Web-Site of Memory: The War of the Pacific (1879-1884) in the Global Age of YouTube

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The Internet has become a privileged site for the dissemination, debate, and production of history. Countless websites, blogs, and discussion lists (such as H-Net) exist where original and not so original material is available to a range of readers, including professional historians. In fact, debate of a historical nature, i.e. debate on historical themes, takes place in all sorts of cyberspaces, some of which are aimed primarily at, and run by, academic historians, but the majority of which are not. This paper explores the debates prompted by the inclusion in YouTube of a Chilean television documentary on the War of the Pacific (1879-1884). YouTube is a video-sharing platform which has been in operation since February 2005 and was recently acquired by Google. It allows users to upload videos, watch them, and, most important for my purposes, comment on them. The comments I analyse in this paper are attached to several uploads of parts of a documentary titled Epopeya (literally ‘Epic’). This documentary, or more precisely, this three episode mini-series, was produced by a Chilean company called Nuevo Espacio and shown on Televisión Nacional de Chile in May 2007 and on the History Channel in several countries in Latin America. Epopeya was controversial from the start. Its broadcast on Chilean television was delayed after the Peruvian ambassador in Chile made an official complaint to the Chilean foreign minister. The controversy was
exacerbated by discussions in the Peruvian and Chilean press and particularly as a consequence of the way in which it very quickly dovetailed, in the public sphere, with a series of issues that shape relations between Peru and Chile, such as the conditions faced by Peruvian migrants in Chile, the scale and scope of Chilean investments in Peru, and, more recently, a diplomatic dispute, now taken to The Hague by the Peruvian government, over the two countries’ maritime border.

The comments on YouTube are not contributions to an academic debate. They amount to little more than a nasty shouting match between anonymous posters. But they are valuable nonetheless because they illustrate a series of themes that are central to how the War of the Pacific is historicized and, in turn, memorialized in several countries, particularly Peru, Chile, Bolivia and, to a lesser extent, Argentina. As such, these comments, and more generally, YouTube itself, constitute sources through which to examine the interplay between the history (in the sense of historiography; i.e. history produced by professional historians) and the collective, and, in turn, transnational or global, memories of a particular historical wound, the War of the Pacific. The War, which began in 1879 and ended in 1884, and which pitted Chile against Peru and Bolivia, was a resounding victory for Chile. Chile defeated Peru and Bolivia, annexed the Bolivian province of Antofagasta (and in the process landlocked Bolivia) and the Peruvian provinces of Tarapacá, Tacna and Arica, and occupied the Peruvian capital, Lima, for two years. But the War also pitted distinct notions of (national) Self and (extra-national) Other that, to varying degrees in each country, were either confirmed or challenged by the process and outcome of the military conflict. Most historians agree that the cause of
the War was economic: the prospect of monopoly control over the nitrate deposits in the Atacama Desert motivated Chilean northern expansionism. But the War, and particularly its outcome, also was, and continues to be, understood in cultural and racialised terms.³

As the analysis below suggests, collective memories of the War of the Pacific reflected in the comments on YouTube express and reproduce in several interesting ways how the War has been historicized and how this historicization shapes collective memories of the War: in particular, the comments reproduce, in varying degrees of alteration, some widely-held ideas that are clearly shaped by how academic historians in Peru, Chile and elsewhere have written the history of the conflict. Particularly evident in this respect in the comments is the role played by Britain in the War, which many Peruvian historians see as decisive in explaining Chile’s victory. But the analysis of the comments also reveals what historians are only beginning to examine closely: on the one hand, the extent to which the War was experienced, and has subsequently been understood, in highly racialised terms and, on the other, the ways in which this racialisation of the War informs how Peruvians and Chileans perceive their own broader history and the history of their neighbours.⁴ At the same time, the de-territorialised nature of cyberspace offers an opportunity to examine memory formation beyond the nation-state and thus allows us to consider the extent to which memory, so often narrowly embedded in, conditional upon, and immanent to nation-state formation, operates in global contexts.⁵ Specifically, as the discussion below suggests, as one of the more widely used applications on the Internet, YouTube constitutes a privileged
perspective on the operation of memory in what Yochai Benkler calls the networked information economy (2006).

This study, therefore, intersects with two literatures: memory studies and internet studies. In recent years, historians and other scholars have become increasingly interested in exploring memory in a transnational or global context. In unmooring memory from the national, scholars influenced by the global turn in the humanities and social sciences have sought to challenge the tendency to view the nation-state as the ‘natural’ or ‘default’ unit of analysis of collective memory and to emphasize how lives were and continue to be lived in ways that transcend national boundaries. In particular, they emphasize that historical wounds such as wars, and a fortiori the Holocaust, Atlantic slavery, or colonialism and their memorialisation cannot be explored usefully through the narrow lens of national memory. In turn, such scholars are often motivated by the political imperative to challenge the use and abuse of collective memories in projects of nationalist or ethnic exclusion. Scholars in the burgeoning field of internet studies such Benkler meanwhile have pointed to the democratizing potential of the networked information economy. For Benkler and others, the networked information economy ‘allows for the emergence of a more critical and self-reflective culture’. By making cultures ‘more transparent’ and ‘more malleable’, the networked information environment permits ‘many more of us to participate actively in making cultural moves and finding meaning in the world around us’. According to Benkler, ‘these practices make their practitioners better “readers” of their own culture and more self-reflective
and critical of the culture they occupy, thereby enabling them to become more self-reflective participants in conversations within that culture’ (2006: 15).

This study also connects to research questions that scholars of Latin America have focused on for some time. Historians of the region, particularly those who work on the dictatorships and civil wars of the 1970s and 1980s, have drawn extensively on oral history methods as well as on the analysis of visual sources such as photographs, films, and children’s drawings, as well as monuments and memorials, to explore the formation of collective memories, not least in the wake of the establishment of Truth Commissions which have tended to foreground collective memories as a way of accessing the past that overcomes the obvious limitations of ‘official’ histories. While the contribution of the recent work on memory in Latin America to our understanding of the history of the region is undeniable, such work has tended to focus on experiences at the level of the nation-state even when most of the processes analysed, such as the military dictatorships of the 1970s or the civil wars of the 1980s, were ostensibly transnational processes both because they were expressions of the particular ways in which the Cold War, an inherently transnational process, manifested itself in Latin America and because they produced diasporas that transnationalised the ways in which they were memorialised as, to give one example, thousands of Chilean exiles remade their lives in other Latin American countries, Europe and North America. Finally, these processes were transnational by virtue of the fact that they were experienced by many who were only indirectly affected by them, but for whom, say, the bombing of the Moneda in Santiago, Salvador Allende’s suicide, or the photograph of a sinister cross-armed
Augusto Pinochet wearing dark spectacles, would play a key role in constituting transnational, perhaps cosmopolitan, memories of the Chilean coup.9

Digital artefacts such as YouTube, as I show in this article, offer historians another tool, along with oral history or the analysis of visual sources, to access and analyse collective memories. They enable historians to examine collective memories in an inherently transnational or indeed supranational context; i.e. in the de-territorialised world of the Internet. In this particular case study, an international war, it is no surprise that the analysis of the YouTube comment function reveals contrasting and indeed conflicting collective memories of the process analysed. But historical processes less obviously transnational, when refracted through digital artefacts such as YouTube that allow easy access to a comment function to anyone around the world with an Internet connection, may well reveal themselves equally reflective of processes of collective memory formation that transcend the national. By incorporating such tools into their analytical toolboxes, i.e. by studying collective memories through digital artefacts, historians may also be able to contribute to debates about the democratizing potential of the networked information economy and whether its users do become ‘self-reflective and critical of the culture they occupy’. As the discussion below demonstrates, the networked information environment of YouTube neither makes culture more transparent nor does it make it more malleable as Benkler contends. If anything, ‘culture’, in the guise of the contested and racialized national and nationalist memories of the War of the Pacific, is rendered even more opaque and inflexible in the networked information economy of YouTube. The operation of memory in global ‘spaces’ such as
the Internet does not guarantee or even necessarily enable the unmooring of memory from the national. In fact, the evidence presented here suggests that, as Thomas Hylland Eriksen and others have argued, the Internet tends to contribute to the strengthening rather than weakening of nationalism (Eriksen 2007).

**The War of the Pacific, historiography, and memory**

Until recently, the history of the War of the Pacific, like all wars, was written from a national, and often nationalist, perspective. In the 1970s and 1980s, the historiography on the War was subjected to a Marxist and dependency-theory turn. In Peru, historians such as Heraclio Bonilla, Nelson Manrique and Florencia Mallon challenged official views of the War as a heroic but ultimately doomed national struggle. Bonilla argued that the War brought to light the fiction of the Peruvian nation: for Bonilla, Peru’s defeat was the consequence of Peru’s failed nation (and class) formation. In particular, Bonilla argued that Peru’s indigenous majority had no notion of the Peruvian nation and therefore could not be counted on to resist the Chilean invader. This view was challenged in a now seminal debate by Manrique and Mallon who showed that in particular circumstances, and specifically in the central highlands of Peru, indigenous resistance to the Chilean invading army articulated precisely around sentiments of nationhood. Different Marxist interpretations of the relative autonomy of subaltern actors vis-à-vis social structures (the Gramscian turn?) and polemics over the centrality of class and class-struggle in interpretations of historical change clearly shaped this debate, as evidenced in an edited collection published in 1979, which
identified a series of causes of Peru’s defeat: ‘the presence of dominant class which because of its selfishness and apathy was unable to become a leading class; the absence of a national project that the entire population could make its own, which resulted in the weakness of the incipient state and the disintegration of the regions; the marginalization and exploitation of the large popular sectors; the voraciousness of imperialist interest groups, encouraged and allowed by the ineffectiveness, improvisation, and social climbing of the dominant class’ (Basadre et al. 1979, front flap). One of the conclusions to result from this revisionist literature, formulated most clearly by historian Enrique Amayo, was that, in the final analysis, the War of the Pacific was an imperialist war that pitted a free-trade alliance composed of Chile and Britain against a protectionist alliance composed of Peru and Bolivia (Amayo 1988).

Although Peruvian historiographical production, on the War of the Pacific as on everything else, declined significantly in the 1980s as a consequence of the deep economic and political crisis that gripped the country, since the 1990s historians have again turned to study the War. Much of this new production aims to overcome some of the assumptions that guided earlier nationalist and Marxist studies of the War, in particular the idea that the War could be understood in terms of victimisers and victims. The new literature is less interested in approaching the study of the War as a diagnostic for the failures of the Peruvian nation-state. Attempts to write histories of the War that take into account bi-national or indeed multi-national perspectives are increasingly common. ¹² In 2008, for example, the Institute of Peruvian Studies organized a series of seminars aimed at exploring Chilean, Bolivian and Peruvian historiographies of the war
as a way to overcome ‘the lack of understanding of this episode of South American history’ which has produced ‘biased, strident, and simplistic interpretations of a fundamental chapter in Peruvian history’.\textsuperscript{13} Several studies by historians from ‘the North’ similarly aimed at producing more ‘objective’, less politicized interpretations of the War, have appeared in recent years (Farcau 2000; Sater 2007; Cluny 2008). The \textit{Epopeya} mini-series both reflects and contributes to this historiographical turn: its use of interviews with historians of Chile, Peru and Bolivia represents an important departure from earlier attempts to discuss the War. However, there is little to suggest that this new historiography has succeeded in significantly altering the dominant perception of Peruvians, Chileans or Bolivians of the War of the Pacific. In Peru, for example, the War continues to be understood in terms that conflate older nationalist histories, with their emphasis on the heroic resistance of Peru’s soldiers and the treachery of Chilean expansionist invaders, with some of the key themes of the Marxist historiography, particularly regarding the role of Britain in deciding the outcome of the War.

In fact, regular memory jolts of the War are typically understood in these very terms. In Peru, every purchase of new armament by Chile, every new investment by Chilean companies in Peru, every news-story about mistreatment of Peruvian migrants in Chile, revives debate that is inflected by, and refracted through, Peruvians’ collective memories of the War of the Pacific (collective memories formed in ways that require further study).\textsuperscript{15} Some of these jolts are only indirectly linked to the War. When the Chilean company LAN, which has a dominant position in air travel in Peru, showed a
video to its in-flight customers depicting Lima in negative terms, the outcry quickly escalated into a diplomatic incident. A recurring bone of contention is the local brandy ‘pisco’, which both countries produce and consume in significant quantities, but which Peruvians see as yet another natural resource that Chile has stolen from them. Peruvian pisco producers are trying to obtain exclusive use of the name pisco for the brandy produced in the vineyards south of Lima (including in a region called Pisco). One the most recent memory jolts involved a YouTube video which showed retired Peruvian army general Edwin Donayre making a jingoistic toast in which he vowed to remove Chileans from Peru ‘in a box, or if there aren’t sufficient boxes available, then in plastic bags’ and suggesting that Peruvian women act as suicide bombers. Other memory jolts further confirm to Peruvians and Chileans that the legacy of the War is far from fully resolved. In late 2007, Chile returned to Peru’s National Library almost 4000 books which its army had taken as war booty during the occupation of Lima. That same year, Peru returned to Chile the mummified body of a Chilean soldier, discovered some ten years earlier buried in a hill outside Lima and whose story inspired Epopeya.

Commentaries in the Peruvian press following the broadcast of the mini-series on Chilean television (which Peruvians who subscribe to a cable network can watch) emphasised that the misgivings about the series had been misplaced. According to political and cultural commentator Mirko Lauer, a survey suggested that 58 percent of Peruvians believed that the broadcast of the mini-series would negatively impact bilateral relations between Peru and Chile. However, this 58 percent had been proved wrong. Peruvian historians agreed that the mini-series constituted ‘a genuine attempt at
objectivity, and in terms of Chilean public opinion, it represents, a different, less self-
satisfied, attitude towards the conflict’ and even Peruvian president Alan García
commented positively on the broadcast of Epopeya. According to Lauer, most
Peruvians had not ‘been offended’ by the broadcast, unlike a few die-hard anti-Chileans
who insisted that the mini-series was a ‘distortion of the facts, full of secret codes, and
even a thinly veiled threat to Peru’. Lauer conceded that the mini-series was partial in
some respects, such as on the causes and consequences of the War or the heroism of
Peruvians. But he believed that the mini-series and its reception indicated a positive
departure in terms of how the two countries viewed each other: the rivalry remained
but it was now based less on ‘history’ than on current concerns: ‘is this better for
bilateral relations? At least it is based on issues that are more manageable’. However,
as the YouTube comments discussed below show, this neat separation between history
and current concerns is not as clear cut as Lauer suggests.

Content analysis

The comments on the YouTube pages that include videos of the Epopeya mini-
series run into the hundreds and have accumulated since the videos were uploaded a
few years ago (they continue to be updated as I write). The tone is almost always
bellicose and offensive. There is no obvious structure to the discussion: some comments
have no obvious interlocutor, other comments are part of two-way or multiple-way
exchanges. Because of this, there is no discernable structure or sequence of
argumentation, although occasionally particular issues or topics are focused on. The
impression is of a crowded, very loud, and very angry debating chamber where everyone speaks at once, no one much listens to one another, and where arguments cannot be formulated without being wrapped in vitriol and invective. The YouTube comment function comes across as a highly masculinised space, where heterosexual normativity, and indeed claims of hyper-heterosexuality (machismo), and the use of accusations of homosexuality, allusions to effeminacy, and demonstrations of one’s sexual potency and allusions to the other’s sexual impotency are all de rigueur. Despite this, a series of clearly discernable themes worthy of study run through these exchanges. I focus here on what I consider to be the three key themes: (i) the idea that Chile won the war because it had the support of Britain; (ii) the idea that Chile’s victory owed to the inherent inferiority of the other countries (Peru and Bolivia), an inferiority which is still in evidence today; and (iii) the idea that a superior Chilean ‘race’ defeated inferior Peruvian and Bolivian ‘races’ in the War.

The first theme regarding the supposedly decisive role played by Britain’s support of Chile in the outcome of the War returns regularly in the discussion. 

expresses this idea in characteristic fashion: ‘Chilean wankers you should know that Peru fought alone while you were sucking fucking English dick in the hope that they would help you otherwise you would have been a mere province of Peru/ [you] ignorant and stinking Chilean monkeys’. A long exchange between several contributors provides a clearer example of the rhetorical, but also analytical, uses to which this idea is put by different YouTube contributors. 

possibly an Argentine, dismisses the *Epopeya* mini-series, arguing that it adds nothing new and that it omits the Bolivian and
Peruvian versions of the War, and continues: ‘the rotos [Chileans –see below] are so stupid (pelotudos) that they don’t realize that the nitrate war was [fought] because of the [interests] of the hegemon of the time, England... the rest is pure storytelling and to cover things up’. marquesdeosorno, a Chilean to judge by their tag, responds to this, saying that Britain, as a hegemonic power, had interests in every corner of the world, much like the United States does today, and adds: ‘YOU TELL YOURSELF THAT STORY IN ORDER NOT TO ACCEPT YOUR SAD INFERIORITY. FUCKING BASTARD’. This provokes a response from dantgary, who accuses marquesdeosorno of being naïve and proceeds to make what appears to be a widely-believed claim regarding the fall of the Peruvian military junta led by General Juan Velasco Alvarado in 1975: ‘the [great] powers of today and yesterday have made very large investments in our countries, and they are therefore the only ones who run the wars as they see fit, an example of this is when the United States had Peruvian president Velasco Alvarado assassinated with a coup d’état [sic] just as we were about to invade Chile...’. hectorpalito interjects at this point, and makes disparaging remarks about Prat and Condell, two Chilean war heroes.

These comments on the Chilean war heroes bring about the angry interjection of marquesdeosorno, who repeats his earlier point more forcefully: ‘You Peruvian shit, the fact is that we beat the SHIT out of you and SINCE THEN YOU SPEND YOUR LIFE CRYING. Accept that you are inferior, [that] rubbish Peru is the only country that Spain left in a state of greatness and [since then] EVERYONE has taken territory from you. You ARE DISGUSTING’. At this point, maxturbad0r intervenes: ‘you Chilean son of a bitch! You are the Judas of South America for betraying Argentina in 1982 by shamelessly helping the
fucking English... You won the War of the Pacific because of English assistance!!! Accept it you Araucanian queer son of a bitch! We Argentines call Chileans ‘the bitches of the English’ because that is what they are these Chilean man-whores... Soon Argentina will wipe that hanging shit (*mierda colgante*) called Chile from the map, you’ll see’.

dantgary then reworks the theme of British support, and makes a point about distinguishing truth from interpretation: ‘history is made to suit each person’s taste [but] the truth is this: Peru fought three enemies, the British hegemon which was interested in the nitrates and used its modern weaponry, the little Chilean ‘*rotos*’ who piss themselves out of fear if there is no one to help them, and Bolivia which became an accomplice and enemy when it abandoned the war and tilted the balance in favour of England and Chile (*rotilandia*).’ This comment clearly infuriates marquesdeosorno, who retorts: ‘We beat the shit out of you, you poor imbecile. Accept your defeat and accept that you are inferior. Each time your country loses at something you invent some bullshit to safeguard your self-esteem. Chile won because it is a homogeneous country, it has long term projects of conquest. LITTLE PERUVIAN LOSER. FRUSTRATED SHIT’.

This exchange illustrates clearly how for different contributors, who write from different subject positions inflected by nationality (Chilean, Peruvian, and Argentine) the role of Britain in the War of the Pacific assumes a somewhat different significance. For Peruvians, Peru’s defeat in the War can only be attributed to Britain’s support of the Chilean military: without British support Chile simply would have never won the war. The argument is taken further: Britain’s intervention in the War was detrimental not only to Peru but also, and perhaps even primarily, to Chile, since the real victors were
the British who gained access to the rich nitrate deposits in the Atacama Desert (a fact that the Chileans fail to grasp fully, according to Peruvians). Chileans reject such claims, and turn the argument about British intervention on its head in order to argue that Peruvians are incapable of accepting that defeat in the War was a consequence of the country’s inherent inferiority and had nothing to do with Britain. In making this argument, Chileans invoke the notion that Chile is a ‘homogeneous’ country, in contrast, so it is implied, to fragmented countries such as Peru and Bolivia. Finally, for the Argentines, the role of Britain in the War of the Pacific becomes conflated with Chile’s support of the British during the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas war. Chile’s supposed subservience to Britain in the War of the Pacific is invoked in order to explain what Argentines perceive as Chile’s betrayal of Argentina during the 1982 war.

The second theme that emerges from the comments, and is already present in the exchanges examined above, is the notion that the outcome of the War reflects the inherent superiority of the victors and the inherent inferiority of the defeated. Corollary to this idea is the belief that this superiority/inferiority remains a feature of present relations between the former warring countries. andyweychafe, for example, makes this point in explicit terms: ‘to Peruvian, Bolivians and Argentines/ C H I L E/ beats you motherfuckers [...] stop fucking about and start concerning yourselves with your corrupt governments and your shitty countries. LONG LIVE CHILE AND ITS GLORIOUS ARMY, unequalled in South America!!’ A version of this argument suggests that Peru’s bitter engagement with the past prevents it from fully escaping its legacy of inferiority. As salitre3 notes: ‘What is sad is that Peru looks to the past with bitterness, Chile does not.
Peru is a country that will never escape poverty because of its hang-ups. They like to blame their neighbours rather than take responsibility for themselves’. Such claims are refuted by posters such as sicodelicodelperu, who make reference to Peru’s recent economic boom: ‘I remind you that Peru is the Latin American country with the highest growth rate in recent years, the world looks at us as an exemplary country and we are overcoming poverty with an aggressive export policy. So, who looks to the past?’. Indeed, several posters attempt to refute claims of Chilean superiority by pointing to the fact that even if Chile was superior in the past, this situation is now changing. bateroncio makes the point that: ‘CHILE IS INFERIOR TO PERU/ IT DOESN’T HAVE SHIT/ hahaha WE PERUVIANS DON’T NEED WEAPONS OR SHIPS TO BELIEVE WE ARE SUPERIOR/Life goes round and if you are on top today tomorrow you will be at the bottom/PERU WAS ALWAYS ON TOP […]/DOWN WITH CHILE’S EXPANSIONIST POLITICS, BUT IF ROME FELL THEN IT WON’T BE LONG BEFORE CHILE FALLS’. This claim is immediately rejected by auctioner, who interjects: ‘Listen cholo [Peruvian – see below], you losers will never defeat us, that is why you are still buried in shit and you come here to look for work. Next time your country will be ours’.

These ideas about the inherent superiority and inferiority of the countries involved in the War are similarly expressed in a particularly revealing exchange between xavierignatius and icla002. xavierignatius reprises the idea that Peruvians cannot face up to the past and tend to blame others for their own failures and what he or she calls ‘ineptitude’. In turn, icla002 reprises the argument that Chile needed the support of Britain, or, in his or her terms, needed to ‘sell your arse to England’, in order to achieve
victory. Then the two become involved in a discussion over the number of times Chilean troops have entered Peruvian territory, with xavierignatius claiming that Chile ‘funded’ José de San Martín’s campaign in Peru during the Wars of Independence (1808-1825) (which contributed directly to Peru’s independence from Spain - the second incursion occurred during the war Chile fought against the Peru-Bolivia confederation in the 1830s, and the third during the War of the Pacific). xavierignatius then claims, quite suddenly, that he is not against Peruvian migration to Chile, and concedes ‘you have improved primitive Chilean cuisine’. But icla002 returns to what he or she sees as Chilean boasting about military victory: ‘Of course, you boast about defeating a country in crisis and almost unarmed’. To this xavierignatius replies: ‘I do not boast, but I feel pride. But what can we do, you are always in crisis, do you expect us to choose the moment when you are not in crisis in order to declare war? You lost the war on your own’ (my emphasis). Perhaps feeling that he or she is losing the argument, icla002 comes back with an argument that aims to reduce the importance of Chile’s victory: ‘what your partial history claims is that Peru was superior to Chile and that is a great lie’. But xavierignatius in turn retorts with a commentary on what he sees as the essential, ontological status, of Peruvian and Chilean nationhood: ‘what happens is that Chile is the son of rigour. And Peru the son of comforts (comodidades [sic])’.

As this last comment suggests, posters invoke ideas about the inherent cultural aptitudes of each nation in these exchanges in order to explain either victory or defeat in the War. From the Chilean point of view, in particular, Chile’s victory in the War owed to the fact that its culture (based, for example, on rigour) is superior to Peruvian culture.
based on the pursuit of comfort, i.e. of an easy life). According to this interpretation, the inferiority of Peru’s culture, which accounts for its defeat in the War of the Pacific, also accounts for the current characteristics of Peruvian society: its corrupt governments, its weak economy, the fact that many thousands of Peruvians migrate to Chile in order to find work, and more generally, the perpetual state of crisis in which the country finds itself. It follows, according to this interpretation, that Peru did not lose the War primarily because of the superior military tactics of the Chilean armed forces, or because of British support for Chile’s war effort, but rather because of Peru’s nature as a failed nation-state. Conversely, it is Chile’s success as a nation-state and the values (rigour) upon which that success has been established that explains its victory in the War and its continuing superiority vis-à-vis Peru. Peruvian posters acknowledge this point implicitly by focusing on the fact that Peru is ‘now changing’. The comment made by a Peruvian poster on Chile’s supposed inferiority, which he or she claims owes to the fact that ‘CHILE IS INFERIOR TO PERU/ IT DOESN’T HAVE SHIT’ is particularly noteworthy. As I will discuss below, whereas Chileans emphasize their cultural aptitudes (what their culture enables them to achieve), Peruvians tend to emphasize their cultural capital (the assets that their culture provides them) in debating the superiority or inferiority of each other’s countries.

The third theme that emerges clearly in these exchanges, and which is evidently connected to the previous theme, is the way in which contributors to the YouTube comment function racialise the war as a war between superior and inferior races. In a number of exchanges, the role played by indigeneity is ambiguous, or rather its
ambiguity reflects the way that indigeneity in Peru, and indeed in Chile, is perceived as being incommensurable with the modern and therefore evidence of individual and, in turn, national backwardness. In Peru, and in much of Latin America, indigeneity is typically represented as something that needs to be overcome and the words Indian or indigenous are routinely used as terms of abuse. In the YouTube exchanges, both Peruvians and Chileans use the idea of indigeneity as commensurable with backwardness or indeed savagery in order to attack each other. Chileans insult Peruvians by referring to them as *cholos*, a term which usually refers to urbanized Indians or mestizos. Peruvians insult Chileans by referring to them as *rotos*, a term which has strong and largely negative racial and class connotations in Chile but whose status as a defining element in Chilean identity has changed over the years (Sznajder 1998; Gutiérrez 2010). At the same time, posters invoke pre-Columbian cultures in order to stress their nation’s superiority and the inferiority of the other’s. As historian Cecilia Méndez has shown, though dominant Peruvian discourse attaches little value to the indigenous, the Inca civilisation is firmly incorporated into constructions of national greatness and is a source of great national pride in Peru (Méndez 1996). Similarly, although the Mapuche are marginalised in Chilean society, they are invoked routinely as central to Chilean identity and as exemplars of uniquely Chilean aptitudes (such as valour, resourcefulness, independence etc.) (Mallon 2005; Richards 2010).

In a telling exchange, Realxpresion mocks Peruvian pretensions to avert the broadcast of the mini-series: ‘what did those *cholos* think, that the documentary would not be shown simply because they did not want it to be?’. These comments provoke the
response of **pamelabonita**: ‘with these words you demonstrate that you have nothing in your head only vanity made out of thin air’ and he or she reprises the argument that Britain helped Chile in the war and that, in effect, Britain used Chile for its own purposes ‘what happened to the nitrates and guano?’ he or she asks rhetorically. **jucaman9** interjects at this point, picking up on **Realxpresion**’s reference to Peruvians as *cholos*: ‘Chilean... you make me shit myself laughing when you call us *cholo*... you are more Indian than fuck... haha... just continue sucking English balls...you’ll get yours yet... don’t you worry mapuche. Nature is eating you up [a reference possibly to land erosion in Chile] and we will give you the coup de grace soon’. This provokes the intervention of **Bakan62** who promises that Peruvians will again soon ‘taste the steel of the CHILEAN CORVO [a curved knife] that your ancestors are familiar with’ and **Ryorigo** who offers a definition of *cholo*: CHOLO (revanchismus ediondus [faux Latin taxonomy roughly equivalent to vengefullus disgustingus]: a mix of a cross [sic] between GUANACO AND CHIMPANZE mostly found in the republics of Peru and Bolivia and to a lesser degree in Argentina and in the main square of Santiago de Chile [where Peruvian and Bolivian migrants congregate]. Is recognisable by its deformity, its vengefulness, its violence and jealousy of human races (its animal classification is still under study). For typical representatives see ETNO-CACERISMO’.  

In a different and particularly nasty exchange, posters explicitly invoke the pre-Columbian past. After lamenting the fact that Pinochet will not return to kill more Chileans, ‘even among yourselves, among *rotos*, you cannot stand each other in that tripe of a ‘country’’, **adolethen** states: ‘you have no millenarian past, no culture of your
own, you are founded on robbery and jealousy, you were never anything and you will never be anything’. **eldago2810** retorts: ‘what is very clear to us, you big-nosed monkey, is that we are Chile, the country that beat the shit out of you’. And he or she goes on to add: ‘Moreover, the Spaniards too, with no more 150 starving soldiers were able to defeat your empire of some 30 thousand stupid Indians. They raped them, they killed the Inca and the dumb Peruvians with a millenarian culture gave them gold [...] How stupid can this race of losers be!!’ In a different exchange, **eldago2810** reprises the same point, although the 150 soldiers have now become 100: ‘100 against 30 thousand... get out of here!’, and adds: ‘now tell me that the Spaniards also had the help of England!!’ **WISINRECORDS** interjects here: ‘this Chilean is so ignorant... it is disgraceful really... you should remember that you only exist because of that ancient Inca empire... otherwise that line next to the Pacific coast would be Peruvian territory... as it was in the past’.

**eldago2810** responds: ‘you are the ignorant one. Isn’t it true that a few Spaniards with small mirrors and other trinkets managed to conquer the ‘empire’ [sic]? They killed the Inca and fucked the Inca’s 30 thousand warriors in the arse. Chile was never dominated by the Incas... wise up [!] They called us araucanos (rebels or savages)... And what’s left of the ‘empire’[sic]? The shanty towns of Lima? The Trocadero [a brothel] in Callao, La Victoria, Martin de Porres, El Surquito [probably referring to Surquillo]... stop fucking about with your empire... [and] start worrying about your present poverty!’

Whereas Peruvians invoke the Incas in order to claim an inherent cultural superiority over Chile, Chileans point to the defeat of the Inca empire by a handful of Spanish conquistadors as evidence of the cultural, and indeed, racial inferiority of
Peruvians, and to the Araucanians’ resistance to Inca and Spanish subjugation as evidence of the superiority of Chilean racial stock. Indeed, for one poster, the defeat in the War of the Pacific can be explained by referring back directly to the Incas. As so200679 states: ‘Peruvians have spent 130 years trying to explain why they lost the war. Understand this: the Incas were never a warrior people, the Mapuches and the Chilean creoles [whites] were. Don’t try to pretend you are tough guys, you just make fools of yourselves[..] Learn instead from a serious country such as Chile, your daddy, who freed you from the Spaniards, don’t forget this, you bunch of ungrateful people’. Faced with such an argument, kratospatos interjects and repeats the argument about Peru’s cultural superiority while denying the existence or indeed possibility of Chilean cultural greatness: ‘Chile is jealous, no matter how much money they make, no matter how hard they try to shine a light on their primitive and savage tribes as if they were Greek heroes, no matter that they buy weapons from the whole world, they will NEVER, NEVER EVER have a Wonder of the World [a reference to Machu Picchu], or for that matter an empire such as the INCA empire, the wealthiest of this continent’.

kratospatos concludes: ‘HISTORY WILL NEVER BE CHANGED (LA HISTORIA NO SE CAMBIARA NUNCA)’.

These different themes are brought together in a highly revealing and compelling exchange between Druidsnake and salitre3:

Druidsnake: When I was a child I was taught the history of the GUANO and NITRATE WAR, and the truth was left at that, history; but I became aware of the pain of the past, when my national [football] team went to Chile and the Chilean
fans made fun of the fact that they took Iquique and Arica from us, later I understood the xenophobia that exists in Chile towards Peruvians, and many other things that demonstrate that it is in fact the Chileans who are unable to forget the past.

**salitre3**: And when Chileans go to play in Peru they are treated correctly? They are even put under spells by witches and such things.

For **Druidsnake** the ‘pain of the past’ cannot be rendered or experienced through the study of history. For this anonymous poster, this pain is actualized and operationalized through the ways in which the War continues to be fought in the football stadiums and through the xenophobia that Peruvians experience in Chile. For **Druidsnake** the War continues because of the fact that Chileans are unable to forget and overcome the past. **salitre3** retorts that Chileans are similarly subjected to unfair treatment when their teams play in Peru, but adds a comment about witches which invokes broader constructions of the Peruvian Other as pre-modern and deviant and, more generally, as culturally inferior. For **salitre3**, this suggests, the particular way in which the War of the Pacific continues in the football stadiums demonstrates and confirms the broader reasons for Peru’s defeat in the 1880s and its enduring inferiority and failure as a nation state and, by implication, the broader reasons for Chile’s superiority and success as a nation state in the present age.

**Conclusion**
The exchanges on the YouTube comment function analysed above offer a compelling perspective on the ways in which new technologies enable the circulation and reproduction of collective memories in de-territorialized and trans-national or global ways. The Internet is increasingly recognised as a tool that historians can use fruitfully for a number of purposes. For example, a recent (May 2009) issue of *Perspectives*, the American Historical Association’s ‘newsmagazine’, is dedicated to History and New Media. Most of the articles examine digital media as useful supports for the dissemination of research and for teaching. But, interestingly, they do not consider how the Internet, itself, can be a source for, and the context of, historical investigation. I am not here referring to digitised archival documents (of which there is a growing number), but to documents that were digital to begin with, that were born digital, and that offer opportunities for historical research. To the extent that, as I have discussed here, people use the internet to engage with the past, historians should recognise the potential of cyberspaces or digital artefacts such as YouTube and many others for accessing, and studying, the interplay between history and collective memory. As this suggests, historians could benefit from recognising and embracing the potential of YouTube, and more generally, of the Internet, to function as a (web)-site of memory much like more familiar, and more often studied, sites of memory, such as memorials, films, television series, and photography, and, indeed, oral history.

The comments on the YouTube comment function also offer a unique and compelling perspective on what observers of Peruvian, Bolivian and Chilean relations know all too well: the War of the Pacific remains an open historical wound.
comments allow us to identify some of the ideas that shape this wound and perhaps stop it from healing. Contrary to celebratory narratives of globalisation or the networked information economy, the analysis I offer suggests that global ‘spaces’ of interaction such as the Internet do not necessarily, or by themselves, enable an overcoming of national or nationalist sentiments, let alone allow participants to become ‘better “readers” of their own culture and more self-reflective and critical of the culture they occupy, thereby enabling them to become more self-reflective participants in conversations within that culture’ as Yochai Benkler suggests. Indeed, what YouTube allows, at least in the case studied here, is the performance by all interlocutors of a sort of ultra-nationalism inflected by virulent racism. What is enabled in this forum is the voicing of views about the Peruvian/Bolivian/Chilean Other, and indeed about the Peruvian/Bolivian/Chilean Self, that would probably be considered unacceptable in other public fora in any of these countries and, a fortiori, in more traditional transnational fora such as multilateral institutions. Naturally, the anonymity provided by the use of nicknames is key to this. Whether this indicates that contributors would not voice the same views if their anonymity was not assured is unclear.

As such, YouTube, and the Internet more generally, appear to function as sites of memory where collective memories of the War of the Pacific are actualised and operationalised; that is to say, a site where the War of the Pacific can continue, and evolve, by other means. What YouTube reveals is the fact that the War is refought as a war of ideas about the Peruvian/Bolivian/Chilean Other and Peruvian/Bolivian/Chilean Self that are constantly interwoven with understandings of the causes, process,
outcome, and, indeed, legacy, of the War. For Peruvians, Bolivians, and Chileans (and the odd Argentine), ideas of the War serve to construct the Other and the Self. At the same time, ideas of the Other and of the Self serve to construct the War. History, in the sense of academic, professional, history, intervenes in this process only in so far as it can be used instrumentally in these constructions. The verbally violent performance on the YouTube comment function is matched by the violence of the racist and racialised (as well as sexualised) constructions of the Other that correspond to the bayonets, cannonballs, and cavalry charges of the virtual combat. To be sure, this is a virtual war, but it is a virtual war that reflects real tensions; tensions that, ultimately, express broader aspirations and anxieties about issues -- such as the perceived material and cultural sources of national progress and backwardness, the perceived standing of one’s country in the global hierarchy of nations, and the perceived role that race, and the racial composition of the population, plays in successful nation-formation -- that reveal as much about how Peruvians, Bolivians, Chileans (and the odd Argentine) feel about each other as about how they feel about themselves.

References:


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1 I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier version of this article and to everyone who commented on seminar presentations of this article at the School of Advanced Study, University of London, the University of Oxford, the Université de Montréal, and the London School of Economics.


3 In particular, as historians of the countries involved in the conflict have begun to show in recent years, for many Chileans the War confirmed the supposed superiority of the
Chilean ‘nation’ and ‘race’. For many Peruvians and Bolivians, the War confirmed the supposed inferiority of their ‘nations’ and ‘races’ and, specifically, of their indigenous populations. On the centrality of race in understandings of the War of the Pacific, see Skuban (2007), esp. chapter 6, and Beckman (2009); see also McCray (2005) for an interpretation of the legacy of the War that focuses on Bolivia.

4 Klaiber (1978) is a pioneering study in this respect.

5 I am, of course, invoking here a literature far too vast to cite properly. Particularly useful discussions, include, Nora (1989); Olick and Robbins (1998); Huyssen (2000); Klein (2000); Kansteiner (2002), and the contributions to the first issue of the journal Memory Studies.


7 I draw here on the rationale for the Global Wounds conference held at the University of Manchester that I helped organise along with the other members of the University’s World Histories Group and where an earlier version of this paper was presented. Recent examples of transnational approaches to memory include Hebel (2009); Rothberg (2009); Schwenkel (2009). See also White (1995).

8 The literature is too vast to properly reference here. In addition to Elizabeth Jelin’s seminal work (2001, 2003) and her editorship of the ‘Memories of Repression’ series;

9 On cosmopolitan memory, see Levy and Sznaider (2002).

10 I consider primarily the Peruvian historiography, with which I am most familiar.


12 For examples of this new literature, see the chapters in Chaupis Torres and Rosario (2007) and the recent work on the War of the Pacific of Peruvian historian Carmen McEvoy (2004; 2006; 2010), whose research has focused on Chilean archives.


15 There is relatively little work on the collective memories of the War. See, however, the valuable studies by Maribel Arrelucea Barrantes and Iván Millones on respectively, Jorge Inostroza’s 1958 novel on the War and commemorations of the battle of Tarapacá, in Chaupis Torres and Rosario (2007); and the contributions of Iván Millones and Daniel Parodi in Rosas (2009).


17 La República, 10 May 2007.

18 La República, 10 May 2007.
My analysis is restricted to comments posted some three or four years ago, when I first conducted this research, but subsequent comments repeat the same views and arguments as those discussed below.

My analytical approach to these comments is that of a historian rather than an ethnographer. I have limited myself to a combination of textual and contextual analysis. It is likely that an ethnographic approach to YouTube as developed by Lange (2007) would have added further complexity to the analysis offered here. However, I am less interested in the social networks that arise through interaction on the YouTube comment function (hence I do not seek to learn more about these networks or about those who compose them) than in what the comments reveal about the ways in which different interpretations of the War of the Pacific circulate in transnational or de-territorialised contexts and in the uses to which such interpretations are put.

These exchanges depressingly illustrate, as Lisa Nakamura has shown more generally, ‘the ways that racism is perpetuated by both globalization and communications technologies like the Internet across a range of discursive fields and cultural matrices’ (2002: xviii).

Etno-cacerismo is a political movement associated with the Humala family, and particularly with Ulises Humala, brother of the more successful Ollanta Humala, the presidential candidate who lost to Alan García in the second round of the 2006 elections. See García and Lucero (2008).

To be sure, historians have been debating such developments for some time. See Trinkle (1998).
Examples of such research include the papers by Christian Pentzold and Courtney Rivard on Wikipedia and website memorials of 9/11 respectively presented at the Collective Memory and Collective Knowledge Conference held at the LSE in June 2007. See http://www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/global/workshopagenda.htm.

Other disciplines, particularly anthropology, have for some years approached the internet as bone fide ‘fieldwork’ site. See, for example, Wilson and Peterson (2002); Ferguson (2003); and Boellstorff (2008).

Admittedly, there are relatively few discernable Bolivian posters to the YouTube pages analysed above. The reason for this is unclear.