

# Interview



# Memorializing Trauma: An Interview with John Patrick Thompson

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On November 6, 2014, Professor John Patrick Thompson (Montana State University- Bozeman) visited the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at UCLA. He presented a lecture entitled “Francoism, Novels, and Memorials: Reflections on a Research Trajectory in Spain,” in which he discussed his research on the traumatic consequences of Francisco Franco’s dictatorship, and how they have been represented in both literature and public monuments. The following day we sat down with Professor Thompson, taking this opportunity to ask him to expand upon the topics of his presentation.

Professor Thompson’s connection to Spain began in 1988, when his grandfather married a woman from Galicia. He attended the equivalent of twelfth grade while living with relatives in Santiago de Compostela, and then returned to Spain one year later to undertake *licenciatura* degrees in Hispanic and English Philologies at the University of Santiago de Compostela. In 2003, Thompson received his doctorate from the University of Michigan and has since worked at Montana State University-Bozeman, where he is currently an Associate Professor of Hispanic Studies. Taken together, he has lived in Spain for approximately ten years of his life, and likes to say that he is a product of the Galician diaspora.

**MESTER:** Could you comment on your personal and academic trajectory? How did you become interested in questions of trauma and memory in postwar Spanish literature and society?

John Thompson: My interest in the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship began the year I attended high school in Santiago de Compostela. I had hired a tutor, who talked to me about the injustices committed by the regime. I don’t remember the issue being brought up at school. During the five years that I studied at the University of Compostela, my interest continued, but it didn’t congeal into a

project. The curriculum of my Contemporary Spanish Literature course sidestepped the war, so I never read a novel or short story that dealt with the conflict. It's not that this subject matter was taboo at the university, but the idea that it could become the focus of an inquiry outside the field of History was completely off the radar.

At the University of Michigan, no one in the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures specialized in trauma studies and Francoism. Upon completing my third year of course work, I still hadn't come up with a dissertation plan. However, I had taken a course with Professor Javier Sanjinés on nationalism in Bolivia, which I especially liked because I was interested in national projects on the Spanish periphery. So, I requested a year of leave and went to Galicia to search for a dissertation topic. I realized that I needed to write on what I knew the best and what was most familiar (like Bolivia was for my Professor). My initial plan was to use Sanjinés' methodology to elucidate Galician nationalist treatises and movements, and I was hopeful that I could find something to rally behind. Nevertheless, although my studies on nationalism came in handy, this is not where my passion was or is.

In January 2000, not long after I had arrived in Spain to search for a thesis topic, someone lent me Manuel Rivas' novel *O lapis do carpinteiro* (*The Carpenter's Pencil*), which explores Francoist atrocities and the transmission of this memory to current day society. I had an epiphany: I could write on representations of the Second Republic, the Civil War, and the dictatorship in novels. I immediately searched for other novels written in Galician and discovered a mine. In fact, several of the works I found are substantially better than Rivas', but didn't get the recognition and marketing.

In the end, I examined four Galician novels in my dissertation, and dedicated one chapter to analyzing key social and political questions such as the Pact of Forgetting. I drew on theories from Holocaust studies and used relevant insights from Spanish and Galician historiography.

**M:** You mentioned that your book, *As novelas da memoria: trauma e representación da historia na Galiza contemporánea* (*Novels of Memory: Trauma and the Representation of History in Contemporary Galicia*), is the culmination of the line of investigation initiated in your dissertation. . .

JT: The novel, I argue, is the most apt medium for providing experiences of immersion in history. Spectators of a historical film can also live the past vicariously, but reading a novel is a longer and more intense activity. The thrust of my analyses was to gauge the effects that the novels' stories and imageries have on contemporary thought and praxis. My introductory thesis argues that in order for larger parts of society to become interested and involved in the commemorative process, social scientists need to bring the knowledge and memory of the Second Republic and the trauma caused by Francoism into dialogue with current social, political, and theoretical issues. Accordingly, I analyze the following questions in relation to the novels: the exhumations of common graves; postmodernism; Francoist fallacies that continue to determine society's understanding of the past; specter theory; the problematics involved in representing trauma; nationalism, feminism, and sexism.

**M: Why did you decide to publish your book in the Galician language?**

JT: Till now, I've published mostly in Galician and English. Last year I published my first article in Spanish and I'm currently writing a book in Spanish. I've lived in Galicia for ten years and that's where I feel at home. I defend the normalization of the Galician language, and I believe affirmative action policies are necessary for this. The current right wing Partido Popular de Galicia (PPdeG) government disparages the language and Galician identity. Only 30% of the population between the ages of five and fourteen utilize the language. The language will disappear unless the governing entities promote its use.

**M: On that note, regarding the use of the language in literature, do you think writing in Galician rather than Spanish has ideological implications?**

JT: Absolutely. Given that Galician is a non-normalized language, writing in Galician inescapably implies taking a political position. If one publishes in Galician, one is supporting the cause of the language. This has always been the case since the Rexurdimento when Rosalía de Castro composed *Follas Novas* (1880). The famous authors today, such as Manuel Rivas and Suso de Toro, publish in Galician. The novels are translated into Spanish, but not immediately, so that Galicians read them in Galician. Their translations, therefore, address a non Galician-speaking readership.

**M: Accordingly, what was your political position in writing *As novelas da memoria: trauma e representación da Historia* in Galician?**

JT: As I've mentioned, I've lived in Galicia for ten years and that's where I feel at home. I love the Galician language and Galicia. I'm a nationalist insofar as I believe in the normalization of the Galician language. A "normalized language" is the dominant language. "Harmonic Bilingualism" is a fallacy—that's what the Partido Popular de Galicia proclaims to defend. The reality is that in a situation of diglossia, one language always dominates. I defend affirmative action policies to normalize Galician. The current PPdeG government doesn't, and that's one of the main reasons why the language is losing more and more ground.

**M: What do you think was the most insightful part of your book?**

JT: Perhaps the part that addresses a core issue that intersects with the Galician national question. From the outset I knew I'd have to address the consequences that the commemoration of the Second Republic and Francoism have on the interpretation of Galician history and on the praxis of current day nationalist projects. An essential task was to become familiar with all Galician literary criticism. The two most renowned critics are Francisco Rodríguez (who is better known as being the de facto leader of the left wing nationalist party, Bloque Nacionalista Galego [BNG], for the last thirty years) and Xoán González Millán (who was a professor at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of CUNY). The general consensus was that these two critics defend opposite positions. While Rodríguez argues that Galician literature should follow a social realist path that denounces Spanish centralism, upholds Marxism, and dwells on the plight of the Galician working class, González Millán defends that literature should be able to encompass all genres.

However, in my book I point out that these two critics are very similar. Neither pays the slightest attention to literature that explores the Second Republic and Francoism, which was prominent in Galician literary production since the death of the dictator, and has been *the* most popular sub-genre from the 90's onward. So how could these two critics completely exclude this sub-genre from their writings? Despite their differences—Rodríguez is more dogmatic than González Millán—both imagine (and fantasize) Galicia as an independent entity from Spain. Literature that denounces the horrors caused by Francoism and upholds the projects and ideals of the Second Republic is a literature that ineluctably presupposes a bond between Galicia and

the rest of Spain. I affirm that these critics fabricate a historical narration, which reinforces the pact of silence hatched in the Transition to Democracy. Having said this, I don't claim that Galician nationalism *en masse* participates in this silencing or distortion of history. I'm referring to these canonical literary critics. Nationalists have been key in the commemorative process. From the late 70's until it closed in 2010, the newspaper *A Nosa Terra*—the voice of the nationalist BNG party—dedicated many issues to unearthing Franco's crimes. During the bipartite government (the coalition PSOE/BNG, which lasted from 2005 to 2009), the BNG (in charge of the Galician ministry of culture) carried out and supported a myriad of commemorative activities.

**M: You study the politics of memory in two areas of Galician culture and society: literature and public monuments. How do these artistic representations treat trauma differently?**

JT: Literature—in this case novels—offers much more intense intellectual and emotional experiences than public art or memory sites in general. One of the core premises of my book argues that the novel is the most apt medium for providing experiences of immersion in history. The experience offered by memorials is completely public. Literature is also public, but the reader reads in his or her intimacy while the spectator experiences the memorial in the open. Physical memory sites also aren't as complex. A memorial's text is always going to be much less sophisticated than a novelistic text. A memorial transmits a very concrete idea and is therefore more limited. The important facet of the memorials is not so much their aesthetic and the message they transmit, but their ability to help forge a memory site where people come together and re-work the past. Pierre Nora claims that a memory site is effective when a reciprocal over-determination between history and memory takes place. That is, people share their memories connected to a memorial, and these memories inspire historians to produce studies on the trauma that occurred at the site. And the other way around: historiographic studies help to undermine the fear and shame felt by those who suffered the trauma. Once the studies are published, witnesses come out and share the traumas that they and their loved ones endured. In that sense, historiography and oral memory feed off each other.

**M: Could you comment on your research on memory sites and post-Transition memorials that reclaim Republican ideals and denounce Francoist crimes?**

JT: It's striking that there is practically nothing published on this subject. There are several studies on Francoist monuments, but post-Transition memory markers have been ignored despite the fact that hundreds have been erected throughout Spain in the last fifteen years. In Galicia alone there are at least seventy. The concept of the memory site (or place of memory)—introduced through Pierre Nora's foundational study—has been explored and re-worked in Spain, but almost always through literature. Physical memoryscapes have largely gone unnoticed by social scientists. For this reason, determining my methodology for researching this project was a challenge. Once I located a few memorials, I was able to find the others mostly through word of mouth. I travel to the memorials, photograph and film them, and meet with the people involved in the initiatives to emplace them. I conduct film interviews, and at this stage I have approximately 250 hours of high definition interviews. Roughly 80% of my sources for this project are oral. I interview members of *asociaciones de memoria* (civic groups whose objective is to unearth and divulge knowledge of Francoist crimes), politicians, the artists, descendants of victims, and even right-wingers when they're willing, which isn't often. And I also have first hand witness testimonies. After completing the written tasks associated with this project, I'm going to make a documentary film.

**M: During your presentation, you commented on some of the positive consequences of monument making, yet you also highlighted the inadequacies, even failures, of many of the commemorative projects. Why are some memorials effective, and why do others fall short?**

JT: The phenomenon of erecting memorials has been successful insofar as it has created opportunities for activism, which resulted in the empowerment of grassroots communities and progressive political parties in the opposition that champion remembrance. In the case of many of these memorials, there was vicious rejection from the municipalities governed by both the PP and PSOE. These memorials ended up being successful because they empowered the *asociaciones de memoria* (who spearheaded or seconded the initiatives to erect the memorials) and the descendants of the victims.

It's also successful because these processes can help inform the general public about such issues. They informed many people of the atrocities committed by the Francoists; people who otherwise wouldn't have learned about them. The most successful cases I think

took place in A Coruña, a municipality governed at the time by the PSOE (today by the PP) that defended—and defends—fascist street names (Generalísimo Franco, Mola, etc.), a statue of Millán Astray, and some fifty other Francoist-related names and insignia that to this day have not been removed.

Furthermore, in the absence of a state sponsored politics of memory, it is only these grassroots initiatives that can provide some sense of public recognition and closure to the first and second generation witnesses of the war and the dictatorship.

However, except for those who participate directly in the emplacement of the memorials (the descendants of the victims dignified, the *asociaciones de memoria*, the supportive politicians), the rest of society, generally speaking, is not included. In other words, despite the beneficial consequences of monument making, all of the memorials fail to a considerable degree. Beyond the reasons I pointed out in my lecture—inappropriate emplacement, abandonment, lack of interpretive cues or inaccurate explanations on plaques, etc.—the primary reason for this failure resides in the lack of engagement with the public. For any commemorative project to work, the public has to be involved and have a stake in it. In the end, the memorials don't go far enough. They often provide relief to those directly affected, but they lack strategies for engaging the rest of society and future generations.

I'm proposing an approach to monument making that engages the public. In a new genre of public art, as practiced and theorized by the likes of Suzanne Lacy and Judith Baca, the artist and the community come together and co-create. The relationship between the artist and the community thus becomes the central part of the work of art. People move from being spectators (or perceivers) to collaborators. The counter-monument tradition upholds this tenet to a certain extent insofar as these monuments are designed to disappear after a certain time: the erroneous idea that a monument can embody eternal remembrance is mocked. But this new genre of public art moves beyond metaphorical engagement and forges processes of social activism. Judith Baca, the artist who led the *Great Wall of Los Angeles* project, proposes two working models: one in which the artist takes the images created by the community and gives life to them, and another that is a fully collaborative project, in which the community does the artwork. Right now I'm trying to organize a pilot new genre commemorative project in Galicia for next June. An *asociación de memoria* (of which

I'm a member) is supporting my initiative to hire an artist to lead this project. My role will be to organize and document the process, and I will use this documentation for a chapter in my next book.

**M:** Your interest in public monuments and memory sites in Galicia led to your most recent area of investigation, the controversial restoration of the island of San Simón, a famous memory site throughout Spain (especially in Galicia, Asturias and Euskadi). Could you tell us about this project?

**JT:** San Simón was a prison colony from the beginning of the fascist coup in 1936 until 1943. Approximately five thousand Spaniards were imprisoned here. Afterwards, the island was abandoned for decades. There were plans to turn it into a yacht club during the dictatorship and shortly thereafter, but these plans failed. In 1986, however, architect César Portela published a project proposal for restoring the island's buildings and landscape. The Xunta (The Galician autonomous government, headed by the PPdeG) hired Portela in 1997 to execute his plan. Finished in 2005, the island now displays a combination of voguish architecture, sculptures, and nature enhancement, which offer visitors a pleasurable experience. Portela writes in depth about his practical and aesthetic objectives in his master plans and in other publications. The renovation of San Simón and its ideological underpinning are an apology to the premises of the Pact of Forgetting brokered in the Transition to Democracy between members of the dictatorship and the opposition. The suppression of memory, according to these premises, will lead to happiness and prosperity. Dozens of the authors who write on Portela's project parrot this message, yet nothing has been published on the erasure or distortion of Spanish memory sites by private and/or political interests. For example, the bullring in Badajoz—where some 2,000 Republicans were executed in two days in 1936—was demolished in 2002, and no one has investigated this event. There have been criticisms, but it hasn't become an object of analysis. It's the same situation with the Island of San Simón, plus dozens of ex-concentration camps, jails, and other *lieux de mémoire*. A key component to this project is my examination of recent official documentation—namely letters sent from the Xunta to the Spanish Ministry of Environment and vice-versa—that proves that Portela and the Xunta attempted to turn San Simón into a spa resort. The project fell through because of the Coast Law (La Ley de Costas).

**M:** In the conclusion of your lecture, you mentioned that part of your interest in the recovery of memory in Spain is a reflection of a personal need for “civic activism” in response to the growing dominance of amnesia vis-à-vis the trauma caused by fascism. How do the current generations in Spain partake in this activism, and how can future generations be brought into the commemoration?

**JT:** The core element of my research, which makes it a life commitment for me, is its usefulness for democracy. We know with certainty that an anti-Francoist culture is a prerequisite for current and future democratic thought and praxis. This is a huge challenge because of the growing indifference vis-à-vis the Second Republic, the Civil War, and the dictatorship, especially among the emerging fourth generation. The challenge we face is how to devise new strategies to bring the fourth and future generations into the commemoration process. I often hear and read that the reason why much of the third and fourth generation is indifferent to the Civil War is because of the increasing time gap. In effect, there *is* a time gap that de-familiarizes the events. Nonetheless, this element is exaggerated, since there are still plenty of witnesses of the war. Last summer I interviewed a man who saw the Republican mayor of his village shortly before the Falangists murdered him. The mayor was tied to a horse’s tail; he was bloody and cried out for help. This man was only twelve when he witnessed this, but what he saw was real. He said to me: “I was only twelve, but that incident burned itself onto my memory.” Living witnesses play a crucial role in bridging the time gap and re-familiarizing the events.

The main reason for the young generation’s indifference vis-à-vis Francoist atrocities resides in its dismissive consideration of the Republican generation. The famous phrase “I’m sick of my grandfather’s battles” denotes a de-authorization of those who fought for the Second Republic. The lies fabricated by the Franco regime in regards to Republicanism were tolerated during the Transition to Democracy, and are still upheld by the right wing and significant sectors of the so-called socialist party, PSOE. As a consequence, the distortions and silences have been passed down to the youth. Our challenge is to reverse that trend.

