

27.1



ISSN: 1409-469X

Diálogos

Revista
Electrónica de Historia



Mural "El agua bajó, las marcas quedan", Asamblea Vecinal Parque Castelli, esquina de 66 y 26, La Plata (2014). La frase también da título al libro-documental producido por la misma asamblea sobre la inundación del 2/04/2013, donde se explica el origen de la expresión.

Enero-junio 2026

url: <http://revistas.ucr.ac.cr/index.php/dialogos/index>



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EDITORIAL
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INTRODUCTION TO THE DOSSIER

DISASTERS AND COMMEMORATIVE PRACTICES

Verónica Capasso and Cécile Stephanie Stehrenberger

During the second half of the twentieth century, the idea that a community's collective memory of a past disaster influences its responses to future disasters gained prominence across various political and sociocultural contexts, including the emerging academic field of disaster studies. As early as the 1960s, for example, U.S. American sociologists specializing in disaster research advanced this idea on the basis of empirical studies of what they termed “disaster subcultures” (Anderson, 1965). According to these scholars, such subcultures were formed through shared past experiences that, preserved in collective memory, contributed to certain communities being better “prepared” for future emergencies, such as earthquakes, floods, and industrial accidents. Over recent decades, the concept of “resilience”, understood as the collective or personal fundamental capacity for confronting such situations, has been instrumental in recognizing the social and political significance of disaster memory.

Cold War U.S. disaster research also served as an intellectual milieu in which another influential idea emerged: that responses to disasters reveal fundamental characteristics of a given social entity (such as an organization or a community), which also define its social structures and cultural tendencies in times considered “normal”. Over subsequent decades, scholars of various academic fields, including historical disaster studies, came to understand disasters as a privileged epistemic site for social inquiry (Stehrenberger, 2017).

These two observations constitute, in several respects, a point of departure for this dossier. The articles here gathered suggest that disasters leave enduring traces

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that condition the ways in which societies confront subsequent crises. These contributions further demonstrate that the analysis of disasters can indeed provide epistemic opportunities for observing social, political, and cultural constellations and processes that ordinarily remain less visible. Among these are “memory regimes”, which determine how collective memory is structured, institutionalized, and disciplined within a given society, regarding not only disasters but also other historical phenomena and the hegemonic practices through which they are articulated and represented (Rabotnikof, 2007; Crenzel, 2008; Dujisin, 2026). The dossier as a whole is informed by a shared concern over the epistemic dimensions of disaster commemoration practices.

We pursue this line of inquiry from a critical perspective, recognizing that ideas about the epistemic and practical potential of disasters, as well as the significance of memory practices for confronting future emergencies, developed within specific historical contexts that were neither accidental nor politically innocent. From this standpoint, we argue that cultural disaster memory studies—an emerging field situated at the intersection of memory studies and critical disaster studies—has the potential to generate valuable conceptual and theoretical contributions to both fields. In our view, the articles brought together in this dossier highlight and productively explore these possibilities.

This dossier stems from an understanding of disasters as complex historical, political, and socio-environmental processes shaped by power relations, epistemic contestations, and multiple temporalities. We conceive of disasters as semiotic-material assemblages in which diverse forms of violence interact, including those that often remain obscured, such as the structural violence associated with extractivist systems. These forms of violence also possess an epistemic dimension and contribute to the production of profoundly unequal dynamics of vulnerability at both global and local scales (Stehrenberger, et al., 2025). Such dynamics are not only unevenly distributed—they also unfold across heterogeneous temporalities. Even rapid-onset disasters tend to incorporate dimensions of slow violence whose effects may extend over decades (Usón and Stehrenberger, 2025).

The contributions to this issue share the conviction that the responses of states, societies, or artistic-cultural collectives to disasters reveal fundamental aspects of these actors, including their positions within pre-existing power relations. These dimensions become visible through a wide range of material and discursive practices, particularly those related to memory. Such forms of intervention also illuminate how these actors conceive of one of the central concerns of historical inquiry: the relationship between past, present, and future.

We further share the view that memory practices, in general, and commemorative practices, in particular, can influence the occurrence and management of future disasters. Such practices determine how risks are perceived, communicated, and managed. As several of the articles included in this dossier demonstrate, disaster commemorations are often articulated as interventions in processes that their protagonists perceive not as concluded but as ongoing, continuing to unfold in the present

while simultaneously projecting themselves into the future. It is precisely for this reason that the following questions become pertinent: How are disasters commemorated? What happens when they are commemorated? What forms of knowledge, ignorance, and temporality are produced through such practices? These questions serve as a common thread running through the contributions gathered in this dossier, which exemplify an observation by Mario Rufer: “Para los discursos de memoria, el tiempo no preexiste ni siquiera como estructura. La memoria parasita el tiempo, lo transforma en una pregunta y en una ocasión para la práctica, lo saca de la estrategia mecánica y lo coloca en la táctica”¹ (Rufer, 2010, p. 13).

Memory practices related to disaster processes can be understood as epistemic practices insofar as they challenge, produce and circulate situated forms of knowledge concerning the social, political, environmental, and temporal dimensions that shape them. They render visible and intelligible the temporal complexity and dynamic character of disasters, as well as the historical inequalities and forms of violence that configure and intensify them, and that are exacerbated by them. However, the production of memory does not necessarily entail the production of emancipatory knowledge. Memories may also generate ignorance, reproduce misinformation, invisibilize subjects and responsibilities, or function as mechanisms of silencing and exclusion.

Memory has been defined by Elizabeth Jelin (2017) as “la manera en que los sujetos construyen un sentido del pasado, un pasado que se actualiza en su enlace con el presente y también con un futuro deseado”² (p. 15). Among the different practices through which individual and collective subjects build and articulate social memory, this dossier focuses on commemoration practices, understood as the actions, interventions, and dispositifs through which individuals and collectives publicly revisit, pronounce and perform specific interpretations of the past. We are especially interested in commemoration because it constitutes a specific mode of public intervention in the past—one in which disputes over the interpretation of disasters, the attribution of responsibility, and the production of future horizons are condensed. From this perspective, the evocation of a particular phenomenon is materialized in various memorial practices and markers, including monuments, plaques, photographs, artistic productions, urban walking or cycling tours, and commemorative ceremonies. Such memorializations do not necessarily respond to a desire for permanence; they may also take ephemeral, situated, and transitory forms. In this sense, the commemoration of disasters constitutes a mnemonic and political practice that exceeds the specific disaster being commemorated and becomes entangled with other traumatic pasts that continue to shape the present. Memories of disasters are thus intertwined with other memories of conflict, inequality, and displacement, producing complex constellations of meaning that connect different forms of violence, temporalities and experiences.

We argue that the complexity inherent to disasters is also reflected in the memory practices organized around them, involving a multiplicity of actors—including state

institutions, affected communities, social organizations, media outlets, artists, and activists —, as well as non-human actants that participate in the material and symbolic configuration of affected territories. Since disasters and knowledge produced about them are traversed by power relations, so too are their memories, interpretations, and modes of representation and transmission. For this reason, disaster commemoration practices emerge as ambiguous and ambivalent spaces, continuously framed by tensions, contestations, and negotiations. Studying these practices allows us to understand the ways in which societies remember and work through critical events, and to analyze broader political, socio-environmental, and cultural processes related to the production, maintenance, and contestation of inequalities.

In recent years, several scholars working within the field of the history of the present have emphasized the need to incorporate pressing contemporary issues—such as disasters and the socio-environmental conflicts associated with neo-extractivism—into emerging research agendas (Allier Montaño, et al., 2021; Allier Montaño & Granada-Cardona, 2023; Jean Jean, 2026). Yet systematic analyses of disaster commemoration practices remain relatively scarce, particularly in Latin America. Among the pioneering contributions to this field are studies of monuments, counter-monuments, commemorative ceremonies, and documentary films, examined in relation to their effects on trauma processing, the formation of collective identities, the negotiation of responsibility, and the production of knowledge about disasters (Taylor & Levine, 2015; Bowers, 2015; Bonomo, 2024; Brataas, 2024; Lerer, 2025). Other studies have explored the role of commemorative practices in disaster risk reduction and the construction of community resilience (Menegatto, 2024), as well as forms of digital memory associated with catastrophic events (Recuber, 2012). Particularly relevant to this dossier are those investigations that examine commemorative practices as epistemic interventions capable of confronting processes of disinformation, produced ignorance, and “undone science” (Stehrenberger & Blázquez, 2025). Along similar lines, various studies have demonstrated how artistic and cultural practices related to disasters function as modes of working through trauma and constructing community-based collective memories that, at times, challenge or contest hegemonic state narratives (Capasso, 2019). While these studies have helped establish an emerging field of inquiry, systematic analyses of disaster commemoration practices as sites for the production of knowledge, ignorance, and contestation remain limited. This dossier seeks to contribute to that debate.

The present dossier on disasters and commemorative practices began to take shape during the workshop *De poesía, recuerdos y anti-monumentos: Prácticas de conmemorar desastres 1793–2025*³, held on 16 May 2025 at the Universidad de Costa Rica. The exchanges that emerged there gradually developed into a transdisciplinary space of dialogue, reflected today in the diversity of disciplinary, geographical, and methodological approaches represented in the contributions here gathered. Drawing on different regions and contexts, the articles address a wide variety of commemorative objects and practices—including literary and visual productions, poetry,

counter-monuments, museum practices, and community memories — , demonstrating that disaster memory unfolds through multiple languages, materialities, and scales. In this sense, the dossier seeks to foster dialogue between critical disaster studies and memory studies not merely through a thematic intersection but also through a conceptual reflection on categories central to both fields, including disaster, commemoration, vulnerability, slow violence, risk, and sociocultural resistance.

In “Plantaciones de muerte: monocultivos, agrotóxicos y violencia en *Donde nadie*, de Carlos Villalobos”, José Pablo Rojas González analyzes the novel *Donde nadie* by the Costa Rican author Carlos Villalobos as a critical intervention into the socio-environmental violences associated with Costa Rica’s banana agro-export model. Drawing on concepts such as “slow violence”, “plantation regimes”, and “produced ignorance”, the author demonstrates how a text that moves between testimony, history, memory, fiction, and poetry constructs a memory of the harms caused by agrochemical use, rendering visible the bodies, territories, and communities affected by processes of environmental degradation that have been systematically obscured. In doing so, the article highlights the potential of literature as a space for denunciation, collective processing of suffering, and the production of knowledge about socio-ecological disasters that challenges the epistemic violences of invisibilization and forgetting.

In “El fetichismo de la conmemoración: análisis de las declaraciones oficiales del huracán Mitch a los diez y veinticinco años de su paso por Centroamérica”, Constanza Schmitt and Natalia María Víquez Valerio demonstrate that, in disaster contexts, forgetting can also be produced through commemorative practices themselves. Examining official statements issued on the tenth and twenty-fifth anniversaries of Hurricane Mitch, the authors critically interrogate institutional modes of disaster commemoration. Drawing on the concepts of fetishization, structural amnesia, and the necropolitics of memory, they show how these commemorative dispositifs privilege technical discourses of risk management and resilience over critical reflection on the inequalities, vulnerabilities, and power relations that made the catastrophe possible. The article thus offers a critical reflection on the tensions between memory, forgetting, and governance in disaster contexts.

Tania Pleitez Vela’s contribution, “El nido de la guacalchía: poéticas del desastre y prácticas de la memoria en Centroamérica”, explores a range of literary and artistic discourses linked to experiences of disaster in the region. Through a reading centered on embodied suffering, grief, and vulnerability, the author demonstrates how these cultural productions document wounds, reconstruct community ties, and activate forms of care and solidarity. The article thereby underscores the role of cultural practices in the construction of collective memories that challenge silences and hegemonic narratives surrounding disasters.

In “Un pasado que no pasa: conmemoraciones visuales de la inundación de La Plata (2013, Argentina)”, Verónica Capasso analyzes a set of visual commemorative practices developed in urban public space, including murals, artistic interventions,

monuments, and museum exhibitions. The article demonstrates how these practices produce collective memories of the disaster, contest narratives that reduced the flood to a natural phenomenon, and sustain demands for justice, reparations, and the right to the city. Capasso also highlights the active role of images in the production, transmission, and continual reactivation of collective disaster memory.

In the article “Reconstrucción psicosocial, vínculos e identidad. Procesos de conmemoración del terremoto de Cinchona, Costa Rica”, Jimena Escalante Meza, Marco Eduardo Carranza Morales, and Catalina Ramírez Vega analyze processes of community reconstruction and collective memory construction developed by the inhabitants of Nueva Cinchona following the 2009 earthquake in Costa Rica. From a psychosocial perspective, the study explores how displacement, uprooting, and the disappearance of the original community gave rise to complex processes of identity reconstruction, appropriation of new spaces, and collective elaboration of the disaster experience. Through their analysis of commemorative practices initiated by the community itself, the authors demonstrate that memory constitutes a crucial resource for rebuilding social bonds, strengthening senses of belonging, and sustaining collective projects for the future.

“Doing Memory, Documenting Disasters: The Commemoration of the Palomares 1966 and the Buffalo Creek 1972 Disasters in Documentary Films” by Cécile Stehrenberger and María Escobar-Aguilar examines three documentary films that reveal how, in the days, months, and years following the nuclear and industrial disasters of Palomares and Buffalo Creek, state and corporate actors actively worked to produce ignorance and forgetting regarding both the events themselves and their enduring consequences. The article analyzes these films as epistemic interventions that, by commemorating a past that had not yet passed, foreground the ongoing nature of the disasters in question. Through the production of counter-images and alternative forms of knowledge, the documentaries expose the epistemic, social, and material violences embedded in official accounts that framed these events as mere “accidents,” “tragedies,” or even “acts of God.”

Taken together, the contributions to the dossier *Disasters and Commemorative Practices* demonstrate that commemorative practices are far more than mechanisms for remembering past disasters. They are interventions that produce both knowledge and ignorance, contest responsibility, reconfigure relationships between past, present, and future, and draw the boundaries that determine which lives, territories, and experiences are remembered, made visible, or forgotten. Studying commemorative practices thus offers a privileged vantage point from which to examine how disaster memories are constructed, but also how their meanings and consequences become objects of ongoing contestation.

NOTES

- 1 “For memory discourses, time does not preexist, not even as a structure. Memory parasitizes time, transforming it into a question and an opportunity for practice; it strips it of mechanical strategy and places it within the realm of tactics” (our translation).
- 2 “[...] the way in which individuals construct a sense of the past—a past that is updated through its link to the present and also to a desired future” (our translation).
- 3 On Poetry, Remembrance, and Anti-Monuments: Practices of Commemorating Disasters, 1793–2025

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