

Anthology Vol. 1: Chapter 7 Summary

FIRE IN THE MEMORY: Theater, Truth, and Justice in Argentina and Peru

by Roberto Gutiérrez Varea

Noting that for centuries Latin Americans have engaged the power of performance practices to resist violence, colonization, and exploitation, Argentine scholar and director Roberto Gutiérrez Varea documents how today, Latin American artists and activists are helping communities build peace in the aftermath of state-sponsored repression and terror.

Varea introduces the acclaimed theater collective *Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani* from Peru and the Argentinean initiative *Teatro por la Identidad* or Theater for Identity (TxI). For both *Yuyachkani* and TxI, theater is about what Varea calls “the performance of collective resistance, memory and of an inclusive shared truth.” Artists respond to the communal needs for memorial, for mourning, and for expression, and in doing so create work of the highest aesthetic quality.

Context

In the second half of the 20th century, both Argentina and Peru saw authoritarian rulers come to power and wreak havoc on the people. In both countries, those who opposed (or *allegedly* opposed) the dictatorship were labeled “subversive terrorists” and were targeted by the government. Both regimes suspended civil rights and both abducted thousands of people who were tortured, executed, or became *desaparecidos*, simply never heard from again. In Argentina, there were an estimated 30,000 people dead or “disappeared.” In Peru, the number was almost 70,000, the majority of whom were indigenous, Quechua-speaking people from poor and marginalized communities.

When democracy was reinstated (1983 in Argentina and 2001 in Peru) both countries established official commissions to gather testimony about the atrocities, find the truth about the crimes committed, and seek justice. In both countries, theater became a bridge between commission officials, human rights workers, and the people who had experienced the worst violence.

TxI: Argentina

In the late 1970s, women across Argentina responded to the abduction of their children and grandchildren by organizing groups such as *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* and *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* (Mothers and Grandmothers of the disappeared). These groups sought to discover the fate of their missing relatives, to reunite them (or their remains) with their families, and to resist the violent practices of dictatorship. According to Varea, “These groups also pioneered the use of theatrical or ritual means by common citizens to carry

their message of pain, outrage, and civil disobedience to authoritarian rule.” Their silent weekly demonstrations on public plazas are known throughout the world.

More than thirty years after their founding, the Grandmothers are still looking for their children’s children, who had been abducted as babies or were born into captivity. In 2000, the Grandmothers invited theater artists to create plays to reach out to the grandchildren—now adults—who might be uncertain about their true identities. The response to this invitation turned into a multi-city festival of plays called Theater for Identity (TxI).

TxI is a unique and successful collaboration between human rights activists and artists. The festival is an annual event, reaching thousands of spectators each year.

Yuyachkani: Peru

In 2001, after a brutal civil war in which indigenous Peruvians were caught in the cross-fire between a government that assumed dictatorial powers and revolutionary guerrillas, the transitional government of Peru established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to begin the process of building peace. The TRC’s goal was to establish facts and responsibilities regarding the attacks and disappearances that had taken place. The TRC traveled throughout the most devastated areas of the country to hold *audiencias*—public hearings—offering the victims and survivors an opportunity to testify to their experiences of terror and loss. The TRC, understanding that many Peruvians would be skeptical of an officially appointed commission, sought assistance from a theatre company, *Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani*.

Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani played a crucial role in supporting these victims and survivors and preparing them to tell their stories. According to Varea, “*Yuyachkani* [was] famous for productions that combined the political theatre aesthetics of Bertolt Brecht and the anthropological theater approach of Eugenio Barba with rigorously researched adaptations of the *performative* forms of indigenous—particularly Andean—Peruvian culture.” Over several decades, *Yuyachkani* had built up trust with Andean communities through performances that represented their plight and drew on their cultural forms. They were thus able to go ahead of the TRC into the communities that had experienced the worst of the state-sponsored terror. Their goal was “to inform the population about the TRC’s mission and its imminent arrival.” Through vigils, marches, installations, rituals, and performances, *Yuyachkani’s* artists helped prepare villagers to share their painful stories with each other and with the TRC.

Building Peace

“The acting of the healing play,” says Varea, “*re-presents* the violent interruption, offering a community a context in which to place it within the flow of the larger story. Performance *creates* a complex but accessible language to speak the seemingly unspeakable.”

Yuyachkani and TxI have both used performance to reach out to people who have experienced violence, trauma, and loss—to give voice and shape to their experiences, their grief, and their hopes.

TxI has contributed to justice in a very concrete way: through the festival, the Grandmothers have already reunited 96 out of approximately 500 abducted children with their families. In a broader sense, TxI has also inspired Argentines to seek the truth and to participate in redefining their nation. Each year, the TxI festivals emphasize the communal nature of self-reflection, of identity-building, and of ethical action—all elements of peacebuilding—and clearly these themes have struck a chord. The 2007 TxI festival drew more than 2,500 people to the theaters every Monday for three months in Buenos Aires alone. TxI has helped people to realize “that the question of identity is not just for those looking to be reunited with their families, but indeed, it is a national issue.”

In Peru, *Yuyachkani* has made a significant link between marginalized, victimized people and official efforts at national peacebuilding. Dr. Salomón Lerner Febres, the president of Peru’s TRC, notes the ways in which *Yuyachkani*’s aesthetic forms have been uniquely able to help victims and survivors of violence begin to heal. Their work, he says, draws on ancient rituals

dealing with reconciliation, healing, and justice, that seek solutions in a symbolic way, but that address very real circumstances in [people’s] lives...In most of the villages in rural Peru victims and perpetrators have to live with each other. In some cases, there are people who actually played both roles. I believe that art can be a kind of catalyst, to help us express the inexpressible. These are experiences at the same time so painful and so personal, and in addition, [experienced] by people who still likely live in fear and pain, that finding the right language to allow them to speak up is critical.

More from “Fire in the Memory”:

- In “Fire in the Memory,” Varea provides a more detailed account of the work of Yuyachkani and TxI, including vivid descriptions of Yuyachkani’s pieces *Rosa Cuchillo*, *Adios Ayacucho*, and *Antígona*.
- Varea also calls on a number of cultural and community leaders in Argentina and Peru to lend their voices to the stories he tells. He includes excerpts from writings and interviews with luminaries such as Ernesto Sabato (Novelist and President of the Argentine Commission on the Disappearance of Persons), Salomón Lerner Febres (philosopher and president of Peru’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission), Nora Strejilevich (Argentine author, scholar, and survivor), Adolfo Perez Esquivel (Nobel Peace Prize winner), Estela de Carlotto (president of *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*), and Gisella Ortiz (Peruvian human rights activist.)