Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death

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Chapter 15

Trains of Workers, Trains of Death: Some Reflections after the March 11 Attacks in Madrid*

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“Dreams about nations produce monsters, why?
Trains of workers, trains of death,
We, Romanians are close to Madrileños, to Spaniards in these days of pain”

—Anonymous note placed in a column at Atocha train station (3/18/04)

Madrid was transformed after March 11, 2004. The following day the streets were filled with massive numbers of mourning demonstrators. Since the day of the attack, spontaneous shrines had appeared in the train stations and other emblematic sites in Madrid. They blanket ed sidewalks, platforms, squares, and subway corridors. Spontaneous gatherings and shrines flowered not only in Madrid but also in many cities throughout Spain as people mourned, memorialized, and prayed for the missing; and 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 (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna [“Basque Homeland and Liberty”]) for the attacks. Finally, after two and a half days of evidence to the contrary, the government confirmed what had already been stated in international and nongovernmental by controlled media: the attack was perpetrated by Islamist terrorists. The voting public punished the government’s apparently deliberate omission, manipulation, and distortion of
information at the polling booths the following Sunday and, contrary to all predictions, the PP was not reelected. Civil society had confronted, reclaimed, and affirmed its right to accurate information from its elected officials.

The popular responses—the reactions of the people—after the attacks produced results that depended upon the use of powerful tools and the strategic mechanisms available as acts of resistance: e-mails and cellular text messages (SMS) were sent across Spain calling for a demonstration on Saturday, March 13, the day before the elections, in front of PP Headquarters. These were reinforced by the writings at the shrines, and by slogans shouted 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), “mentirosos, mentirosos” (liars, liars).

The spaces of civil sacralization created after the attacks in Madrid follow the pattern of collective mourning after massacres, such as September 11, and deaths of emblematic personalities, such as Princess Diana, but with their own particularities due to the political effects in terms of popular agency. The spontaneous shrines in Madrid are part of the political sphere developed after the attacks and cannot be understood outside the context of the general elections held three days after the train massacres (see figure 15.1).

On Friday, March 12, men and women took to the streets and cried together after the attacks in the train stations of Atocha, El Pozo, and Santa Eugenia (Madrid). Instead of staying at home, people used public spaces to express nation-wide solidarity with the victims. What does a folklorist do when a whole country steps out of its homes to voice its anger and express its grief via a morning parade of 11 million people? What is the role of the ethnologist—and scholars in general—in times of crisis? In a sense, this article is a modest answer to this question. I am presenting here an early work-in-progress on the spontaneous shrines built after the attacks at Madrid that took place on March 11. In particular, I will concentrate on the representation of various nationalities in the shrines, while presenting the research project developed at the Department of Anthropology at the Spanish Council for Scientific Research (CSIC) to document those shrines and the collective mourning after the attacks. After March 11, hundreds of shrines were placed at the train stations where the bombings took place. The following week a group of researchers from the CSIC sent out e-mails to anthropologists, folklorists, sociologists, and community-based workers asking for help in collecting various materials from the shrines, testimonies, e-mails related to the attack, and any other mourning-related materials.
Of the three steps that are included in the formation of an archive (compiling, cataloguing and making it accessible to the public) we at CSIC are in the first one. At the time of this writing, May 2004, various collaborators have donated more than 2000 stills of the shrines (including poems, letters, candles, and various kinds of displays at the train stations) along with other artifacts: t-shirts sold at the shrines to collect money for the victims, stamps with black ribbons, and a collection of e-mails that were sent as mourning messages. Each photograph, tape, or artifact is accompanied by logs that document the context, content, and technical data (following the model used by the Folklife Center at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC). Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett asks in her piece on September 11, “How do you collect a present that is already historical?” (2003: 17). Collecting and archiving pieces of the present that are ephemeral and, at the same time, are everywhere and are part of a consciousness that one is in a historic moment raises many difficulties that we are just starting to face: Which testimonies should be recorded? Which rumors? Should the political e-mails and SMSs that people sent and blocked computers and cellular phones on March 13, a day prior to the general elections in Madrid, be included in an archive of mourning?
The attacks on March 11 in Madrid consisted of a series of bombs that were placed on commuter trains: four bombs and four trains, all of them on the Alcalá-Madrid line. The first train left Alcalá at 7:00 in the morning, followed by the others at 7:05, 7:10 and 7:15 AM, during rush hour for commuters. The bombings took place between 7:36 and 7:39 AM in Santa Eugenia, El Pozo, and Atocha. In each train there were numerous explosions that killed a total of 191 people and injured more than 1900, one third of whom were foreigners. A police officer died a few days later.

Both the “when” of this attack (at 7 AM on a weekday) and the “where” (working-class residential areas outside Madrid) indicate that most of the people who traveled in those trains were workers: construction workers, waiters and waitresses, domestic workers, and some students. Fortunately, a university strike was held that day and the number of students traveling was much lower than on other days.

The shrines at the four epicenters (Atocha, El Pozo, Santa Eugenia, and Alcalá) displayed different characteristics regarding their structure. Atocha is one of the main train stations in Madrid and it had more and longer-standing shrines. Atocha is in fact a cosmopolitan train station. While Atocha’s shrines can be considered ecumenical representations of a combination of tourists and daily commuters, the shrines in El Pozo, Santa Eugenia, and other train stations of the line, such as Alcalá, showed more personal links to the victims (see figure 15.2).

El Pozo, for instance, is a local neighborhood. The name “El Pozo” is synonymous with revolutionary uprisings and riots during Franco’s dictatorship, poverty that nurtured communist and labor movements, and unpaved streets until the 1980s. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it has a high number of housing projects with almost 10 percent of the residents immigrants primarily from Latin America and Eastern Europe (Madrid Datos 2004: 2) (see figure 15.3).

Due to the different locations of the bombings, pilgrimage was one element of the mourning process. In the first weeks, visitors to the shrines went from one train station to another, producing a certain kind of pilgrimage. At the same time, there was an institutional pilgrimage by political representatives, religious figures, and other famous people, such as soccer teams. For instance, after the royal wedding between Prince Felipe and Letizia Ortiz, many international political figures stopped by the shrines to pay their respects. In addition to the spontaneous shrines, various institutionalized memorials are being constructed (“El bosque de los ausentes” in Atocha, a plaque in Sol dedicated to the public services that
Figure 15.2  Shrines at Atocha train station.
Photo by: Cristina Sánchez-Carretero.

Figure 15.3  Shrines at El Pozo train station.
Photo by: Cristina Sánchez-Carretero.
helped during those days, and a sculpture commissioned in memory of Antonio López to be placed in Atocha).  

However, those institutionalized memorials are different from the spontaneous shrines. I use the word “spontaneous,” following Santino, “to indicate its unofficial nature and the word ‘shrine’ because these are more than memorials. They are places of communion between the dead and the living” (Santino, this volume). Some of the graffiti written at the train stations was, indeed, addressed directly to the deceased. In addition, there was also a spontaneous organization to keep the candles lit and the sites clean. For example, in El Pozo a group of women in their late fifties were taking care of the shrines. In Atocha, there were candles lit all night during the first few weeks. After a month, the cleaning services of the station took on the role of cleaning the empty containers of the candles.

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. Participation, interpretation, and the possibility of opening up a space for a certain degree of agency point to the political nature of the spontaneous shrines. The shrines are, indeed, performative acts, that can cause or imply an action (see introduction to this volume by Jack Santino). 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 demonstrate the potential of non-institutionalized or unofficial—but popular—cultural practices.

In addition to personal memorabilia, the banners used in the demonstrations against terrorism, and against the government for its deceptions, were also attached to the shrines (see figure 15.1). The demonstration against terrorism on Friday 12 had a general meaning of honoring the deceased in public (11 million people, out of a population of 40 million, participated in these demonstrations). The traditional moment of silence was interrupted by groups yelling: “Habamos todos en ese tren” (“We all were in that train”). Other calls addressed the president of Spain, Aznar, asking for an explanation before the general election: “Antes de votar, queremos la verdad” (“Before we vote, we want the truth”). Along with the demonstrations, the shrines were also used as a political arena with clear effects on the elections of March 14, in which Aznar’s party was not reelected. The walls of the train stations were used to voice ideas or reject those expressed by others. The capacity to invite participation and interpretation is due to the polysemy inherent in these assemblages (Santino 1986) and the multivocality over time, because the postings are responded to, adding—in a dialogic way—new meanings. Interestingly, the shrines, the demonstrations, and the writings all were parts of a popular response to the bombings. They registered sympathy and identification with the victims; outrage at the
perpetrators; and outrage, also, at the Government, which had attempted to deceive the people.

One third of the 192 people murdered in the train bombings were immigrants and the shrines included a wide variety of offerings from people who identified themselves with their country of origin. Solidarity was constructed supporting Madrid and Spain. At the city level, it is possible to say, and imagine, “We are all Madrid” or “We were all in those trains.” However, the level of the nation state is different and solidarity with “Spain” as a concept requires the conception of other nation states producing a separate but equal relationship. On the other hand, “Madrid” (representing the concrete locality) allows a total, mutual self-identification: “we all experience the same things, we all were subject of the same threats,” “we are you,” and, therefore, “We are all Madrid.” 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: for example, Brasil a Madrileño (Brazil is Madradian). While the nation states and different regions in Spain appear identified with Madrid, interestingly enough I couldn’t 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” (see figure 15.4).

Figure 15.4  Colombia cries for the 11M victims.

Photo by: Cristina Sánchez-Carretero.
My thesis is that the conception of the nation state necessitates a solidarity that, in part, constructs the opposition to other nation states, reaffirming one’s own national identity. 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 and experience: all the residents of Madrid, regardless of their backgrounds, ride the same trains.

In some of these notes, the nation is personified and the writer assumes the role of representing the nation state of origin: “Spain, Colombia cries with you,” “Spain, Morocco is with your suffering, we’re all victims of terrorism,” “Chile is with you,” “Spain, Ecuador cries with you,” “Venezuela accompanies you in your crying,” “Venezuela is with Spain, Peace in the World.” Once again, the nation-to-nation relationship allows for a solidarity that, at the same time, acknowledges the difference. The construction of smaller-scale relationships (Madrid or the train itself) permits a communitas-relationship, a sense of feeling together because “we ARE you.” However, the level of the nation state is different and the solidarity with “Spain” is expressed in terms of nation to nation. “Chile and Spain united for ever” says one of the drawings, which includes a Chilean flag that melts into the Spanish flag. “United forever” expresses the solidarity of Chileans and at the same time marks the difference in terms of equality: we are united as far as we continue being two different entities.

Some of the writings include an explanation of the solidarity: “Spain: Cubans are with you because your blood is our blood and your pain is also our pain.” Other times, even the signature is the nation itself: “We cry with you, [signed] Hungary.” On a very few cases, the writer of the note gives a detailed account of the group he or she decides to represent: “Cubans living in Madrid.” A person addresses Spain as an individual: “Train me, give me a weapon and I’ll give you my life, Spain, My dear country, where I saw my daughter being born. God save Spain! An Ecuadorian.”

In some of the letters written by migrants, the narrator represents the entire collectivity of migrants:

Ecuador. I’m an immigrant searching for a better future; just like many other immigrants who search for a better future and didn’t get it, because there’re men who don’t know the meaning of peace. From this note I send my greetings to those affected [by the attack]

In other examples, the writer represents the “undocumented migrants”:

I’m an undocumented migrant but the pain has united all of us (...) sometimes I think, why is that I wasn’t there [in the train] so my family could work
fearless, non-exploited, even if it’s without me. Should we wait for another terrorist attack? Shameless! I will not write more. An Ecuadorian. Ana María.

A letter complaining about the policy regarding migration. The writer of this note complains to the government about their policy to give Spanish citizenship to those injured and the families of those who were killed. This measure tried to solve the difficult position of some of the families who were afraid of reclaiming the bodies of some of the victims due to their irregular situation concerning their visas.

Another note almost yells “Immigrants are NOT guilty” and somebody (a nonimmigrant) adds with a pen “they were also victims”. A person from Morocco writes:

All Moroccans are with the victims and their families. All of us are not the same. They are radical murderers, terrorists. We are a community of Muslim immigrants with big reasons against wars, against all kinds of terrorism, against absurd revenge. We are pacifists. We wish there were no borders, or colors, or languages or religions so the world can live in peace. I ask Madrildians not to mistake us with them “the terrorists” and united we’ll win. And no more death either in Madrid or in Iraq or in the Basque country . . . or in any other place in the earth. Say yes to Peace, no to war, kill terror.

The genres represented in the shrines include letters, poems, personal narratives, and drawings among others. Nevertheless, the most common one is the assemblage: mixtures of photographs, drawings, writings, and other artifacts such as toys, candles, and religious images. In addition, a variety of languages are employed (among others, Spanish, Arabic, Rumanian, Polish, Catalan, and Basque). El Pozo and Alcalá include more memorabilia to particular victims by their families and friends, with messages addressed to the victims, and, in some cases, to the murderers of the victims. I did not find differences in terms of how the grief is expressed depending on the country of origin, but there are some aesthetic differences between artifacts by people who knew the victims and general writings of condolences, and, therefore between the shrines in Atocha and the smaller train stations. Black ribbons and white palms are two common elements repeated in all the shrines and the demonstrations. The white palms stand for fighting terrorism with peace. It has become a national symbol in Spain in the fight against terrorism. A group of law students at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid first adopted the gesture of painting the palms of their hands white or wearing white gloves to signify the hands of people who want peace, as opposed to the bloody hands of terrorists. The symbol started when Francisco Tomás y Valiente, a law professor, was murdered in 1992 by the ETA. In the demonstrations, everybody raised their palms painted in white as a way of saying “our hands are clean and will continue being clean because we fight without violence” (see figures 15.5 and 15.6).
Figure 15.5  White palms in Atocha.
Photo by: Cristina Sánchez-Carretero.

Figure 15.6  Black ribbon: "Sergio, 17 year old, why?"
Photo by: Cristina Sánchez-Carretero.
In those assemblages, snapshots are the elements that clearly differentiate the offerings made by the people who knew personally the victims. Photographs are umbilical cords—using Roland Barthes expression (1981: 80)—that link the body of the missing being to the gaze of the viewer. The sensorial experience and the indexical quality of photographs make them part of the collage of closeness and remembrance to those who had personal ties with the deceased. At El Pozo, 10 days after the attacks, a woman was rubbing a picture of her deceased relative against the walls carpeted with notes, poems, and drawings, as if the physical contact of the picture with the materiality of the shrines would penetrate into the photograph and touch the loved being. At the same time, by mourning at the shrines we are touched by the pieces of incomplete grief to make sense of our own suffering. The act of reading, gazing, or breathing the smoke of the candles makes us incorporate into our bodies the shrines themselves.

Not only does the materiality of the shrines permit a corporeal response, but so also do other media less tangible. In addition to spontaneous shrines at the train stations, the Internet provided another medium for the production, participation, and dialogic interpretation of shrines. Many cyber-shrines take the shape of chats and forum; others are built as memorial sites where visitors can contribute poems, photographs, songs, comics, or light their own virtual candles.

Civil society appropriates new technologies to communicate, call a demonstration, or mobilize. The flash-mob mobilization that took place via SMS, telephone calls, and e-mails on the evening of the general election has been seen to play an essential role in the Spanish national election. The PP claimed that there was a conspiracy performed via SMS; however, more than 2,000,000 changed their votes unpredictably and only a few thousands met that evening. Those in power forgot about the strategic, peaceful weapons of resistance from below employed in Madrid (Scott 1990). SMSs were one more of the various ingredients of the collective mourning after the attacks in Madrid that provoked this drastic change in Spanish politics.

Another element in the performance of civil society that took place in Madrid was poetry; an essential component of these shrines that sometimes are signed, other times anonymous, and in many cases copied from well-known poets (Antonio Machado, Miguel Hernández) and from singers (Joaquín Sabina, Joan Manuel Serrat). Poetry becomes a portal "where the living and the dead touch one another" (Zeitlin, this volume).

I conclude with a poem by a resident of El Pozo—one of the few messages written in English—in which he expresses the new construction of a
locality after the attacks; in particular, the locality is linked to the train station:

How can someone feel an emotional connection with a commuter train station?
The place where I get off the train and shuffle along on my way home with nameless other commuters.
Today I feel no emotion with the grocery store I shop in, nor the news stand, nor any other place I pass by to and from work each day.
But the train station is where I am going to, now on a Saturday to take a candle. Those people now have names I can look at on a list of the 67 who died here two days ago. People passing through our humble neighbourhood. Spanish and immigrant, young people, men, women, and children
on their way to work or school.
And that is how I have come to feel an
emotional attachment with a building of
steel and concrete. My train station in
My neighbourhood, is now a reminder of
the pain and suffering that terrorism
creates.

Notes

* I want to thank Jack Santino for his feedback on this paper. Jack Santino and
Margaret Kruesi (Library of Congress) encouraged our research group to start an
ethnographic archive after the attacks in Madrid and I want to thank them for their
unconditional support.

1. Any kind of political demonstration is forbidden the day prior to the election.
   It's called "Jornada de Reflexión" (Reflection Day). It is against the law to show on
   TV—or any other media—any piece of information that might be considered a
   political campaign in order to allow individuals make their own decisions.
   Therefore, the demonstrations on Saturday 13 were considered illegal by the
   PP and by the "Junta Electoral Central."

2. Luis Miguel García Mora suggested to me that I use the Spanish expression
   "espacios de la sacrality civil."

3. Regarding the mourning of Diana see Walter (1999) and Kear and Steinberg
   (1999).

4. All the photographs included in this article were taken by Cristina Sánchez-
   Carretero and are part of the Archive of Mourning, Spanish Council for
   Scientific Research (CSIC). Research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of
   Science and Education (MEC: HUM 2005. 03496/ HIST) and the CSIC.

5. This percentage is taken from the municipal census, which includes both
   regularized and nonregularized population.

6. Regarding the immediacy to memorialize in these tragedies, Marita Sturken argues
   that in the face of absence, "especially an absence so violently and tragically wrought
   at the cost of so many lives, people feel a need to create a presence of some kind, and
   it may be for this reason that questions of memorialization have so quickly followed
   this event." The author asks herself: "What, we might ask, is behind this rush to
   memorialize and to speak of memorials? Could we imagine people talking of
   memorialization after the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto, or the bombing of
   Hiroshima? Or, for that matter, that the people of Rwanda talked of memorialization
   after the massacres that killed hundreds of thousands there? Throughout his-
   tory, collective and public memorialization has most commonly taken place with
   the distance of time. After wars have been declared over, towns, cities, and nations
   have built memorials to name the dead and those sacrificed" (Sturken 2004).

7. At the moment of writing this essay, representatives of the cleaning services asked
   the Atocha station officials to take the shrines out of the station for a double
   reason: with the beginning of the summer the heat and smell of the candles is
unbearable; and, second, they argue that the shrines make them think constantly of that day and they cannot perform their duties properly. The Spanish train service (RENFE) is preparing an online shrine to substitute the physical one: http://www.mascarcanos.com


14. The strategies of misinformation developed in those days have been the focus of various books speedily written. See, for instance Artal (2004) and Rodríguez (2004). Rodríguez includes copies of all the official documentation communicated to the press. See also Carderós (2004).

15. The "Asociación de Vecinos del Pozo del Tío Raimundo" edited a collection of poems, letters, and drawings by children from El Pozo neighborhood (Asociación de Vecinos 2004). In addition, at least two collections of poems have been published (Jordá and Mateos 2004; VVAA 2004).

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