

“¡HABÍA AHÍ UN ARCHIVO!”

ACTS OF SOVEREIGNTY BETWEEN BURIAL AND EXHIBITION

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Abstract: In 1879, in those territories that are currently part of the Argentinian Patagonia and few months after the genocide carried out against the natives, euphemistically called the “Conquest of the Desert”, the prolific writer, geographer, politician, and attorney Estanislao Zeballos organized a mission in order to “survey” and “explore” the recently conquered area. He thus gathered – though the correct word would be “sacked” – human skulls, bones that still haunted the battlefields, cult objects, clothing, and metal artifacts. During that journey Zeballos discovered, buried in the middle of a sand dune, a forgotten archive: boxes containing press clippings, XIX century correspondence between the national government and the Indigenous *cacicazgos*, account entries, governmental stamps pertaining to the *cacicazgos*, and a Castilian dictionary. This text works out the relationship between this buried “Indian archive” and the remains and objects looted from the defeated population, to be collected and then exhibited. The article attempts to demonstrate that if we read the buried Archive of Salinas Grandes along with that collection of items, gathered in order to be exhibited, like two distinct but nevertheless continuous operations pertaining to the construction of a sovereign discourse, we could better understand the power that the signifying matrix separating culture and history, chaos and state, ritual and politics, archive and trophy, tradition and sovereignty still acquires in the present.

Keywords: archive, collection, postcolonialism, sovereignty, Indigenous people.

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Yo soy el escribano de este desierto¹.
Letter written by Bernardo Namuncurá to the Buenos Aires Archbishop, July 10th, 1873.

...aunque no se siguiese de la empresa
 otro interés que el de desencantar la tierra².
 Ñuflo de Chaves, *Memoria de los casos sucedidos en la tierra desde que estoy en ella*
 (1566).

INTRODUCTION

We are at the end of 1879, in those territories that are currently part of the Argentinian Patagonia. Few months after the genocide carried out against the natives, euphemistically called the “Conquest of the Desert”³, the prolific writer, geographer, politician and attorney Estanislao Zeballos organized a mission in order to “survey” and “explore” the recently conquered area⁴. He thus gathered – though the correct word would be “sacked” – human skulls, bones that still haunted the battlefields, cult objects, clothing, and metal artifacts. He brought all those items to Buenos Aires for their exhibition in the recently created museum of the city, promoting the “expert” study of the plundered exhibits.

During that journey Zeballos discovered, buried in the middle of a sand dune, a forgotten archive, an endeavor described in his later memories like a sort of “revelation”: boxes containing press clippings, XIX century correspondence between the national government and the Indigenous *cacicazgos*, account entries, governmental stamps pertaining to the *cacicazgos* and a Castilian dictionary. A document stood out to the eyes of the writer-traveler: a 150 pages ink-written manuscript, watermarked by the Mapuche leader Calfucurá (1770-1873). Zeballos, nevertheless, never mentioned the author. He treated the manuscript as a revealed mystery, in the writing of a history that “he” grants to the present. That group of documents is now known as the Archive of Salinas Grandes, since it was found in those lands.

Estanislao Zeballos declared he brought it to Argentina in order “to make it available to the scholars” (Zeballos 1890: 7, my translation). He wrote that in a footnote in his book about Calfucurá, published five years after the discovery. That archive Zeballos would guard jealously, until his death. But, before his final hour, he bowdlerized the material, selecting and separating what was to be preserved and what was to be removed. He split the documentation and thereby destroyed the former organizational sequence of the source. The material remained for a few years in Zeballos’ home after his death, and when his inheritance was granted to the Museum of Luján in 1929, the surviving part of the Archive of Salinas Grandes was stored in the “Zeballos Wing” of the museum, uncatalogued. Symbolically buried once again, it was “rediscovered” in 1987 by the Argentinian bishop Juan Guillermo Durán⁵.

Though the partial examination of this archive already produced a few conjectures and speculations resulting from the study of the source material (Durán 2006; Diez 2012) and its comparison with other documentation, I will in this study be engaged with something different. I rather would like to examine the relationship between this buried “Indigenous Archive” and the human remains and stolen items belonged to the defeated natives that Zeballos pillaged and then displayed. The 1879 debut of the Argentinian Army was an inaugural utterance of the State: the cruel massacre of thousands of natives in the name of the progress and “civilization”. After a few months, Zeballos and his people swept the battlefield and inaugurated a national symbolic turn cleaning up the remains, searching for “trophies”, and plundering the reliquaries. What kind of sovereign utterance is established by these actions? Why picking up skulls, displaying objects, classifying remains while, at the same time, exhuming an archive in order to reconstruct it, re-write it, and then hide it again?

In the following three parts I will try to demonstrate that if we read the buried Archive of Salinas Grandes along with that collection of items, gathered in order to be exhibited, like two



distinct but nevertheless continuous operations pertaining to the construction of a sovereign discourse, we could better understand the power of the signifying matrix that separates, in effective categories, culture and history, chaos and State, archive and trophy.

THE ARCHIVE AND THE LAND

Histories are variegated even if corresponding: in the middle of alluvial lagoons between the Pampas and the Argentinian Patagonia, several times over the wire fences, and emerging from the few unplowed mounts of the Pampas, appears *la luz mala*, the wicked light. Stories of apparition, through a mechanism of symbolic replacement, belongs to the threshold of a border space. Connected to the Indigenous burial grounds, to the bones of the dead people scattered after the massacres carried out in a plethora of frontier conflicts, to the skeletons of the livestock that dwelt in the Pampas and died in solitude, the bad light forms part of the most common traditional stories to be retold in the Argentinian countryside (Escolar 2010). A sort of narrative framework joining myth and lived experiences of specters and lights.

In turn, the Pampas alluvial lagoons – which are not fluvial, do not reach the sea, but still form a communicating system between them – are very different in size and water flow. Sometimes they ferociously flood fields, small villages and cemeteries. The allegorical power of the lagoon and its inundation appears frequently in the Argentinian literature (Martínez Estrada 1944; Gamarro 2002). In the former border between the Indigenous and the *criollo* State, that rhetorical space that occupies a significant part of the pre-national collective imagination, its waiting room, very close to a key strategic point of *mangrullo* formations and XIX century forts, there can be found a system of six interconnected lagoons, a drainage basin, known as *Las Encadenadas del Oeste* (The Linked of the West)⁶. The last of them is called Epecuén⁷. Worshipped and visited by the Indigenous people of



Carhué during the XIX century because of its peculiar salinity, four times the salty sea, which provided its water with therapeutic and healing properties. Because of that, Epecuén was a pivotal ritual and political center.

Nearby Epecuén, in the Chilhué sand dune zone situated in the Salinas Grandes territory, Namuncurá buried the archive of his father, Calfucurá. This archive contained documents written between 1830 and 1860 and embodied the negotiation between the Indigenous lordships and the so-called Fathers of the Nation. We can assume that when the Indigenous leaders understood their unavoidable military debacle, forcing them to run away south towards the Río Negro after the breaking of the former peace (Durán 2006), Namuncurá's men excavated a deep hole in the border between a sand dune and the lagoon and there buried the archive, carefully placing the documents in big wooden boxes sealed in leather. Among people with different face features and of a different language, his place still thrives with stories about ghostly lights, weird amulets, and vestiges from another world.

Sometime after the burial of the archive, and almost at the end of the military campaign carried out by the newcomer Criollo state, Zeballos came to the place along with his companions and experts. In order to speak about the finding, he uses the rhetorical narrative mechanisms of the “discovery”, the supernatural guide and the “extraordinary encounter”:

eleven in the morning... I will never forget the name of the blessed Gordillo, this was the name of that soldier, because he was the author of a magnificent discovery, unexpected, one of a priceless value; a discovery that, like those battles won when you expected nothing but defeat, must be credited to the guardian star of the wanderer, that marry him with good luck. Gordillo saw a paper over the slope of the sand dune and, gathering it reached me out of surprise. My surprise was even bigger when I read, printed in light blue letters, a watermark: Provincial Governor. I went back to the sand dune, we dig, like a miner searching for his golden vein, and I felt a true outburst of joy, intense and undeniable: there was an archive!⁸

Like I said, a number of studies were published about the content of what remains of that archive (Durán 2006; Diez 2012), and there are no doubts left about two procedures. On the one hand, the Archive of Salinas Grandes has been expunged and altered (that means some documents have been obliterated) through an unclear process (there are supposition about Zeballos role in that, or perhaps it was due to some posterior agent). On the other, the present archive is nothing more than a fistful of letters, press clippings, and a manuscript attributed to Santiago Avendaño, a prisoner of war that spent part of his infancy among the Mapuches.

What is striking is that several years after his “discovery”, Zeballos published his renowned book *Calfucurá y la dinastía de los Piedra* (Zeballos 1890), a text which is mainly focused on this manuscript. Nevertheless, Zeballos seems uninterested in the maker of the document. He never mentions Avendaño or any other possible author. Searching for names, the reader would find Avendaño only in a few footnotes where Zeballos carries out a complex interplay of showing and hiding operations. He speaks about a writing mystery, a “curious manuscript”, a national inheritance devoid of authorial origin, imposing itself like a “voice from the past” inside the civilized city⁹. Zeballos autoconfigures himself as a perfect interpreter finding, expunging, sorting, classifying and translating the material converts himself as the author of an unprecedented history: the political history of the desert.

The reader must remember the semantic relationship between expurgate, clean, “purify” and even “cross out”: I bowdlerize an archive that has been “discovered” two times (the first one in a sand dune, the second among the forgotten marginalized papers of Estanislao Zeballos). In the book trilogy published by Zeballos concerning the “Curá dynasty”, he speaks about the existence of a potentially “outrageous” correspondence that perhaps deserved to be ultimately censored. Only by him? Perhaps by his heirs as well? There is no certainty. One thing is nevertheless manifest, that is Zeballos’ need to maintain a kind of omniscient narrator about



the desert: “the manuscript says”, “according to the manuscript”, “we can read in the manuscript”¹⁰ are but a few of the countless expressions used by Zeballos in order to quote an authorless entity¹¹. Though, we can identify at least three persistent operations carried out by Zeballos about this voice: it has been fixed in a script, it has been buried, and it has been exhumed (by himself).

The Bishop Juan Guillermo Durán found it again in 1987, stored in the archive of the historical museum in the city of Luján, in a room dedicated to Estanislao Zeballos¹². Durán’s words reveal this epiphanic notion of archivistic “encounter” using almost the same allegories already employed by Zeballos when he formerly found the documentation buried in the sand more than a century before. What was unclean in the Archive of Salinas Grandes? What did Zeballos feel he must purify and, then, what did he feel was corrupted, contaminated?

THE ARCHIVE AND THE POSSESSION

We must not forget that Zeballos kept in his home, together with the Archive of Salinas Grandes, a copious collection of items: Indigenous cultural objects and working tools (iron utensils and garments), along with human skulls and bones that after his death began to be stored in the Museum of Natural Sciences of la Plata. He “gathered” them in the desert, during his journey at the end of 1879, among the human remains and the decomposing bodies left to rot in the battlefield after the war. It must be underlined as well that Zeballos published his *Calfucurá y la dinastía de los Piedra* in 1884, when the naturalist Francisco Moreno was inaugurating the Museum of Natural Sciences. Following the inauguration, Moreno not only dedicated himself to the cataloguing of more than two thousand skulls and bones of dead Indigenous, but also intermittently exhibited like exotic attractions the lonko mapuche Incayal, Foyel, and part of their families until their respective death. After they died, their bones as well were integrated in the museum col-



lection¹³. The Archive of Salinas Grandes and the collection, then, share much more than what it seems.

The Archive was expunged because it contained incriminating material for someone, something that could have generated a scandal concerning the outlay of the Argentinian government and the *caciques*, the “vices” of the frontier and the traffic of goods, or the suspicious granting of military grades by the Argentinian government to several Indigenous individuals. Scandals that would have blurred the line, pretended to be pristine, between civilization and barbarism (Durán 2006), that would have revealed a contact zone too porous or, precisely, impure (Pratt 2007). Others suggested that the archive would have been expunged in its political parts, removing the documents that would have corroborated the existence of a confederation of Indigenous nations, an explicit Indigenous military strategy, a convergence of entities disavowing the recognition of sovereign activities during decades, entities whose power should have remained hidden. That means, to purify the archive when it constitutes an evidence: the evidence of decades of political activity on both sides of the border.

In turn, this very expurgation makes sense when we precisely investigate where Zeballos suppressed the manuscript. He cautiously removed all the passages where Avendaño, the author, breaks the biases against the natives and describes them as worthy political subjects (Battcock, Gotta 2002; Diez 2012; Hux 1999)¹⁴. Watermarks, stamps, signatures and other signs of diplomatic activity were already sufficiently annoying. Those were symbols of statecraft, symbols of a political ability that has little to do with the “desert”.

According to Veena Das (2004), a signature is the sign of a power whose referent is far away and, still, continues to operate through its agents via a mechanism sometimes untied from its formal framework. In that contact zone, statehood was dangerous. To recognize the impure world of politics and the conversions among Argentinian government military, the erratic use of Indigenous customs inside the criollo forts or the resolution of conflicts



through rational payments demanded by the lonco not only put at stake the supposed savagery of the “other side” of the border, but underlined as well the intrinsic parochiality of the Argentinian government’s official discourse, its constitutive ambiguity – that can be traced down all the way to Buenos Aires – and its instability. Zeballos could not use only the Archive of Salinas Grandes in order to demonstrate a “world of institutional politics” since his journey, first of all, should have made clear that the conquest had been a political victory against an uncivilized nature. Thus, any sign of Indigenous policymaking and political know-how should have been erased or used only in order to sanction what the desert, the plundered items, and the rising Argentinian state were dictating: the image of the fierce, indomitable, savage, and brutal native.

The archive is to be constituted here in a zone where the contacts are erratic, probationary as much as talismanic. The “discovery” was based on a logic of curiosity and greed and renounced to the burden of proof and evidence: the archive is a treasure that must be controlled, as a dominion, since its signifying power could jeopardize the entire deed (Rozental 2017). It is no coincidence that the archive was buried in the sand banks of “the border” (“*la frontera*”) – that inexhaustible Argentinian national rhetorical space. The metaphor of the threshold connected to the metaphor of the burial, of something that is out of sight and under the ground as well, is what lies behind the figure of the treasure and connects it specifically to the field of politics: between a preserved natural prodigy, lucky finding and military maneuver “destined” towards that encounter.

Through the discovery of an archive whose origins and author are unclear or absent, that demands an interpreter in order to make evident its political meaning like a gift offered to the newborn Argentinian state, the ancient time of myth is forged, a time where *cacicazgos* and *malones* (a military tactic typically used by mapuche and charrúas) must look like a remote rhetorical space. The Archive of Salinas Grandes works, inside the seminal discourse of the nation during that time, not like the limits of an

enunciative regime as I already pointed out previously (Rufer 2017), but like something else: an unruly object that does not set a temporality, but expands time backwards, and grants Zeballos a signed – and semeiotical – proof about his destiny as a winner.

Zeballos takes advantage of the archive and writes three books based on its material: the aforementioned *Calfucurá y la dinastía de los Piedra* (1884), *Painé, la dinastía de los zorros* (1886) and *Relmu, la reina de los pinares* (1888). Which vices, which scandals, which unspeakable expenses were mentioned in the Archive of Salinas Grandes documentation? Not Zeballos, not the museum staff during the first decades of the XX century, and neither recent scholarly research mentions it. They do not know, nevertheless they could imagine. Or maybe they know, but they never mention as if the cleansing of the archive would operate a logic of noise and conjuration. From that buried chest emanates not only a narrative possibility, but also a prohibition. Between the manuscript that enables a statal signature and the words that forbid it, appears what must not be named. The sovereign will of the Indigenous people? Their self-established organization? The lies of the diplomatic treatises? The political ability of the former nations located in the *araucanía* that could organize “mobile alliances” in the territory that now goes from Chile to Buenos Aires?

Perhaps we should look at the silencing processes of the historical discourse considering it not only like a narrative that exhibits or conceals, like already suggested by Trouillot (1995), but a mechanism that boasts the archive and at the same time makes its strategic place vanish. The historical discourse displays the archive and nevertheless makes sure to erase “the symptoms of what has engendered it” (De Certeau 1988: 298).

How bodies were treated is another issue that interrogates the archive. During his journey through the desert, after the last crucial campaign carried out in May 1879, Zeballos describes the skulls he found in the open field with methodical coldness. Those remains, unlike the archive, were never buried and Zeballos’ ac-



count is very far from the allegory of the “guiding star” that brought the former discovery:

The contemplation of this image of death was frightening and sickening. The dead bodies of the Indians were still decomposing and most of them had their flesh still attached to the bones, some preserved their hair and part of their face was still intact [...]. Salazar, a man from the Corrientes Province, took part in the battle and it was him who overthrew Gerenal, cacique and commander of the Indians. He remembered [...] that the Indian fell close to the river ravines, and it was impossible not noticing him since I was vividly interested in his skull. We finally found him, and the identity of the corpse was quickly established by the soldiers from the white dotted blue poncho that the cacique was wearing that day. I took the skull and six lumbar vertebrae. It is a truly araucanian skull, because of its asymmetrical grotesque shape, sunken and protruding, and because of its considerable volume [...] The putrefaction spared this part, it was in contact with the salina, and after cleaning it with alcohol and rubbing it with phenic acid I could keep it intact through the entire journey in order to offer it, later, to the expert study, like a valuable memory of my peregrinations in the desert of the homeland, which I yearned to know, and also like the skull of the last cacique that bravely died defending his hideout to be found in the remotest shelter. We wade across the river again and I named that place Gerenal's Pass¹⁵.

The skulls will support the deeds that testify, according to Zeballos, the victory over barbarism: everybody could see the testimony of an “other epoch”. Zeballos stressed, like everyone during his time, that those human remains are after all, and must be, objects of inquiry and study, subjects to be discussed in dedicated seminars and items to be exhibited in a museum showcase. This logic of exhibition emulates the sense of that intimate interplay between the museographic concepts of “in situ” and “in context” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 17-30): something that is extracted from one matrix of meanings and is forcefully injected into another. That should warn us about something: the most well-established and recurrent form of colonial dominance is not carried out through the erasure of the difference. On the contrary, is



carried out through the exhibition of that difference, but it now re-appears under the law of another syntagm, obligated in the occupation of just one possible space of representation. The classic museographic operation colonizes in this specific way: it is not a removal, but a re-semanticization of a system of symbols unaffiliated to the former significant context of the object. Nevertheless, we are in the presence of a further difference: in our case, Zeballos named bones and places, baptized skulls. Thus, he performed a political act, so typical in a context of war and military expansion but very distant from the scientific context where he was, supposedly, positioned. Instead of the scientific predilection to decontextualize, compare, generalize or serialize items (Podgorny, Lopes 2014: 178; Nemser 2017), he was naming places and plundering skulls and bones – not in the quality of researchable items but in the quality of vestiges of the time past. Zeballos was writing over the land the dominance of the newborn State and proposed a materiality which ultimately does not form a scientific collection but is just a spoil of war: he is interested in “that” skull, and not another one. That skull, along with the white dotted blue poncho. Zeballos is not interested in the series, only in the syntagm: the recognizable sign of the defeated.

The skulls will thus occupy the collection that feeds the visual machinery of a conqueror State (Podgorny, Lopes 2014; Yujnovsky 2007) while at the same time the “discovered” archive will appear as the omen of the Republic, of “the lettered city”; and curiously has been exhumed as a testimony of something past, something far, something alien. When the discovery is redescribed, nobody pays attention to the fact that Zeballos exhumes an archived buried from six to twelve months earlier. It is described like a treasure coming from a forgotten civilization, not only chronologically remote but also detached from whatever form of interaction and contact. Like the war that dictated its burial, it has been part of the epic that founded the Nation and, according to Homi Bhabha, has its roots in the double vocation of time: at the same time new and archaic (Bhabha 1994). That alienness, that distance is what Michel de Certeau



teau (1988) designated as necessary for the construction of history as a modern discipline: the historical past does not work with the dead only because it works with “the deceased”, but, more precisely, because it works with “what it makes die”.

This operation is in harmony with a second one, well-known in the configuration of Argentinian academic knowledge. It has to do with the strict separation between ethnohistory and history as academic disciplines. The former is mostly dedicated to the study of “the border” that separates the Indigenous. The latter was born as a field of knowledge after the massacre of the Indians and with the coming of European immigrants. The writing of history, then, is carried out through a violent replacement inside the textual regime: a living subject, the *Indian* – a social subject that “would exist no more” –, is substituted by the *Pampas* – a territorial subject, that encompassed all those fields to be worked by the coming immigrant peasants. After this replacement has been accomplished, the *Pampas*, the fields, the countryside would thus be transformed in the central, and almost unique, topic of the national master narrative (Hopkins 2020: 253-255; Giudicelli 2018; Navarro Floria 2005)¹⁶.

THE ARCHIVE AND THE TRENCH

The Archive of Salinas Grandes is a miniaturized epistemic operation that brought the Nation into existence: it encompasses the burial and the expurgation. It was entombed in a sort of civilizing limbo, close to the end of the world dictated by the XIX century Argentinian military elites, before the extermination: the Alsina’s Trench

– The archive has been found here, along with Namuncurá’s correspondence?

– Yes, yes [...] Even now when the harvester passes you can find rocks and other things, you see? For sure they were around here [...] I have seen a light coming, like that you know? It seemed like a vehicle



approaching. Arriving all of a sudden and all of a sudden... it disappeared. They call it *Médano Negro* (Black Sand Dune) [...] There it was... their burial ground (*El país del diablo*, documentary film, 2007, Dir. Andrés Di Tella, Bs As, min. 3).

And... there are unexplainable lights, of different colors, that runs with, comes by and haunts you. You can see it... daily here in the Pampas. They are connected to ancient Indigenous settlements, to burial grounds, to the phosphorescence of the bones. No explanation is satisfactory because what one can see is impenetrable (*El país del diablo*, min. 34).

The trench? I do not know; it must be over there. There you can find nothing more than ruins. A *mangrullo*¹⁷ marks it. They say that there an archive has been uncovered, that contained Indian papers, jewelry and amulets. Far from here, further south. You can spot footsteps; you can see holes in the grass. I do not know, they say that. And the cow. You can hear like a cow imprisoned in the trench, at night. Someone says it is Alsina's ghost [he laughs]. And, you see? They have never finished the work (*Malón y masacre*, docu-fiction, Dir. Sara Barkin, Argentina, 2003, min. 17)¹⁸.

Adolfo Alsina, appointed Minister of War by the Argentinian president Nicolás Avellaneda and confirmed by the Senate of the Nation in 1876, set in motion the activities to dig a ditch crossing, from the Southwest to the West, the whole country, from the sea to the foothills, like a wound. He called it, grandiloquently, "The Trench of the Nation". Now it is known as *La Zanja de Alsina* (Alsina's Trench), the result of his peculiar insanity. Not much remains of its features, like scars in the cornfields or soybean seas. The minister mocked the cartographic notion to the farthest limit: if in the south you can find indomitable indios, we will trace the limit of the world just before their territory (Alsina 1977).

He proposed to outline, with the help of convicted soldiers and prisoners of war employed as manpower, a shallow trench that should have split the country in two. Three meters deep by one and a half wide. Six hundred and sixty kilometers, from Bahía Blanca to La Amarga lagoon, in Córdoba (Landa et al 2017).



In the press, during his time, Alsina has been treated like an exceptional statesman but also as a raving lunatic. But, despite harshness and madness, almost four hundred and fifty kilometers have been excavated. According to the writer Juan José Saer, for example, the Alsina's Trench “explains, unexpectedly, a strong fantastic tradition of the Rio de la Plata literature”: like a Kafka *avant la lettre*, caught between the statal bureaucracy, authoritarianism and irrationality, Alsina's idea “not only forestalled Kafka's *At the Construction of the Great Wall of China*, but also *The Castle* and *The Process*” (Saer 1991: 433). A 374 kilometers trench, that now survives only in pieces. Almost nothing survived. What kind of national willpower testify this deed? The fatherland that lays waste, that plows the soil and prepares, always new lands that stir pieces, bones, wounds.

However, fragments and tones of the great Other still appears. Alterations of the regular text: according to the quotations nowadays, one hundred and forty years after, *baquianos* and connoisseurs of the ancient “desert”, while interviewed, tell us about a suspended limit, an archive that seems to be buried together with “amulets” – something that, as far as I know, never appeared in the primary sources. Intermittent and unfathomable lights. Black sand dunes, wandering cemeteries in a windy noise. Spirits trapped inside screaming cows, wandering cemeteries in the howling wind, black silhouettes on full moon nights.

The agonal link between the Argentinian nation and its alterity seems to be encrypted in this archive that, like every unearthed treasure, does not bode anything good for the future. Part document and part treasure, it looks like the metonymy of an endless siege: something about the Other does not permit history to be obliterated. Something surrounds it, even if it is nothing more than an archive-treasure/archive-ghost.

In the famous novel *La liebre* (The hare), by César Aira, all of a sudden, the narrator yells: “What other problem would the open space of the Pampas have, if there is one, than discontinuity?”¹⁹. In this shadowless country, as said by Perla Suez, discontinuity



nuity is but sheer terror. Fear of the Other having a place: a physical place in the land, and a proper locus of enunciation. Because when the shadow dissolves, every repair vanishes and a martyrdom in the open air is of the worst kind. Fear to be exposed envelops everything, and in Argentina everyone is scared. “There is no genocide without the connivence of the majority” says Marcelo Valko (2010: 31). That collusion is as big as the Pampas. The fear of the *malón* (sudden Indian attack), of the *cabecita negra* (little black head)²⁰ of the naked truth. The terror of the great Other that lurks, crouched inside a trench (or a peripheral borough, or a bush) and that cannot, must not, leave any residue nor have any archive²¹. A persisting Other: “What constitutes this text-off that is nonetheless marked within the text?” asked Michel de Certeau in *The Writing of History* (1988: 244). Maybe a buried archive?

In Latin-American vernacular histories, the appearance of a lineal temporality assured, ideologically, the legitimacy of discursive operations that were crystallizing in Central Europe: operations like the invasion, the occupation, and the “juridical protection” of a consistent part of the Earth that, according to the *ratio imperii*, needed to be pulled to the present. But this temporal tenacity, this insistence in expelling the past, is also the semiotic manifestation of a peril: the ever-possible siege by the Other. We can understand then, after the genocidal war against the Indigenous people, the exhumation of the Archive of Salinas Grandes. The narratives about that “discovery” as well as the expurgation of the documentation are events that must be read in connection to the creation of the Museo de la Plata collections. They are merged in a unique temporal operation, a singularity inherent to the postcolonial historicity regimes: it inaugurates the new time of the writing establishing, through rhetorical procedures, the idea that the Indigenous world is an alterity since it is at the same time something other and something far away, in an already disappeared space and in an irreversible and outdated past.

But at the same time, it is mandatory to show the contemporary trophies of war, to exhibit them in a collectible space, to



make them present inside the aristocratic regimes of the hunt, the domestication and the domination. The Other have to be stripped of its features, every notion of tactical enemy, of sovereign will-power, of political knowledge must disappear. A hunting regime that, like a practice innerved in the nobiliary politics, must always remember that the prey is, nevertheless, close. While Zeballos was uncovering the archive, Julio Argentino Roca wrote in the national newspaper that military ethics was unfit to deal with the indios: “we need no other tactic except the one employed by the hunter against the wild boar [...] what I am saying [...] against the deer, since the Indio is but an armed deer out of his breath” (cit. in Yunque 2008: 468). The trench symbolized the end of politics and inaugurated a tactic of the partridge hunter: the war has been transformed into a hunt.

This proximity to the animal world is not just one additional example about how the Other was transformed into a barbarian. We must read this hunt, which is a manly activity, in connection to the attitude towards female bodies: women were not hunted down, but violated and then, after the mutilation of the breasts, beheaded. Behind the triad hunting-violating-writing we can glimpse a male confraternity, that ultimately built the State. A new sovereignty is imposed over a territory conquered through writing developed as conscience, and dehumanizing the neighbor in order to exhibit it like a trophy and an object. Women are violated and then killed in order to erase a possible legacy, an obliterated *mestizaje*. Inside this framework, that “Indian archive” of Salinas Grandes as said by Durán, was a dangerous discovery. The archive casted doubts upon an almost-perfect arrangement. From the documentation we can see a third party emerging, a mystery that lingers and shows its will to negate the interlocutor and, potentially, that could cancel the epic dominion of the rising history.

The contiguity between the temporality of an expunged manuscript – that can be read since it contains a language capable of policymaking – and the exhibited collection of human remains and cultural objects set forth an ambiguous notion of post-

colonial national time. It is a conventional modern time, full of promises and openings, but also a time that anticipates those fears that would finally originate the late 19th and early 20th centuries social hygiene movements: “our family is unclean”. Because of that, the Archive of Salinas Grandes had to be purified. The roughness of the war had to be softened and the daily coexistence, the constant interchange, the cultural *mestizaje* reduced to nothing. The new time of the “agricultural dream”, that inexhaustible desert that nowadays is a “perpetual horizon drowned in a sea of soybean” (Carrales 2017: 6), will be forever challenged by a “marvelous” and unspeakable archive: the archive that reveals the contention of the Other, its political reality, its continuous presence.

ARCHIVE AND TIME

The trope of the animal hunt returns several times in Latin America during the XIX century. Always, the animal is “much too close” in the foundational essay, like the Indian *malón*, or like the popular mob during the XX century: a closeness that must be permanently invoked.

Maybe, this is a reason for what happened in 2017: when the *Prefectura Naval argentina* – a federal police institution – was relocated to lake Mascardi, its members occupied the territory of the province and evacuated, through an armed repression, all mapuche lands that formerly were under a regime of temporal juridical protection. In order to uphold the occurrence, rumors were spread about an alleged dangerous separatist organization called RAM (Resistencia Ancestral Mapuche)²². It is interesting to read the statements of the then Minister of Security, Patricia Bullrich, about the episode: she underlined that cultural rights were one thing, and another thing “the foundation of the Republic and the national future” that should be protected because of “the amount of blood shed in the forging of our history”²³. Protected through the everlasting excision between sovereign history and cultural



difference, by force. At the same time, the Vice-President of the Republic, Gabriela Michetti, spoke about the urge to intercept that “threat” since the Indigenous people that claimed and occupied the territory, seized weapons, dangerous material, and “even spears”²⁴.

The same spears that until recently were exhibited in the ethnographic collection pertaining to the Museo de la Patagonia in Bariloche. Objects to be found still today as a decoration in some Patagonia rancher’s living room among the French furniture, exhibited like a war trophy²⁵.

A double possession goes with the beautiful harmless bucolic Indian: a double that reaffirms the conquered Indian. The writing of history and the crystallization of culture like a two-faced Janus: the only permitted Other is the one pacified through war and domesticated by history. When the pacified culture overflows and shows its violations, its negating power, then it is rapidly dragged into the sovereign language: as such, it threatens the lineal time of progress, of the State, of the capital and ought to be, whenever necessary, destroyed. Maybe the Parliament of the former Vice-President of the Republic would reveal the success of the buried archives and of the ethnographic collection in (post)colonial spaces. If, on the one hand, the Indians appear as a pacified supplement of the nation inside a multicultural discourse, on the other they always remind a constant and latent threat that can potentially disclose the unmentioned secret: the typical will to plunder of the Latin-American Republics.

In 2005, I surveyed the National History Museum in Buenos Aires precisely because I wanted to see what was the discourse that the most legitimate space of the national public history establishes concerning the genocide and about the genetic matrix of the State. I was already assuming what I was going to find: nothing. Nothing but the emblematic 1889 oil painting by Juan Manuel Blanes called *Conquista del Desierto*. There is no trace of the Indians in it. Only a squad of soldiers gathered around Julio Argentino Roca while he is gazing to the north, like he was already imag-



ining “pastures, railways and progress” like said by the positivist thinker Ángel Costa (Amigo 1994).

Surprised, I consulted with Ramiro Abrate, the guide of the museum, who told me:

look: here we just preserve one painting about Roca’s deeds. There is criticism since the Indians are absent. What should we exhibit? They appear not even in paintings. We recovered the black *mazamorreras*. Oil paintings, songs, the *gauchesca*, everything...but the Indians, today just because they are trendy...yes, they lived there in Patagonia, there was the border, all that stuff about the *malones*...no. There is nothing left of it, what should we display?²⁶

I am interested in this testimony, since I feel a sort of distress uttered by the impossibility of filling a blank representational space: there is no document to be displayed, at least one fitting a history museum. In a sort of editing, the guide binds together different scenes in a synchronic picture: on the one hand, something that recalls school acts (the black *mazamorreras* could not have other origin; and we cannot help but think that there is no better penetrating national pedagogy compared to school acts, one that establish fondness and national habits). On the other, the guide also mentions the border with Indians – always the Indians have been on the other side or were part of natural history, perhaps because of their contiguity with it. History as an institutional discipline has done a lot in order to blur the image of these alterity figures, and today there are plenty of studies about museums and natural history. But my point is other: has that image changed in the public historical discourse? Why would a Vice-President of the Republic make such an offence, speaking of threats, dangers and spears, and it was not considered a public shame? What effective relation would keep preserving the void, the ethnographic object, the manuscript that could not be Indian and the reliquary tradition of the contemporary multicultural patrimony?

Somehow, what was said by Durán about the “sealed work” of the Archive of Salinas Grandes is still valid: little is known, a lot



has been lost, the access is difficult. Still in the 21st century, the archive is embarrassing. Maybe because it would be too expensive, for the political will of the State, the opening of a memory restoring policy. Former and ongoing land expropriation should be seriously addressed and a new vocabulary should be generated, one that allows us to understand how in just three years the Indigenous population was exterminated and, as a subsequent act, a new unpolluted map of both sides of the trench was drawn by less than two thousand white property-owners, all of European origin. They became title-holders of more than forty-two million hectares of land, already registered in public records just five years after the genocide. This is not unrecognized: but in the orders of knowledge, all of that always seems far, half buried, and even the multicultural nation is more at ease when speaking about collections, clothes, and spears than when speaking of watermarked political treatises and lonco signatures that unveil how a notion of the State was present even on the other side of the trench, there where nothing should have remained but oblivion.

CLOSURE

Every temporal organization of the alterity takes the shape of an account of the nation. I think that the exhibition of skulls introduced by Zeballos, the oil painting by Blanes stored in the National Museum, and the negated Archive of Salinas Grandes, hidden, recovered, and buried again, are unruly demonstrations of the neocolonial domination still at work during the republican apogee and can be understood, according to Saussure (1959), only as a paradigmatic organization. Struggles of rewriting carried out by the learned city that keeps defining its limits.

Nowadays, we are surprised when a national authority recurs to the “spears” in order to evoke some sort of primitive menace, when actually the subject is a political movement that vindicates lands and acknowledgement. Still, we are not surprised by knee-



jerk reaction itself, but because the utterance reveals the contemporary effectiveness of the semantic organization that keeps separating the historical archive in the State signature, on the one side, and, on the other, the pacified culture in the display cabinets, the harmless Indian, and finally the latent hunting of animals. The latest two always were superimposed figures, even in the pluricultural nation where the Other is recognized. Because if the mannequin Indian asserts the national reliquary of display cabinets and picture cards, the Other, the untamed, survives in the spectral form of a menace (to the property, to the rapacious foundation of the Republic, lost among the hiding mechanisms of foundational discourses that, deliberately, forgets wars and conquest). If it resists to be collected and catalogued, it must be expunged, like the archive. It must be brought on the other side of the trench, and hunted by any means, as often as needed.

The Indigenous revindications and the pillaging of their resources are juxtaposed in a semantic combination, just like the acknowledgement of the Indigenous cultures and their repression – justified by the State depicting their protest as a “menace to the Republic”. This combination compels us to consider temporality as a political concept, disputed in the present here and now. It forces us to see archive and collection, history and national heritage, positivistic rhetoric and multicultural acknowledgement as elements combined and juxtaposed in heterogeneous times and not as separated temporal and political sequences.

NOTES

¹ “I am the Scribe of this desert” (my translation).

² “[...] though the enterprise only served the purpose of free this land of all enchantment”.

³ About the Conquest of the Desert as a genocide see Del Río et al. 2010; Pérez 2019.

⁴ Estanislao Zeballos (1854-1923) has been a XIX century criollo learned man. He was very versatile: reporter, attorney, he studied engineering and geography. In 1872 he participated in the establishment of the Argentinian Scientific Society. Nevertheless, as



stated by many voices, his scientific career was always deeply connected to his political concerns, and addressed to uphold the ideologies of his times, especially those concerning the border with the Indians and “the civilization”. See Yuñovsky 2007; Barcia 2004.

⁵ The discovery originated the most complete study that exists today (Durán 2006).

⁶ “The border” is a salient historiographic topic in Argentina. The frontier with the Indian was mobile, and its policy was changing both spatially and politically throughout the 19th century. In the last two decades before the genocide (1860-1880), political treaties gave way to more offensive and warlike strategies.

⁷ Located today in the province of Buenos Aires, the lagoon overflowed in 1985 and forced the population to evacuate the territory. Today, the submerged remains of the villages are tourist attractions.

⁸ “Eran las 11 am... No olvidaré nunca el nombre del bienaventurado Gordillo, que así se llamaba aquel soldado, porque fue autor de un hallazgo soberbio, inesperado y de un valor inestimable; de aquellos hallazgos que como las batallas ganadas cuando se espera una derrota, deben atribuirse a la estrella tutelar del viajero que lo desposa con la suerte. Gordillo vio un papel sobre la ladera de un médano y habiéndolo alzado me alcanzó con sorpresa. La mía fue aún mayor cuando leí, impreso en letras azules, este timbre: Gobernador de la Provincia. Volví al médano, escarbamos, como un minero que busca la veta aurífera para herirla y sentí un verdadero arrebato del gozo más intenso e innegable. ¡Había allí un archivo!” (Zeballos 1881: 192, my translation). In his book *Viaje al país de los araucanos*, Zeballos stated that the archive contains “correspondence from power to power” between “the government” and “the caciques”, “commercial accounts that were of much use for the vandals”, “the proof of the complicity of the savages in the civil wars of the Republic” (Zeballos 1881: 192, my translation). Like a treasure erupted from the nature, it seems that the archive is not the organization of a knowledge, but the gift offered to the newcome State that only confirms the accounts already known by Zeballos: the savage against the Republic, the *cacique* against the government, the vandal against the businessman.

⁹ The first footnote of Zeballos’ book states: “I took all the data that I am providing from 1833 to 1861 from a curious manuscript of a hundred and fifty pages, found by myself in the Desert [...] it was hidden inside the sand by the indios, while they were forced to a desperate retreat by colonel Levalles’ armies, it still exists in my library and I make it available to the scholars [...]” (Zeballos 1890: 29, my translation).

¹⁰ Zeballos 1891: 18, 20, 25 to name just a few. For a deepest analysis of Zeballos’ narrative processes see Diez 2012.

¹¹ This happens only in *Calfucurá y la dinastía de los Piedra*. Later, in the other two Zeballos’ novels about the “desert” called *Painé* and *Relmu*, the author abandons the style of the chronicler and proceeded using a novelesque and fictive narrative style, inventing the heteronym of Santiago Avendaño, Liberato Pérez (see Diez 2011). This transformative process seems to ratify Fermín Rodríguez’s idea: “From the first travelers that came in order to make investments that ultimately resulted in mirages, the economy of the desert took the shape of a fiction” (Rodríguez 2012: 213. See also Barcia 2004).

¹² Monsignor Durán speaks about the “mode of the encounter”: “I am speaking about an experience intimately connected to that pristine sentiment of grace and fullness that overwhelms the historian when something unexpected appears, or the examination of a known material that nonetheless no one has fathomed at deep. Like the virgin soil, it just waits to the plough in order to produce a rich harvest. That was precisely the feeling I felt one cold morning in June 1987, in the city of Luján, in the reading room of the archive Estanislao S. Zeballos, when the staff put over the table, for the first time, the voluminous dark green folder that



contains what the remains, the breadcrumbs, of the ancient archive of the powerful former salinero cacique Manuel Namuncurá" (Durán 2006: 16, my translation).

¹³ There are plenty of studies about that. Zeballos worked together with Moreno helping him with the collection and participated to the debate he started in Europe about the diversity and specificity of "original races" that existed in the Patagonia. After all, the discovery of the *Homo neanderthalensis* in 1856 originated in the next decade an intense debate, and ideas about a "great ancestor" or "living proof" begun to circulate worldwide.

¹⁴ Meinrado Hux (1999) analyzed the manuscript and other documentation concerning Avendaño's life, sternly judging Zeballos' narrative process. In a study, Clementina Battcock and Claudia Gotta inspected Avendaño's narratives, his post-memorial acts – since he narrates an indigenous memory he never lives, but has been told to him – and the proposition for a "contact literature" with its own political and diegetic strategies (Battcock, Gotta 2002).

¹⁵ La contemplación de este cuadro de muerte era pavorosa y repugnante. Los cadáveres de los indios estaban aún en descomposición y la mayor parte tenía aún la carne adherida a los huesos y algunos conservaban fresca la cabeza, con pelo, y las facciones de la cara casi intactas [...] El correntino Salazar tomó parte en este combate, y había derribado al cacique Gerenal, comandante de los indígenas en la acción. Recordaba [...] que el indio había caído cerca de las barrancas del río, de suerte que era imposible no encontrarlo, interesándome vivamente, como sucedía, por su cráneo. Lo hallamos, por fin, y la identidad del cadáver fue en breve establecida por los soldados, deduciéndola del poncho azul con lunares blancos que el gran cacique ostentaba el día de la acción [...] Yo saqué el cráneo con seis vértebras lumbares. Es un cráneo de tipo araucano verdadero, por sus formas grotescas, sin simetría, deprimidas o sobresalientes, y por su volumen notable. [...] La putrefacción había respetado esta parte, que permanecía en contacto con la salina, y habiéndolo lavado con alcohol y rociándolo con ácido fénico, pude conservarlo durante todo el viaje, para ofrecerlo más tarde al estudio de los profesores, como un recuerdo valioso de mis peregrinaciones por el desierto de la patria, que anhelaba conocer, y también como el cráneo del último cacique muerto heroicamente en defensa de su guarida en el más apartado refugio: en la inhabilitable travesía. Vadeamos de nuevo el río y di al lugar el nombre Paso de Gerenal (Zeballos 1881: 336-337, my translation).

¹⁶ For a very interesting discussion concerning the selection of historical topics in the rising of Latin America as a "disciplinary discourse" and the most general connivence of the empire see Salvatore 2016: 17-33.

¹⁷ A sort of small wooden watchtower, 10-15 meters high, very common in those lands during colonial times.

¹⁸ This "cow" is mentioned as well in *La muralla criolla* (documentary, Dir. Sebastián Díaz, Argentina, 2017), even if no source is named. I never found other academic or ethnographic reference about this account, of Alsina's ghost under the guise of a cow trapped in his own trench.

¹⁹ "¿Qué otro problema tendrían los abiertos espacios de la pampa, si iban a tener alguno, que el de la discontinuidad?" (Aira 2017: 43, my translation).

²⁰ The expression originated during 1930-1940 in Argentina. In those times, there was a mass mobilization and poor rural workers moved from the Argentinian hinterland to Buenos Aires, searching for better jobs. It was an internal mass migration phenomenon that involved poor mestizo, brown-skin, racialized people. The press started to write about an invasion of "black heads" or "little black heads". Later, Peronism would claim and reevaluate the term as the truest expression of the "real people" from below.

²¹ In order to understand how powerful this fear is, it is profitable to read some literature. Juan Manuel de Rosas, and other XIX century sources that inaugurated the national literature, stressed the fear of mobs, a recurring theme that later would be repeated and mixed to other themes like the immigration, in 1930, the 1945 popular revolt that was backing Perón, the 1960 social movements exploded in the major cities, the economic crisis of 2001 or the 2013 police and social revolt in the province of Córdoba. Perhaps, Pedro Mairal's novel *El año del desierto* is one the best narrative fictional examples about this discourse, about the fear of a great Other as the shadow of the nation; an alterity that lurks and is transformed in a repetitive inscription of history (Mairal 2005).

²² The existence of the RAM has never been proved and everything suggests that it was an invention of the government in order to cast negative shadows over indigenous claims over the territory and their legitimization of environmentalist policies against the negative impact of mining exploitation activities. While I am writing this article, the former 2017 Minister of Security Patricia Bullrich, is under trial on charges of espionage against several indigenous leaders (see Meyer, Adriana 2019). “Imputada por espionar y reprimir a los mapuche”, Pagina 12 on line, <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/228723-imputada-por-espionar-y-reprimir-a-los-mapuches>.

²³ In his chapter “What Freud Makes of History”, De Certeau explains that “each social discourse in turn effacing the symptoms of what has engendered it” (1988: 298). If in the asylum the symptoms of the neurotic disappear after the “medical reason”, in history the symptoms of the defeated alterity disappear after the “documentary truth” of an archival logic and intermittently appear as another thing. When culture “only believes in working ‘to take care of’ its own stability through evidence, “what in reality it takes pride in camouflaging in another way, and better” (De Certeau 1988: 298).

²⁴ <https://www.elpatagonico.com/michetti-supone-que-los-mapuches-atacan-lanzas-n-3051981>.

²⁵ This can be seen in interviews, in the aforementioned documental, where the land-owners of Patagonia proudly show their big houses and their private collections of indigenous objects. One of the most emblematic spaces where the archive, the historical objects (of the army) and the nationalized ethnographic (indigenous) collection are definitely organized is the Museo de la Patagonia in Bariloche, Province of Neuquén, starting from 1940. For case study see Piantoni 2013.

²⁶ “fíjese: acá nomás tenemos un cuadro sobre la labor de Roca. Algunos critican porque no están los indios. ¿Qué vamos a poner de ellos? Ni en los cuadros están. Las negritas mazamorreras sí las tenemos. Óleos, canciones, la gauchesca, de todo... Pero esto de los indios, ahora porque está de moda... si estaban allá en la Patagonia, estaba la frontera, todo eso de los malones... No. No hay nada de eso, qué vamos a poner acá...? (Museo Nacional de Historia, Parque Lezama, Buenos Aires, interview with Ramiro Abrate, December 2005, my translation [following his petition, Ramiro's name was changed].

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