

# **The Politics of Archiving Ephemera in Times of Crisis: The Case of the “Mourning Archive,” a research project on the mourning rituals in the aftermath of March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2004 train bombing in Madrid<sup>1</sup>**

Cristina Sánchez-Carretero, Spanish National Research Council

**Paper prepared for the conference “Culture Archives and the State: Between Nationalism, Socialism, and the Global Market,”  
May 3-5, 2007, Mershon Center, Ohio State University, USA.**

*Abstract:* In the aftermath of the March 11th attacks in Madrid train stations, a group of anthropologists from the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC) started a project that documents and analyzes the public performances of grief and protest conducted after the attacks. In addition to the testimonies, photographs of the shrines, and other materials produced by the research team, CSIC and Madrid’s regional train system (RENFE) signed an agreement in 2005 allowing for the donation to the Mourning Archive of materials that citizens had left in the train stations. This project has two goals. First is the organization of these materials that document acts of mourning. The second objective is the analysis of collective responses to the violence, utilizing as sources the most immediate expressions of mourning in the aftermath of the attacks and in-depth interviews with diverse groups involved in the event. In the case of Madrid, the mourning rituals performed at various train stations, together with public anti-terrorist demonstrations, constituted an arena for public debate and political change. In this presentation, I will concentrate on the actions triggered at these performative memorials and the role of archives in constructing the memory of traumatic events.

“We will experience our present differently in accordance with  
the different pasts to which we are able to connect the present.”  
Paul Connerton (1989: 2)

We are living in times when performances of grief of "the other" are constantly consumed via mass media and, at the same time, our own grief tends to be minimised as mourning rituals are simplified and taken care of by professionals of death, dying, and mourning. And, yet, while all this is happening, we are witnessing "other" mourning rituals, other forms of expressing social wounds such as the one produced by the train attacks in Madrid on March 11, 2004. In this presentation, I will concentrate on the social healing processes activated after a traumatic event—such as the March 11<sup>th</sup>. train bombing---and the role of archives in constructing the

memory of social traumas. I will not be dealing with the direct grieving of the families of the victims, but with that of the citizens who expressed themselves at the stations and in the streets of Madrid.

Processes of grieving, memory building, and making sense of social trauma are materialized in public mourning in an extraordinary way. These performative memorials—using Peter Jan Margry's term—provide an arena in which the intersection of politics, mass media, the construction of memory, traumatic death, and mourning rituals in civil spaces can be analyzed. As Margry and Sánchez-Carretero explain,

Spontaneous shrines and memorials have turned into major focuses at times of trauma, danger and social unrest. These shrines continuously manifest new and more dynamic ways of representing collective identity. Since they reveal the steps that shape national memories as human beings struggle to come to terms with traumatic loss, it is the undirected performative dimensions of these memorial sites that make them so fascinating. In the interest of developing a truly dynamic public anthropology, we challenge our colleagues to help make sense of these events as they occur. (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2007: 2)

In the last decade, scholars have been conducting research on the reasons for and meanings of this massive personal and collective way of dealing with emotions connected to traumatic death (Grider 2000, 2001; Doss 2006; Haney et al. 1997; Fraenkel 2002; Santino 1992, 2006). In 1992, Jack Santino used the term "spontaneous shrines" to describe these places of memory and, as he points out, the word "spontaneous" is used to indicate their unofficial nature: nobody—church, the government, the media—tells the griever to place offerings at the shrines. These practices are not sanctioned by any institution, and citizens are their active subject. The word "shrine" is used by Santino because "these are more than memorials. They are places of communion between the dead and the living" (Santino 2006: 12). Memorials are frequently built as permanent monuments thinking of a future audience, whereas spontaneous shrines are ephemeral and target an immediate audience.

## **The Mourning Archive Project**

Madrid was transformed after March 11, 2004. The following day the streets were filled with massive mourning demonstrations. Since the day of the attack, offerings deposited at the train stations had appeared in the train stations and other emblematic sites in Madrid. They blanketed sidewalks, platforms, squares, and subway corridors. The columns at Atocha were palimpsests of messages addressed to God, the deceased, the victims, their families, terrorists, and politicians. These improvised debates used a rich variety of written and drawing genres: letters, songs, poems, prayers. In times when educational statistics say that people do not write or read very much, the written word took over public spaces. The shrines were lighted day and night for three months, and in June they were removed and substituted by cyber-shrines, a decision which was contested and fought for a while.

Massive gatherings and shrines flowered not only in Madrid but also in many cities throughout Spain as people mourned, memorialized, and prayed for the missing; they also confronted the conservative Government, headed by José María Aznar from the Partido Popular (PP). The Government had immediately blamed the Basque terrorist group ETA (and still now some insist on a conspiracy theory linking ETA and Islamist terrorism). The voting public punished the government's apparently deliberate omission, manipulation, and distortion of information at the polling booths the following Sunday, and the PP was not reelected. Civil society had confronted, reclaimed, and affirmed its right to accurate information from "its elected officials."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The description of the events is part of Sánchez-Carretero (2006).

The responses after the attacks produced results that depended upon the use of powerful tools from below and the strategic mechanisms available as arts of resistance (Scott 1990). E-mails and cellular text messages (SMSs) were sent all across Spain calling for a demonstration on Saturday March 13th, a day prior to the elections, in front of PP Headquarters, along with writings in the shrines, and shouting slogans at the demonstrations such as “con los muertos no se juega” (you cannot play with our dead people), “con los muertos no se manipula” (don’t manipulate our deceased), “antes de votar, queremos la verdad” (before voting, we want the truth), “¿quién ha sido? Europa ya lo sabe” (who did this? Europe already knows it), and “mentirosos, mentirosos” (liars, liars). At the same time, the train stations were transformed into public arenas of political/religious/grieving performances: a communicative performance that followed the pattern of other mass-mediated public memorializations of traumatic death, such as the Oklahoma City bombing’s shrines, those of September 11th, the shrines dedicated to anti-G8 protester Carlo Giuliani, killed in Genoa (Caffarena and Stiaccini 2005), the shrines following the Buenos Aires Cromagnon tragedy, or the shrines built after the death of Pim Fortuyn in Amsterdam (Margry 2007).

The attacks on March 11 in Madrid consisted of a series of bombs that were placed on commuter trains. In each of the four trains there were numerous explosions that killed a total of 191 people and injured more than 1900, one third of whom were foreigners. A week after the attacks in Madrid, a group of researchers from the Department of Anthropology at the CSIC started the project "El Archivo del Duelo" (The Mourning Archive) to document and analyze these mourning rituals and—by doing so—to participate in the construction of memory in times of crisis. This archive includes the documents and testimonies donated to the Spanish National

Research Council (CSIC) by anthropologists, historians, photographers, the Spanish National Train Company (RENFE), associations, and individual collaborators.

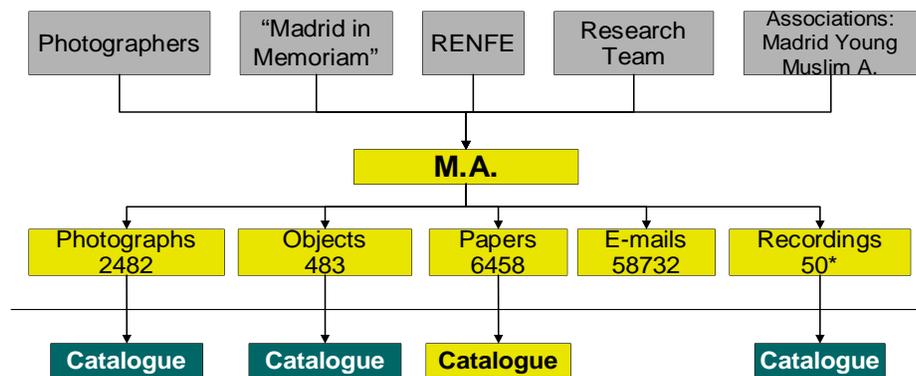
---

### **The Mourning Archive (M.A.)**

On-going phases: April 2007

Phases finished: April 2007

Donors:



---

The project has a two-fold objective:

1. The first consists of the organization of the materials of the project: photographs of the shrines, the actual objects deposited at the train stations and donated by RENFE, testimonies and all the ethnographic materials that are being "produced" as primary sources during our fieldwork (fieldnotes, audio and video recordings, etc), and 60,000 condolence e-mails sent to the train stations. Together with the various victims' associations, we have developed protocols to restrict the access to the materials, so that they are available only for educational and research purposes.
2. The second objective consists of the analysis of the responses to violence in the aftermath of the attacks from the perspective of the anthropology of violence; the

analysis of mourning rituals and the public memorialization of death; and understanding mourning as an expression in critical collective situations. The research team focuses along the following lines:

- a. Public responses to violence
- b. Public spaces and group expressions: Public memorialization of death
- c. Ethnoliterature
- d. Folk Religion
- e. Muslims' associations in Madrid and their responses to violence

The project is being developed according to the following specific activities:

1. Preparation of the project: to compare similar archives, prepare protocols, and design keywords
2. Conservation of the documents of the collection
3. Development of an inventory of materials
4. Description of the documents: Cataloguing and classification
5. Adaptation of the CSIC database to guarantee access to the Mourning Archive along with the rest of the CSIC collections
6. Ethnographic Fieldwork with victims' associations, train workers, social services, Muslims' associations etc.
7. Analysis of collective responses to the violence and the lines of research mentioned above
8. Transfer of the results and conclusions to the society at large.

### **The memory of *ephemera***

I would like to locate this project as part of a process of social construction of memory. The "consensus narratives" (Bowman 2001) after a social trauma leave many voices on the side

and one of the objectives of our project is to contribute to the construction of the memory of the attacks, incorporating the demonstrations of mourning that, due to their ephemeral and anonymous nature, often disappear. From this point of view, the researchers of this project have participated from the beginning in an active reflexive process of linking this archival project to a conscious effort of memory building, which is, indeed, a political position part of a process of the democratization of what is archivable and the legitimation processes involved.

The recent history of Spain and the silences regarding the repression conducted during Franco's dictatorship, only recently addressed, make it even more urgent to participate in the questions posed by Paul Connerton to understand how societies remember (1989). By documenting these performances of grief and protest as a location of memory, we are building future possibilities of connectivity to a recent past based on the voices of dissent/grief/frustration/love/solidarity, etc. In an individual mourning process, the silence or invisibility of what happened is a viable option. However, in the case of social traumas, if silence is the resulting way out, it means that this silence is instrumentalized because amnesia—even a partial amnesia—towards a social trauma responds to interests which do not belong to the agents whose voices were expressed in the improvised shrines at the stations.

### **Locality versus nation-building solidarity or grief as a citizen-gluing force**

"We all were in those trains" was repeated in various formats (shouted as a slogan, painted, printed, hand-written, in graffiti), and it implies that those participating in the performances of grief shared the same "territory of grief." The "we are all Madrid" is talking about being Madridian no matter where you come from. In fact, it is very interesting to note that "Madrid" (representing the concrete locality) allows a total, mutual self-identification: "We all experience the same things, we all were subject to the same threats," "We are you" ("we are all

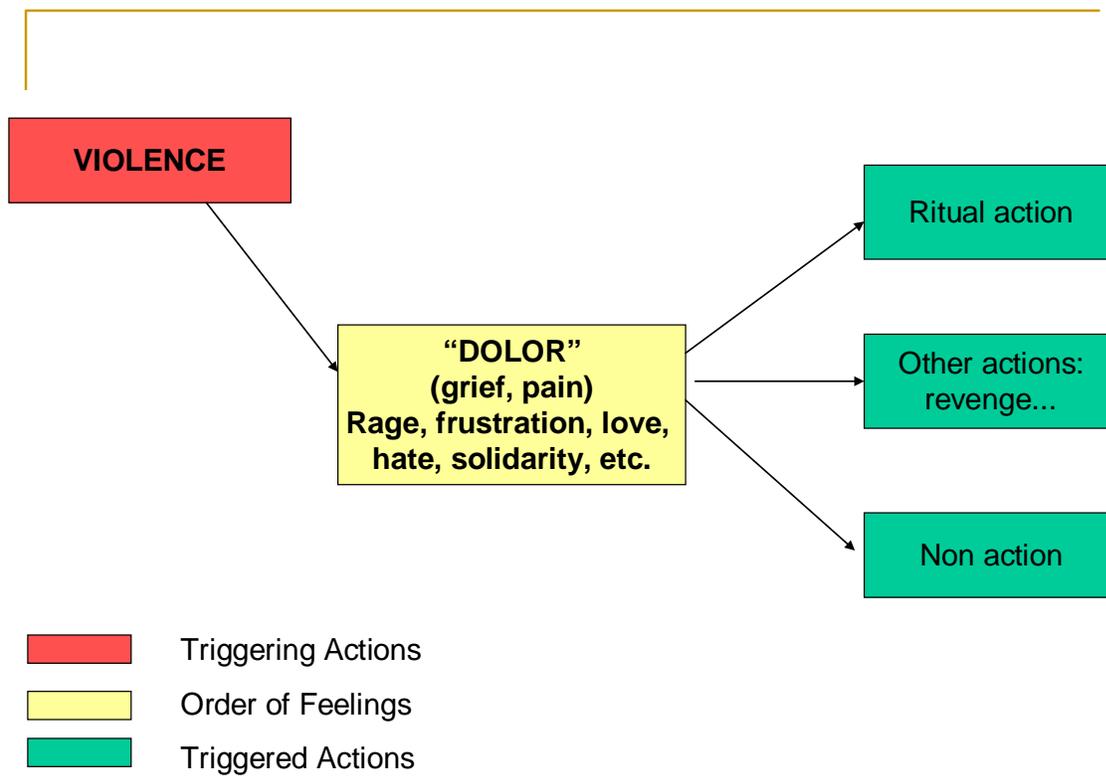
Madrid” or “We were all in those trains”). My thesis is that while the city, representing a particular locality, is inclusive in the sense that “all of us could be Madrid,” the level of the nation-state necessitates solidarity that, in part, constructs the opposition to other nation-states, reaffirming one’s own national identity while opposing the rest. Therefore, at the international level, identification is never complete because it entails its own opposition. The city, however, is an inclusive, experiential paradigm, allowing inhabitants to identify with others of different national background in terms of everyday life. The “We all were in those trains”—yelled at the demonstrations and repeated at the shrines—is also represented by the various nationalities that express their grieving in the shrines. The nationalities represented in them stress the idea of solidarity in the construction of the other: “We all were in those trains” continues with “we are all Madrid”, “*Brasil is Madrid,*” “*Colombia is Madrid,*” “*Romania is Madrid*” are examples repeated in many notes and graffiti at the stations. While the nation-states and different regions in Spain appear identified with Madrid, interestingly enough I could not find equivalent notes referring to Spain such as “We all are Spanish” but rather “We are WITH Spain,” “We love Spain,” or “We cry FOR Spain.” Therefore, individuals writing on behalf of nation-states express their condolences and solidarity to the nation-state of Spain without the total identification that appears in the case of the city: “I cry with you, Spain” implies, if we compare this sentence with the examples of the city, that “I am NOT you.”

The total identification via the common grief is represented in the mirror hung in a column in Atocha train station with the note: “*mírate: podías haber sido tú*” (look at yourself: it could have been you). These examples show the performances of grief as collective social trauma, as a wound inflicted on the whole group, which also needs specific mourning rituals. Analyzing these memorials from a performance perspective, as well as regarding the apparently

static enactment of the improvised memorials as a performative event in public space, makes clear that these memorializations of death are not only a question of expressing grief and sorrow, but to use that "structure of feelings" (Williams) to trigger new actions in the social or political sphere.

Which brings me to the PERFORMATIVE quality of spontaneous shrines: In Spanish the word DOLOR refers both to pain and grief, and it was one of the recurrent feelings expressed at the shrines--among many others, such as frustration, rage, hate, love, and solidarity. . *Dolor* belongs to the sphere of feelings, and it is expressed in actions. Ritual actions are a possibility among other actions and they can subsequently trigger new chains of actions. And here is where I want to stress the idea of the link between performances of grief and political action (and, of course, political instrumentalization).

The shrines are used as a means for performing and initiating changes. They are mechanisms of agency. This last aspect is especially relevant in the case of the Madrid attacks because the aftermath of "11M" provoked radical political consequences. The most immediate actions stimulated by these performative memorials are interpretation and participation. After reading one of the messages--and interpreting it--a person visiting the shrines decides if she wants to participate by adding another contribution, disagreeing, explaining, or polishing previous offerings. Participation, interpretation, and the possibility of a certain degree of agency point to the political nature of the spontaneous shrines. The shrines are, indeed, performative acts, in an Austinian sense, that can cause or imply an action. The performance of agency via the shrines--and other communication devices such as SMSs and e-mails--enabled actual political change at the level of government and demonstrates the potential of non-institutionalized or unofficial cultural practices.



Citizens do not place memorabilia or offerings at these sites only in memory of the deceased, but their acts imply a message asking for action: 'this should not have happened,' 'somebody has to take responsibility,' or simply 'a different world is possible.' The possibility of a different world without wars and violence is, indeed, a recurrent idea in most of the materials deposited at the Archive of Mourning.<sup>2</sup> The linkage of these performative memorials with particular actions is one of the common characteristics of various case studies of spontaneous shrines analyzed at a workshop on “The public memorialization of death: Spontaneous shrines as political tools” that took place at the last conference of the European Association of Social

<sup>2</sup> A key topic that needs further analysis is how concrete actions can develop into a praxis.

Anthropology.<sup>3</sup> By comparing various case-studies in Europe and the Americas, the workshop participants reached the conclusion that these globalized ways of mourning after a traumatic death share the common characteristic of asking for specific actions.

### **Influence of mass media**

I want to stress the relevant role of mass media in these performances of grief, not only as a part of the "material culture" of the shrines themselves but also in their influence in forging a model for these mourning rituals in public spaces. Mass media are part of our daily life and they reproduce reality while also producing and diffusing new ritual forms. After a tragedy like the March 11th attacks, what models of performative symbolic action do we have with which to face it? The most obvious answer would be the models portrayed by the mass media, and we need ethnographic accounts of the role of mass media in the creation of these globalized rituals.

On the one hand, spontaneous shrines indicate the globalization of ritual practices via mass media, in which the sacralization of public spaces is a defining element. On the other hand, these practices might indicate a return to collective formulas of mourning rituals incorporating death into public spaces. Non-industrialized societies used to incorporate death and grieving into the public arena, and it seems as if in the era of globalization we are returning to traditional mourning expressions --combined with mass media formulas-- as a strategy to develop new mourning rituals.

With most deaths, private mourning (in private but also public spaces such as the morgue, cemetery, or church) is enough, but in the case of tragic or sudden death, and even more in the cases when there is a social trauma, there is a reaction to that wound and the mourning rituals are built differently. Death turns --in those moments-- into the focus of social life while the current

---

<sup>3</sup> Peter Jan Margry and Cristina Sánchez-Carretero organized this workshop that took place at the EASA conference in Bristol, September 2006.

tendency is to minimize death in our lives. As Santino says "The shrines insert and insist upon the presence of absent people. They display death in the heart of social life. These are not graves awaiting occasional visitors and sanctioned decoration. Instead of a family visiting a grave, the 'grave' comes to the 'family' ---that is, the public. All of us. We are all family, mutually and interdependent" (Santino 2006: 13).

### **Collecting and archiving as legitimization process: The “democratization” of the collecting drive**

More and more this material culture is considered as part of the cultural heritage and--as related to the local or the national and to identity politics in general—is being collected and preserved (Caffarena and Stiaccini 2005; Gardner and Henry 2002, Sánchez-Carretero 2006). I locate the interest in these “other voices,” which are usually expressed ephemerally and anonymously, in a democratization process that is transforming academia. I think it is a different drive from the search for a nostalgic past that once occupied folklore studies. Both document “other voices,” but one of the differences between—what I call—the democratization of the collecting drive/impulse/fit, on the one hand, and the drive for collecting antiquities in the 19th century, on the other, is precisely that artifacts such as the offerings deposited at the train station are not relics of an almost disappearing past reconstructed—as all social memory is—in the present. Another difference consists of the reflexive aspect in terms of memory-building, a reflexivity which is located at the base of this project and was repeated in every meeting we had to search for support for the Mourning Archive.

The voices expressed at the stations implied a capacity to start actions using expressive ways of communication. To understand the political changes in Spain in 2004, one needs to understand the uses of the public spaces by civil society and the performative memorials as an

arena for political and religious debate. By organizing a project that documents these performative memorials, the members of our group participate in the possibility of constructing also future heritage. Heritage centres such as museums have a strong symbolic power in terms of the metacultural process of heritage formation. In the case of our archive, we are working in the opposite direction: we do not “rescue” the past from the present, but rather we participate in the metacultural process of adding value to what might constitute heritage in the future, leaving room for other voices that are expressed by civil society via informal modes of communication at the spontaneous shrines.

### **Bibliography**

- Alexander, J.C. (ed.) 2006. *Social Performance. Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Bowman, G. 2001. “Thinking the Unthinkable: Anthropological Meditations on the Events of 11 September 2001.” (Unpublished manuscript).
- Caffarena, F. and Stiaccini, C. (eds.) 2005. *Fragili, resistenti. I messaggi di Piazza Alimonda e la nascita di un luogo di identità collettiva*. Milano: Terre di Mezzo.
- Connerton, P. 1989. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Doss, E. 2006. Spontaneous Memorials and Contemporary Modes of Mourning in America. *Material Religion* 2(3): 294-319.
- Fraenkel, B. 2002. *Les Ecrits de Septembre: New York 2001*. Paris: Textuel.
- Gardner, J.B. and Henry, S.M. 2002. September 11 and the Mourning After: Reflections on the Collecting and Interpreting the History of Tragedy. *The Public Historian* 24(3): 37-52.
- Grider, S. 2000. The Archaeology of Grief: Texas A&M Bonfire Tragedy is a Sad Study in Modern Mourning. *Discovering Archaeology* 2(3): 68-74.
- Grider, S. 2001. Spontaneous Shrines: A Modern Response to Tragedy and Disaster. *New Directions in Folklore* 5 (<http://www.temple.edu/isllc/newfolks/shrines.html>).
- Haney, C. A., Leimar, C. and Lowery, J. 1997. Spontaneous Memorialization: Violent Death and

Emerging Mourning Rituals. *Omega* 35(2): 159-71.

- Margry, P.J. 2007. Performative Memorials: Arenas of Political Resentment in Dutch Society. In: Margry, P.J. and Roodenburg, H. (eds.) *Reframing Dutch Culture: Between Otherness and Authenticity*, 109-134. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Margry, P.J. and C. Sánchez-Carretero. 2007. "Memorializing Traumatic Death." *Anthropology Today* 23.3: 1-2.
- Sánchez-Carretero, C. 2006. Trains of Workers, Trains of Death: Some Reflections after the March 11th Attacks in Madrid. In: Santino, J. (ed.) *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*, pp. 333-347. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Santino, J. 1992. 'Not an unimportant failure': rituals of death and politics in Northern Ireland. In: McCaughan, M. (ed.), *Displayed in Mortal Light*. Antrim: Antrim Arts Council.
- Santino, J. 2006. Performative Commemoratives: Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death. In: Santino, J. (ed.) *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*, pp. 5-15. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.