

Phantom Pain: From Absence Dearest Memories Are Born

Abstract

Phantom Pain is a creative practice research project addressing the extinction of indigenous languages as a consequence of the marginalization of ethnic groups. Specifically, this project focuses on the history of Sirionó people in Bolivia, and how their struggle to maintain its language, almost on the verge of extinction, can be related to physical trauma if society is understood organically as a body. Seeking to mirror the speed, inevitability and impact of language loss, document conservation and restoration techniques were reversed in order to accelerate the destruction of the artwork itself.

Keywords

Linguistic Diversity, Language Loss, Endangered Languages, Creative Practice Research, Physical Trauma, Indigenous Cultures, Restoration.

Introduction

Although there is notable discussion in how languages represent the world with greater or lesser degrees of accuracy and distinction, it is commonly accepted that they nevertheless constitute an undeniable form of knowledge for that specific world (Orman, 2013). Every language is essential by the sole fact of its own existence, and among multiple reasons that can be argued in favor of their importance, I chose here to remark Kristeva's understanding of language functions as a "carrier wave of anamnesis." Not hyperbolically, the loss of languages implies the disappearance of a cultural trove that encodes a unique epistemological point of view. The vitality, versatility and stability of each language promote the rights of their speakers to participate in the global community on and in their own terms (Hornberger, 1998).

According to the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing, published in 2002 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), half of the 6,000 or so languages spoken in the world will disappear by the end of this century. In the case of indigenous languages, it's only certain that their precarious situation is part of a much wider context, whereas politically dominant languages and cultures "embattle" them to the point of endangerment (Hale, 1992). Indigenous languages are deemed worthy of preservation not only because their specificity and importance from an academic/scientific perspective, but mainly because what is at stake for their speakers is beyond mere linguistics: social recognition, political autonomy and economical freedom. The link between sociopolitical power and language use is

not new; Roman historian Tacitus highlighted it centuries ago when he wrote: "The language of the conqueror in the mouth of the conquered is ever the language of the slave." (May, 2017) In sum, languages loss processes are deeply shaped by cross-cultural encounters and post-colonial domination.

The Loss of a Limb

Classical sociological thought (Comte, Spencer, Durkheim) introduced the organismic analogy of society as a living being (the critique of this theory, mainly by Max Weber and his rejection of supra-individual concepts, and later by functionalism, is out of reach for the purpose of this paper). Early as Comte, society was characterized by an order found amongst families, classes and cities, or the internal organs of the social organism. These organs are contained by religious communities, labor division and, most importantly, by linguistic communalities. In the late 19th century, Spencer added to the former concept the principles of evolution, equilibrium, and dissolution (Dunn, 2016), establishing further parallelisms between society as a biological and psychological entity. For him, the parts that constitute both organisms and societies can live on after the death of the whole, and by extension, they also can keep on living regardless the disappearance of some of their constituent parts.

Following this analogy, a linguistic community is then a constituent part of a society, and its extinction would amount to the loss of a limb. As argued by Bohórquez, the imposition/acquisition of languages, in detriment of one's own language, which can be traced to a process of external or internal colonization, provokes a "profound disorganization of the socio-symbolic coordinates that ground the subject's sense of selfhood" (Bohórquez, 2009). The loss of a limb is an obvious trauma, and in the same manner the disappearance of any language inflicts a permanent scar on its society history and memory.

French military surgeon Ambrose Pare was the first to report phantom pain phenomena in the mid-sixteenth century, but until the 19th century the term "phantom" came to be widely accepted (Murray, 2010). Not anymore a medical mystery, modern research on phantom limb pain (PNP) supports its existence as a real and organic pain. This condition occurs after a peripheral nerve supply is disconnected from the central nervous system. The body part then, but not always, develops into a phantom pain. When this occurs, patients experience sadness, anger and an acute awareness of loss, leading to depression and isolation, but also, acceptance and hope. The same can be said for the speakers of an endangered language.

Sirionó People

The earliest record in Western historiography of the Sirionó people occurred in 1693 as recorded by the *Edifying and Curious Letters Written by Missionaries of the Society of Jesus*: “Shortly after, the saint discovered another nation. After traveling several days he found himself living with a group called Sirionó. At the moment when these barbarians perceived the Father, they readied their bows and were ready to shoot at him and his group of converts, but Father Cyprian moved toward them so kindly that arrows fell from their hands. He asked for some of them to remain in his group, and when he visit their settlements discovered another nation called the Guarayans” (Holmberg, 1950).

Various actors throughout history confined the Sirionós, nomadic hunters and gatherers, to limited geographical areas. A significant numbers of their people were sequestered in Jesuit missions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Then, in the nineteenth century, due to the rubber industry boom, entire families were separated and exploited in factories as slaves. In the early twentieth century it was the turn of the Franciscans and Evangelists, and in the thirties, finally, that of the Bolivian State. Sirionó traditions adapted under the risk of disappearing to new social, economic, political and spiritual demands.

In 1950, the American anthropologist Allan R. Holmberg published the results of his in-situ research: *Nomads of the Longbow: The Sirionó of Eastern Bolivia*. The perspective was such of his time: there was no empathy for the culture. He catalogued them as one of the most backward peoples of the world, unwilling to work, unable to take advantage of tools, superstitious, indifferent to myths, simplistic, lacking social stratification, and indifferent towards intellectual speculation.

At the time Holmberg visited the region, he failed to notice that the few Sirionó he had contact with were the remnants of a once three thousand people community, most of whom died from a flu epidemic in the early 20th century. Their culture reflected survival and scarcity. Still, Holmberg's book served as an academic reference for several years to address the cultures of other indigenous peoples. Nevertheless, the so-called 'Holmberg's mistake' (the supposition that Native Americans lived in an eternal, un-historized state, without ability to act) remained in force and even fanned out to pop culture (Mann, 2005).

In the late 20th century, various Sirionó groups united to demand from the Bolivian government a complete vindication of their culture and territory. In 1997, they were given just over 52,000 hectares (520 km²) thanks to a grassroots movement that started with the Indigenous March for Territory and Dignity, which took 34 days to arrive to La Paz. In the same decade, the Assembly of Sirionó People, their highest body of political decision, and the Sirionó Indigenous Council, were established. Through them, the defense of their territory, the use of economic resources and other issues such as conflict resolution and education were pursued.

Today, Sirionó people live in Beni's province of north-

western Bolivia, in Ibiato and Pata de Águila. Around five hundred families are the only speakers of Sirionó in the world. Adults and the elderly speak Sirionó and although children learn and study it is not their daily use language. Funds have been allocated to translate books and educational materials into Sirionó, in order to promote its use and conservation. Still, their language, like many others from Alaska to Patagonia in the American continent, has a rather uncertain future: like a stream without force, it narrows as years pass.

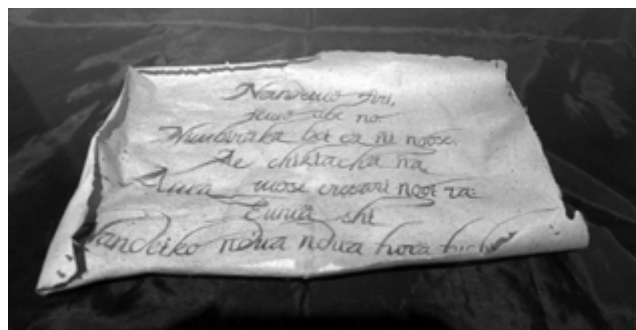


Fig 1. Rodrigo Azaola, Phantom Pain, 2016, IX International Art Biennale SIART, La Paz, Bolivia, 2016. ©Rodrigo Azaola.

Phantom Pain

Literature for loss limb patient is abundant. Following an amputation, an individual lives with a new reality, in which physical and psychosocial challenges need to be addressed. Body image and self-concept are the main psychosocial stressors (Desmond, 2008). Having in mind the analogy of language loss/limb loss I noticed that literature for patients focus on how to foster adjustment and adaptation, i.e., how to reach again psychosocial equilibrium, self-esteem, self-concept, and self-regard. Reinterpreting common concepts drawn from the literature reviewed, I wrote a poem for its translation into Sirionó.

We are somehow different,
but everyone is.
There is no victory without loss
Nor heroes without defeat.
Let time do its work:
From absence
dearest memories are born.

Given the status of Sirionó as an endangered language (Haen, 2015; Crevels, 2012; according to Gasparini & Dicarere Mendez, 2015, there are perhaps 40 people that can speak the language in a creative way), I decided to take upon that condition as a materiality prerequisite for the artwork. How could an object vanish at a predictable, if regrettable, inexorable rate?

Interdisciplinarity

I sought the assistance of Dr. Noé Gasparini, leading scholar in Sirionó language, from the University of Lyon Laboratoire Dynamique Du Langage, to translate the poem. Different considerations emerged that ultimately modified

the meaning of the poem. According to Dr. Gasparini, some concepts from the poem were simply not translatable, due to the lack in Sirionó language of existential sentences ("there is no..."). Moreover, the expression of general ideas without participants occurs very seldom. Also, Sirionó does not have concepts such as heroic, time or absence. Gasparini wrote to me: "I'm not sure how to translate *We are different* since the closest approach would be *We are unique*, implying diversity in uniqueness." All these considerations were taken into account to consolidate a new version, and with it, a Sirionó translation:

We are, and so are you,
a little bit different.
I'm surprised of not always
being able to be strong.
One can lose oneself.
In rain season, tears fall:
In nothingness,
our memories will be good.
Nandemö jiri,
jëmö abe no.
Nimbiräkä bei eä ñi ngose.
Ae chikiachä ña.
Ama mose eresari ngoi ra:
Emuä shi
Nandeiko ndua ndua turä tuchi je.

María del Pilar Tapia López is the leading researcher of the Documents and Graphic Works Workshop at the Mexican National School of Conservation, Restoration and Museography. In collaboration with her workshop, paper and ink were manufactured in order to accelerate the rate the destruction of the document in which the aforementioned poem was written. Attracted by the unusual task at hand, the workshop participants came up with a set of solutions. First, based in the recipe of the anonymous "A Booke of Secrets: Shewing diues waies to make and to prepare all sorts of Inke, and Colours" (London, 1596), fifteen milliliters of iron gall ink (its acidic range is equivalent to a lemon or black coffee) were produced. For the paper sheets, a special ground wood pulp was developed, due to its impurities that cause discoloration and weakening of the material (Bajpai, 2012). Finally, *Aspergillus* spores, known by its remarkable capacity to dissolve cellulose, were obtained from an 18th century infected book. *Aspergillus* is a group of fungi (asexual and non-motile) that is implicated in the bio-deterioration and degradation of documents (Pinzari, 2010). Such spores were sprinkled over the highly acidified paper and the ink.

In addition to these elements, other externalities were considered to quicken the deterioration of the document. Humidity levels were incremented through careful water sprinkling over the document, and as the artwork was located under a direct natural light source, heat was also present several hours per day. Fungus growth is a common feature in humid and hot environments. Spores start producing fungus cell walls, and its expansion consumes the material from the surface on which it grows (Prajapati,

2005). Paper becomes fluffy and moistened, colored with stains.



Fig 2. View of pulp and paper development at the Documents and Graphic Works Workshop at the Mexican National School of Conservation, Restoration and Museography. ©Rodrigo Azaola.



Fig 3. View of the 18th century infected book from which *Aspergillus* spores were obtained. ©Rodrigo Azaola.

Finally, over this period, I became acquainted with Miliacia Eato Mano, Ibiato human rights specialist and lawyer and later President of the Sirionó Indigenous Council. Through her, I got a very accurate and actual status of the Sirionó language. For them, there is no doubt whatsoever about the need to preserve not only their language but also their traditions. She informed me that some teachers were studying the language, and from early childhood to high school, Ibiato children were taught Sirionó. Some pedagogical texts and the Bible have been translated, and there is more interest in the language since it was recognized as an official language of the Plurinational State of Bolivia. Indeed, since 1994, the reform of the Bolivian Constitution asserted the multiethnic and multicultural character of the country, as well as various indigenous collective rights, and in the 2007 Constitution all Bolivian indigenous languages were recognized as official languages (Crevels, 2012). In 2016, in Ibiato, the Sirionó Language and Culture

Institute was established. Nevertheless, Sirionó language remains severely endangered, as it lacks transgenerational transmission.

Phantom Pain was exhibited at the SIART Biennale (La Paz, Bolivia) in 2016. Due to the combined effect of the paper and ink acidity, and the action of *Aspergillus*, the calligraphy became unreadable after a few days, and within a fortnight the paper disintegrated. Its disappearance coincided with the time frame -every two weeks- in which it is estimated that one of the six thousand languages spoken on Earth disappears.

Conclusion

Socioeconomic interests, globalization and encroaching Western society (Crevel, 2015) are among the factors by which most indigenous communities are experiencing language shift (the use of a language being replaced by another) and language loss today (Lane & Makihara, 2017). Indigenous cultures in the Americas have been perpetually neglected and marginalized. The official discourse for the integration of indigenous peoples originates in a hegemonic position in which the poles are autonomy and perpetuation of poverty, or assimilation and consequent disappearance of the identity. Official processes to strengthen indigenous cultures, be they political, economic, cultural or linguistic, yield, at best, mixed results.

Phantom Pain aimed to integrate the undeniable fact of language loss, derived from a long legacy of marginalization, into an artwork that could physically render the notion of decay and disappearance. As argued, language is a constituent part of the society/body, and its loss equals both for an individual and for any society a profound change and acute disorganization within the sense of selfhood.

Creative writing, linguistics and scientific restoration and conservation techniques were integrated into an artwork that reflects on the political and cultural legacies affecting the survival of indigenous languages and cultures. Parallelisms between limb loss rehabilitation literature and the challenges that endangered languages societies face, were used to highlight aspects of individuals and societies trying to cope with a traumatic episode. Facing loss, the possibilities for growth and learning are emphasized as a palliative to memories of a time that cannot be recreated. However, the extinction of any language leaves a body –a society– mute and incomplete, unable to communicate unique experiences, resulting in the impoverishment of humanity as a whole.

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