

Narrow but Endlessly Deep: The Struggle for Memorialisation in Chile Since the Transition to Democracy. By Peter Read and Marivic Wyndham. Acton: ANU Press. Pp. 240. USD\$41.

Review

How can sites of past violence be memorialised without reifying the memories they evoke? Whose voices are prioritised in processes of memorialisation, and what is the role of the “overseas historian” in listening to such voices? These questions encircle Peter Read and Marivic Wyndham’s most recent publication *Narrow but Endlessly Deep*, a public history exploring the complex practices and processes by which the physical locations of dictatorship violence in Chile are contested, preserved, and consigned to oblivion. The culmination of over a decade of discussions, observations and interviews, the text provides a multifaceted history of memorialisation at seven former centres of torture and detention in post-dictatorship Chile. It contributes to an expanding body of scholarship that interrogates the spatial aftermath of dictatorship violence in Latin America (Andermann 2012; Hite 2013; Aguilera 2015), adding to the field by taking a “longitudinal approach” (17) to the analysis of place, and engaging with individuals who have largely been omitted from the memorialisation process.

Based in Australia, with a background in aboriginal history, Read and Wyndham hail from an intellectual tradition that is sensitive to the complex spatiotemporal afterlife of violence and repression. Their approach does not impose or transplant a coherent theoretical framework onto the context in question, but strives to intervene in current debates by engaging with individuals who have an intimate connection with the locations in question. From the outset the authors distance themselves from a particular ideological position, or political party, stating instead that their work is a public history engaging in “worldwide debates about why and how should deeds of state violence to its own citizens be remembered, and by whom” (11). The “longitudinal” approach, tracing the history of memorialisation as a contested and ongoing process, diverges from semiotic analyses that focus on the physical appearance of memorials at a particular moment in time. Finally, the text is an act of preservation; an attempt to document the experiences of an ageing generation whose stories about the dictatorship, and its aftermath, are increasingly relegated to the margins of the Chilean public sphere.

The book is split into two sections, focussing on seven different case studies, ranging from iconic sites of detention and torture, such as the national stadium, to lesser known locations that are not officially acknowledged by the state. Part 1 outlines the strained processes by which memorials were imagined, commissioned and constructed throughout the Chilean democratic transition. The second section jumps forward to 2014, surveying how the use and appearance of the sites have evolved since their inception, and opening up a space for reflection on the current trajectories of memorialisation in contemporary Chile. Excluding one, each case study is framed around one individual's relationship to a place and, adding to these individual accounts, the authors map out a complex network of actors, including student activists, tourists, disbanded left wing political parties, the families of victims, and state funded organisations. The physical appearance of each site is analysed, however, it is stressed that this material façade will inevitably evolve with new trends in memorialisation.

One of the strengths of the work is its engagement with individuals who have a long relationship to a specific place of past violence. The text, as a result, does not prioritise the experience of the visiting subject, but strives to represent each memorial as an ongoing process with a dense and contested history. Often, these individuals have not been part of the memorialisation discussions, and their testimonies sit uncomfortably with normative accounts about the role of memorials in post-conflict societies. For example, in one particularly powerful interview, Don Roberto Sanchez, a caretaker and former detainee at the national stadium, expresses his regret that the building is still tainted by memories of violence. "Keep the stadium, use the stadium. It was bad here only for two months in 71 years", says Rodriguez, reimagining the building as a victim that continues to be unjustly stigmatised and disfigured.

Arguably the most valuable contribution of the book is its longitudinal approach, generating a layered perspective of place that can only be developed through years of site specific research. Reflecting on the former clandestine torture centre, Londres 38, the authors describe how the Chilean state gradually capitalised on internal divisions within the "memory community", leading to the creation of a space that excludes any trace of the far left groups that were once imprisoned there. An analysis based on a single visit to Londres 38 might focus on the aesthetic of absence generated by its empty rooms, or applaud its resistance to didactic signage. For Read and Wyndham, however,

the site is indicative of a “creeping generality” (p.98) in which the particularities of place and memory are obscured by the broad task of learning from the past, and moving toward reconciliation. In other words, Londres functions as a *mise-en-scene* for remembrance, as opposed to material space with a complex history. Read and Wyndham strive to restore specific memories of these locations and in doing so contextualise the pacifying interventions of the state.

While there is much to admire in this approach, the method, and choice of case studies, also have limitations. Firstly, the socio-political landscape of contemporary Chile is strangely absent. The emerging generation of activists and memory workers, who will take on the responsibility of curating many of these sites, is not given a voice, and little mention is made of the social movements that continue to struggle against the structural legacies of military rule. The authors defend this decision by arguing that the injustices suffered by older generations are rapidly being marginalised by more “contemporary” political concerns and causes. However, such an argument ultimately reinforces a strict delineation between the repressive violence of the dictatorship and the enduring violence of the neoliberal state. Likewise, the task of demanding justice for the dictatorship’s crimes is framed as a wholly separate task to that of the Chilean student movement, when perhaps it would have been more productive to observe how they intersect. The focus on individual testimonies only perpetuates this temporal delineation, implying that the affective resonance of sites of past violence will inevitably wane with the death of those who lived through the repression.

To conclude, *Narrow but Endlessly Deep* is a robust intervention in the study of memorialisation in Chile, pioneering a longitudinal site-specific approach that is too often neglected in memory studies. The authors are committed to restoring depth and specificity to places of dictatorship violence, challenging the standardising rhetoric of the state, and engaging with marginalised subjects who are seldom incorporated into the memorialisation process. A more nuanced analysis might have paid closer attention to the political climate in contemporary Chile, reflecting on the role and status of these locations in contemporary social movements. Nonetheless, through their analysis Read and Wyndham generate a rich landscape of memory, in which struggles for truth and justice are always non-linear and intensely contested. The book serves as a reminder that the physical appearance of a site of memory is only ever a fragment of its story, and

sometimes more historical forms of analysis are required to discern what seethes beneath the surface.

STRUAN GRAY
University of Brighton

References

Aguilera, C. 2015. Memories and silences of a segregated city: Monuments and political violence in Santiago, Chile, 1970–1991. *Memory Studies* 8(1), pp. 102–114.

Andermann, J. 2012. Expanded Fields: Postdictatorship and the Landscape. *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 21(2), pp. 165–187.

Hite, K. 2013. *Politics and the Art of Commemoration: Memorials to Struggle in Latin America and Spain*. London: Routledge.