transformations have been part of a neoliberal wave of progress that goes hand in hand with increasing levels of poverty and inequality as much as new forms of ruination, for example, the environmental degradation caused in the whole region by agribusinesses, the logging of hardwoods, and cattle raising. Still, people with relatives in rural areas (criollos? Wichí? both criollos and Wichí?) are also wary of these reloaded narratives of progress, for the government's promises that sustain them say nothing about the evictions resulting from the concomitant arrival of powerful foreign actors in the region. In sum, it is a truly complex panorama, as could be expected, and yet it is lucidly described.

In terms of theoretical goals, the author aims at coping with “the absolute spatialization of practice” and search for

“traces and sedimentations of past relations and conflicts in space” through the exploration of “the spatial and social legacy of these failed navigation plans.” His examination of the social relevance of destroyed objects thus points to “highlighting the spatiality of historical processes and the ways in which local people's interpretations of this sedimentation and its resulting debris reveal important clues about their subjectivity.”

Once social memory is stated as a key element of both social-spatial processes and subjectivities, the politics of memory requires a parallel reassessment as well. I assume that Gordillo would agree that memories are not just narratives. I do, however, wonder about the extent to which he considers narratives of current progress a concomitant part of collective memories. For while anthropology depends on gathering and analyzing narratives of different sorts, it is important vis-à-vis subjectivities to render precisely which of them count as collective or social memory. Briefly, hegemonic accounts can be repeated but do not necessarily impinge on the self/selves, either uniformly or as other accounts of direct experience do, although if they are truly hegemonic, it can be expected that they become a reference point in contestation over the past. Processes of public memorialization, of remembering/silencing personal and collective experiences, and of transforming them into more or less stable narratives passed from one generation to the other despite the affective attachment they can produce are related but not in a predictable or necessary way. When subjectivities are the explanatory target and when contested meanings are registered, the relationships among these different processes require further elaboration. Overall, the pending question is about the conditions/relations/contexts that allow even the same actor to communicate to us both romantic views “that the town was indeed a prosperous place” and the perhaps more “deliberate acts of memory” and of interpretation of current conditions that take a different part “in historicizing and denaturalizing that geography.”

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In the sparsely populated Gran Chaco, bereft of monuments and with few traces of past human endeavor, the absent presence of the stranded ships Gastón Gordillo so eloquently depicts reverberates across time and space despite their absorption and obliteration by human and nonhuman agencies. These residues of progress and hope in the ramshackle transient settlement of Rivadavia are not crowded out by the cacophony of tales from elsewhere and the endless flows of global information. Here, legends and events of yesteryear linger in the absence of other compelling narratives of identity and history. And in the spare materiality of such a place—