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Narratives at my Doorstep: Researching Memory as an "Improper Historian"

Sarah Gensburger

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Sarah Gensburger

Narratives at my Doorstep: Researching Memory as an “Improper Historian”

1 Introduction

During the night of 13 November 2015, the most murderous terrorist attack in Paris history took place. The event was immediately referred to as “historic” by journalists, politicians, and historians. Some even went so far as to call it a turning point in French history. It followed an earlier attack on 7 January of the very same year which targeted the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo, and which had also been immediately described as a new historical mark.

I am not a historian but a sociologist of memory. More importantly in this case, I happen to live on boulevard Voltaire in front of the Bataclan Concert Hall and close to the restaurants of the 10th and 11th arrondissement which were targeted on 13 November. My two children, who were still very young at the time, were attending a school located halfway between the Bataclan and the Charlie Hebdo offices. The day after the attack, I was shocked, of course, but I still did my usual end-of-the-week grocery shopping. And on 16 November, as on any other Monday, I dropped my kids off at school.

This personal experience led me to decide to become an “improper historian,” following Ann Rigney’s beautiful expression, and to postpone the qualification of the event as “historical.” Instead, as a proper sociologist, I looked empirically at the grassroots memorialization of it. In doing so, I studied the many written cards, pictures, drawings, objects and other ‘things’ that people brought to the sites of the attacks in the immediate aftermath, and for several months. Here, and again following Ann Rigney’s steps, I observed the memory sites of my neighborhood not for themselves but as a way to grasp the “dynamics of remembrance” (2008a) and the way it relied on the remediation of pre-existing narratives to make sense of the current event. In this chapter, I will take stock of the social study of these narratives on my doorstep. What stories have people told in this dynamic grassroots memorialization process? Where does the narrative of the event start and end?

2 Researching narratives on my doorstep

How can we research the narrative impact of an event? As early as the morning of 14 November, the pavement and the pedestrian walks of my neighborhood had

instantly been filled by ‘things,’ cards with messages, pictures and drawings, figuring people’s readings of the recent event. I decided to dedicate my initial research to this material manifestation of narratives. First, I did ethnographic observation around these grassroots memorials to document how these narrative products came to life. Second, I conducted interviews with visitors and passers-by. Considering that “in practice, of course, people rarely talk about ‘history’ as such” (Rigney 2007, 150), I started the conversation with practical, and in fact material questions: from “do you often come here?” to “when (or where) did you write this message?,” and others of this type.

In some ways, I considered these grassroots memorials as “textual monuments” in the same way literary scholars have been considering books. In fact, several novels were brought to these sites of memory and left there as a commemorative tool. The most prominent one was Ernest Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast* (1964). Indeed, in the French translation, its title is *Paris est une fête* [“Paris is a celebration party”]. Because of this, Hemingway’s book quickly became a textual symbol of the spirit of resistance Parisian people have been practicing, for example through keeping the coffee terraces alive despite the fact they had been targeted and had become sites of murder. And, on the first anniversary of the event in November 2016, it was the very picture of Hemingway’s book cover, taken one year before on this very same location, that a street artist chose to paste on the walls of the building close to the Bataclan concert hall as an act of commemoration (Figure 1).

In January 2016, already, the neighborhood had hosted the first anniversary of another major terrorist attack – the one against the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, which is located in the exact same district. This commemoration took place on the Place de la République where the massive grassroots memorial born after the January attack had just been revived by the November one. At the center of the square, a giant screen displayed some photographs meant to embody the event to be remembered (Figure 2). The French government and the administration of the City of Paris had decided not to show images of the event itself but of some of its grassroots commemorations, that is, messages and people writing them, literally building a “textual monument.”

Since then, this grassroots memorial was remediated again, this time in the form of a permanent commemorative artefact. In July 2016, through the decree n° 2016–949, the French government created a “national medal for the recognition of victims of terrorism.” The medal presents a literal materialization of the grassroots memorial of the Place de la République: “The center is edged with a blue band bearing the inscription “République Française,” and on the silver circle at the center is a representation of the statue of the Place de la République.”



Figure 1: November 13, 2016. Figures 2 and 3: January 2016 © Sarah Gensburger.

3 Grassroots memorialization as remediation of narratives of terrorism

The dynamics of remediation had already played a major role in the construction of the grassroots memorials themselves. Narratives of other terrorist attacks were very present in the textual monuments built by the thousands of messages people left on the sites of the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, located mainly in front of the Bataclan and on the Place de la République.

Of course, the temporal and the spatial proximities between the two events – they took place the very same year and in the very same district – explained that speaking of the Charlie Hebdo attack was considered by a lot of people as a relevant narrative to tell their reaction to 13 November. This trend is even more present after January 2016 and the anniversary of the first attack. In front of the Bataclan, some months ago, someone hung laminated photographs of messages on the park's railings (Figure 3). The messages figuring in these photographs referred to Charlie Hebdo through the iconic motto “Je suis Charlie” [I am Charlie]. However, beyond this immediate local connection between January and November 2015, these grassroots memorials as textual monuments have told a lot of other stories of terrorist attacks. Some people came to these sites to tell the story of the victims of terrorist attacks which had just taken place or to commemorate others which had happened several months or sometimes years before. In January 2016, Ankara had just been hit twice. As a reaction, a poster told the story and showed the faces of the victims of an attack which took place in October 2015 in Ankara (Figure 4). On 19 January, someone wrote “I am Ouagadougou” on a white paper and pasted it on a gigantic pink painting about “Love” which had been brought there several days earlier (Figure 5). And yet another terrorist attack had taken place four days ago on 15 January in Burkina Faso.

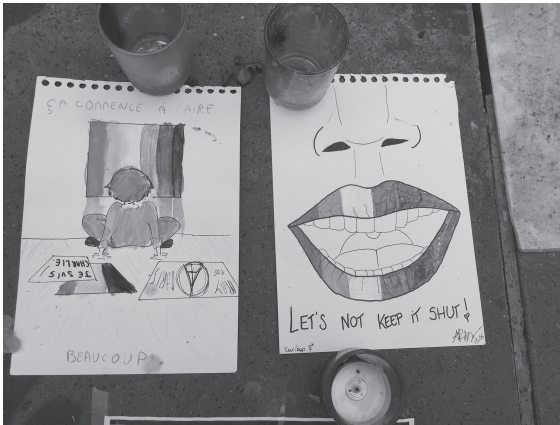
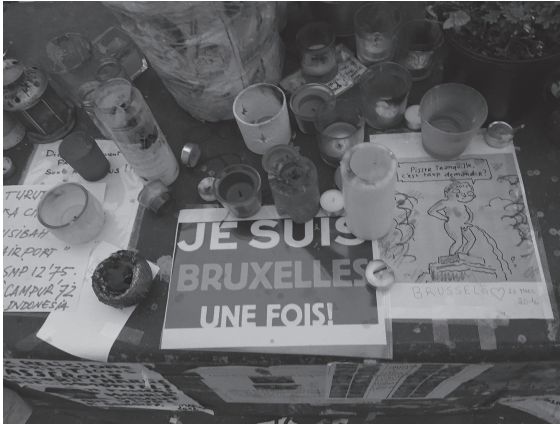
On Tuesday 22 March 2016, the region around Brussels was hit by three bomb attacks, two inside the airport and another in the subway. In the following days, the grassroots memorial of the Place de la République was filled with messages about Brussels. As can be seen in Figure 6, the messages represent a double reference to the Brussels attacks and to the Charlie Hebdo one, through the use of the “I am Bruxelles” slogan and the typography designed originally as a popular reaction to the Charlie Hebdo massacre. On 12 June 2016, a shooter entered a popular gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. Figure 7 shows a drawing that combines different references to the Charlie Hebdo attack, to the Brussels one and, through the rainbow flag to the recent homophobic massacre. Here, the memory dynamics create a composite textual and visual monument made of multiple remediations. With my colleague Sylvain Antichan, we spoke to a young couple who came this



Figures 4 and 5: © Sarah Gensburger.

very day to leave a banner made of paper that read “The more you kill us, the more we will love each other” (Figure 8).

The man, aged 26, and the woman, aged 23, were both philosophy students. They had moved to Paris in September 2015 from Portugal (she is Portuguese, and he is Belgian-Portuguese) and they now live in the 18th arrondissement. They said that they were particularly sensitive to issues around LGBT rights. They had come in response to the attack in Orlando and brought the banner. They chose the place to hang it with care. The man wanted it to be hung next to the Belgian tribute, as though it was an echo of his own national belongings. This was the first



Figures 6 to 8: © S. Gensburger.

time that either of them had come here to leave a tribute after an attack. For the attacks in Brussels, the young man said he had been “too involved,” he “called people” and “didn’t even think” (of coming here). For Paris, in November, “we had just arrived” in the capital. They had made their banner “an hour ago, in a park near the Archives” (The French national archives being nearby the square), and they “brought the supplies from home.” To which event does this banner refer to? What kind of narratives is it a textual monument of?

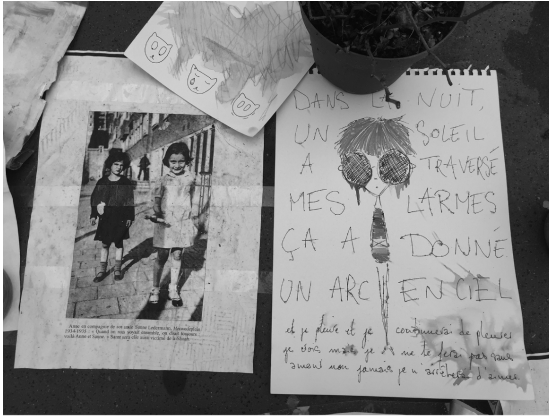
4 The other “historical” nature of event: from rupture to continuity

The grassroots memorialization on my doorstep has relied on numerous other remediations of past narratives. Among the cultural memory which was mobilized at these sites, the ones of the two World Wars have been the most prominent. On 18 June 2016, for example, the iconic figure of Anne Frank appeared on different messages suddenly displayed on the base of the statue at the Place de la République, stressing one more time the textual dimension – Anne Frank has become known worldwide as the author of a book, her diary – of this narrative remediation (Figure 9).

These sites of memory serve as locations from which to observe the dynamics of memory. This latter process turns out to be a continuous narrative remediation rather than solely a product of trauma and the definition of boundaries between the before and after of the event.

This study of the narratives on my doorstep confirms Maurice Halbwachs’s claim in the *Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holyland* (2008 [1941]), in which he considered the pilgrims’ narratives as stories of social continuity rather than of historical discontinuity (Gensburger 2019b). In the light of the above, the historical nature of the event is very different from the one usually considered by the commentators. The event is historical not because it marks the limit between before and after but because the way people make sense of it is embedded in pre-existing narratives of the past and will, on its turn, inspire new remediations in the future.

Since the 2015–2016 sequence, this grassroots memorialization I studied on my doorstep has itself become a cultural memory reference. In March 2020, while the grassroots memorials had long disappeared from both the Place de la République and the Bataclan concert hall, I witnessed its reenactment. On this day, on my way home, I saw an ephemeral memorial brought back to life along the square in front of the concert hall (Figure 11). Taken by surprise, I asked around and quickly learned that it was the set for a TV series, for which the set designer



Figures 9 and 11: © S. Gensburger. **Figure 10:** © with the courtesy of Clémence Boussicot and the team of the TV show “En thérapie”.

and her team recreated artefacts left at this very spot five years earlier. The ‘fake’ messages, flowers, and photographs have now taken the place of the authentic ones and look more real than life. From the interview with the set designer I conducted, I then learned that the artefacts were fabricated from images preserved by the media since 2015 (Figure 10). The place in which they are displayed lends these counterfeits an almost greater veracity than that of the originals, which have now become ‘tributes,’ to use the official term, and which are kept in boxes in the Archives de Paris following the City of Paris’ decision to collect them for “history” (Gensburger and Truc 2020). This case study illustrates one more time the importance of studying memory sites not mainly for themselves but as a way to understand “the cultural dynamics in which they function” as Ann Rigney already demonstrated (2008a).

