

When Words Fail: Exploring Embodied Memory in Peru

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Emily Thompson

My dissertation examines state-sponsored memory spaces in Latin America as well as vernacular or “unofficial” memorials. In Peru, where my preliminary research is based, this work is particularly urgent. The Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) determined that the country’s armed internal conflict (1980-2000) claimed the lives of approximately 70,000 people, of whom over 50,000 were Indigenous. Although the vast majority of those displaced, murdered, and disappeared were Quechua-speakers living in the rural Andes, most memory projects are either focused geographically in the coastal capital of Lima, far from where most of the atrocities occurred, or, like the TRC’s Final Report, prohibitively published in Spanish and English. These realities prompt the questions guiding my research, who decides what a nation’s collective memory looks like and for whom is transitional justice served?

This past summer, the Tinker Research Grant facilitated my preliminary dissertation fieldwork in several ways. It enabled me to return to Peru after many years to make new connections and strengthen established contacts. I focused on ethnographic research at national and local memory museums in Lima and Ayacucho and interviewed curators, artists, activists, and scholars associated with human rights and memory in Peru.

My time was divided between Lima and Ayacucho, where I met with multiple human rights leaders, visited museums and archives, and participated in commemoration events throughout August, which is “memory month” in Peru. In Lima, my in-depth interviews included former heads of the *Defensoría del Pueblo* and the *Asociación Pro Derechos Humanos* (APRODEH) as well as members of the *Dirección General de Búsqueda de Personas Desaparecidas* and the interdisciplinary working group *Grupo de Memoria*, housed in the *Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú* (PUCP). I visited collections and archives at the *Lugar de Memoria, la Tolerancia y la Inclusión Social* (LUM) where I met with curators, as well as temporary art exhibits and permanent monuments throughout the city related to the internal armed conflict. In Ayacucho, I attended several commemorative events; a pilgrimage with the mothers of the *Asociación Nacional de Familiares de Secuestrados, Detenidos y Desaparecidos del Perú* (ANFASEP), a mass service honoring the disappeared, a community cultural night, a photographic exhibition, and an extended museum visit to the *Casa de Memoria*. I also

performed interviews with members of *Juventud* ANFASEP, the regional directors of the *Comisión de Derechos Humanos* (COMISEDH), local artists, academics affiliated with the *Escuela de Bellas Artes* and the *Universidad Nacional de San Cristobal de Huamanga* (UNSCH), and activists.

Due to Covid restrictions, I also attended several Zoom conferences and panel discussions related to memory in Peru organized by the *Instituto de Democracia y Derechos Humanos* (IDEHPUCP), COMISEDH, APRODEH, and ANFASEP. I did not have time during my trip to meet in person with everyone I reached out to, but my time in Peru did allow me to make initial connections that have facilitated my continued research back in the US. I continue to hold interviews over Zoom, particularly with professors and artists, and to attend virtual meetings and workshops organized by different human rights groups.

Although my preliminary research was relatively brief, my time in Peru offered valuable insight into contemporary debates over sites of commemoration. The Tinker Research Grant allowed me to sharpen the focus of my project by engaging with a particular coalition of human rights organizations in Ayacucho as they work to convert a former army barracks and mass grave into a sanctuary for the disappeared.



The 38th anniversary of the Peruvian TRC's final report at the Ojo Que Llorá (Eye That Cries) memorial in Lima. (Photo by Emily Fjaellen Thompson.)



Offering commemorating those disappeared at the site of a mass grave in Ayacucho.



Members of ANFASEP after a pilgrimage to the future site of their Santuario de la Memoria in Ayacucho.
(Photo by Emily Fjaellen Thompason.)