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# Ethnic mirrors. Self-representations in the Welsh and Mennonite museums in Argentina and Paraguay

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**ABSTRACT:** According to some scholars and philosophers, ethnic identities are the best political, social, economic, ethic (and even aesthetic) alternative to State centralism, which is incapable of dealing with cultural diversity. Ethnic communitarianism is then defined as a more authentic, humane, democratic and inclusive form of organization. The Welsh colonies of Chubut (Argentina) and the established Mennonite colonies of the Chaco Region (Paraguay) are two ethnic groups with forms of community life that have been thoroughly studied from different perspectives. However, neither has been analyzed their point of view of alterity or their relation with those who do not belong to the community. In their museums the history of the community is represented, self-images and other people's images are constructed and spread. The interesting part of these stories is not what they say but what they do, the form in which contents are expressed. These communitarian historical museums tell about the past but they mainly have an impact on the present. Like national or even imperial museums, Welsh and Mennonite museums tend to naturalize a particular self-centered, prejudicial and evolutionist point of view that often excludes other perspectives, especially those elaborated by the neighboring indigenous communities. In contrast, we believe it is necessary to take a stance for democratic, horizontal relations between communities and more polyphonic and responsible historical representations. **KEYWORDS:** Chaco (Paraguay). Chubut (Argentina). Menonite Communities. Welsh Communities. Museum.

**RESUMO:** Alguns filósofos e acadêmicos assinalam que as identidades étnicas são a melhor alternativa política, social, econômica, ética (e mesmo estética) ao centralismo estatal, que é negligente ao lidar com a diversidade cultural. O comunitarismo étnico é definido como uma forma de organização mais autêntica, humana, democrática e inclusiva. As colônias galesas de Chubut (Argentina) e as colônias rurais dos menonitas no Chaco (Paraguay) são dois grupos étnicos cujas vidas comunitárias têm sido muito estudadas desde diversas perspectivas,

3. See Ronald Cohen & Judith D.Toland (1988).

4. See Annie E. Coombes (2004); Carol Duncan (2004); Álvaro Fernández Bravo (2006); Marisa González de Oleaga & Fernando Monge (2009); Ludmilla Jordanova (1989); Donald Preziosi (2004); and Thomas J. Schlereth (2004).

5. See Edward Said (1983).

6. See Matthew Arnold (1969).

7. See John Hutchinson & Anthony Smith (1996).

8. See Fredrik Barth (1969).

mas o seu ponto de vista acerca da alteridade ou sua relação com os atores extracomunitários nunca foi levado em conta. A história comunitária é representada nos museus galeses e menonitas das respectivas regiões e aí são construídas e difundidas não só as autoimagens mas também as representações dos outros. O aspecto relevante dessas histórias não é o que elas dizem, mas o que fazem, a forma como os conteúdos são expressos. Esses museus históricos comunitários falam sobre o passado, mas seu maior impacto recai sobre o presente. Como os museus nacionais ou imperiais, os museus galeses e menonitas tentam naturalizar pontos de vista particulares, auto-centrados, preconceituosos e evolucionistas que geralmente excluem as perspectivas elaboradas pelas comunidades indígenas vizinhas. Em vez disso, pensamos ser necessário criar relações mais horizontais e democráticas entre as comunidades e difundir representações históricas mais polifônicas e responsáveis.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Chaco (Paraguai). Chubut (Argentina). Comunidades galesas. Comunidades menonitas. Museu.

One of the most notable political characteristics of the past decades has been the crisis of the national State and of the State-centered subjectivity. The national State, as defined in the mid and late 19<sup>th</sup> century and maintained until the 1990s, served as a mechanism that allowed certain social and ethnic groups to dominate over others, attempting to eradicate or relegate to the private sphere the disturbance seemingly caused by cultural difference. Concerned with its own survival, the national State managed to impose the moral authority of the hegemonic group – at least temporarily – making its values and beliefs commonplace<sup>3</sup>. As part of this strategy of domination, great efforts were made to associate the State with the images and ideas of authority and culture. In this regard, schools and national history museums have been two of the institutions that have contributed the most in terms of promoting and legitimizing the homogenizing discourses of the State, hiding or silencing people's diverse experiences<sup>4</sup>. As noted by Said<sup>5</sup> and Arnold<sup>6</sup>, this strategy relegated that which was not included or which could not be integrated to the State culture as anarchic, strange and different. The ideologists and spokespeople of State supremacy have appealed to the ideology of modernization and progress in order to attempt – though not always successfully – to eliminate difference through genocide, the accusation of tribalism, traditionalism or particularism.

Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, different intellectuals and critics have claimed that the end of essential identities, grand political narratives and the "scientificist" tendency in social sciences has helped to expand people's perception of the intrinsic value of this diversity. People are more aware of how useful it is to recover, demonstrate and appreciate this diversity<sup>7</sup>. Non-State, collective organizations have appeared, apparently or potentially more representative of ethnic, linguistic or religious plurality. This trend, which could be called post-nationalist, post-State supremacy, has many different aspects: the new subjects of interest are the "ethnic" museums, the education based on local traditions and on the ethnic backgrounds of students, the recovery and the creation of regional tradition and the appearance of media sources transmitted in "original" languages.

Ethnicity – understood as cultural difference – is stubborn and persistent; it always returns and there is no sign that it will be eradicated. As Barth<sup>8</sup> and De

Vos<sup>9</sup> have pointed out, this is because ethnicity is the condition that allows cultural interaction. This type of belonging seems to satisfy certain needs that are not covered by any other kind of identification<sup>10</sup>, in spite of the violence it can produce<sup>11</sup>. While ethnicity (understood as a strategic and situational position) is prepared to replace national identities, it is reasonable to suppose that these “realer” identities, more democratic and horizontal, will not merely reproduce the State’s order and hierarchy patterns. One would hope that these ethnic groups would not pass this traditional State exclusion policy on to others who are different from themselves<sup>12</sup>. However, the relative triumph of ethnicity, of ethnic identities or identifications – that is, the victory of smaller groups over an absorbing, obligatory national loyalty – has not resolved social problems. Undoubtedly, by turning ethnic people into subjects, it has helped give a voice to those previous marginalized. By identifying and making visible those considered different, however, it has created a relationship with those outside the community quite similar to that of the State.

In this article, we will attempt to address some of these issues by analyzing two ethnic groups: the Mennonites and the Welsh. The first group, the Mennonites, have lived in the Chaco Region of Paraguay since 1930, where they founded three prosperous colonies that are still thriving today. The Welsh formed communities in the central Patagonia Region, in the province of Chubut, Argentina, during the last three or four decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see Map 1).

9. See George A. De Vos (1975).

10. See Ronald Cohen (1993).

11. See Donald N. Horowitz (1985).

12. See John Rex (1986).



13. See James Clifford (1999); and Néstor García Canclini (1990).

In both cases, the ethnic makeup of these groups is quite different from that of the surrounding population, and in order to sustain their community life, both had to develop unique strategies for dealing with the State. Thus, the Welsh and the Mennonites negotiated, disputed, accepted or debated many of the political decisions made by the Argentine and Paraguayan governments (respectively). The Paraguayan State – patrimonial, weak, and extremely in need of a larger population and greater investments – has not managed to absorb the Mennonite colonists culturally; the Mennonites have continued to marry and maintain symbolic ties within their community, developing successful strategies for economic growth and diversification. In contrast, in the case of Argentina, around 1880, a strong, centralized national State was created, and it successfully pressured Welsh immigrants to renounce to their goals of political and educational autonomy; ultimately, the Welsh were integrated into national society. The national government of Paraguay reacted quite differently to the Mennonite colonies than the Argentine government did in the case of the Welsh colonies in Chubut. Within the framework of relations that included confrontation and negotiation with the State, community autonomy was maintained in the first case, while in the second case, the colonists were incorporated into the national State. It has been the weakness of the Paraguayan State that has allowed the Mennonite culture to survive and thrive. For once, this historic failure – often listed as a cause of the problems that afflict Paraguayan society – has allowed a different culture to survive and develop. Non-national viewpoints were permitted and even appropriated by Paraguayan people. For this reason, we speak ironically of the “praise for weakness”, because this might be the only time when the secular deficiencies of the State produced an interesting result.

Both the Welsh and the Mennonites are ethnic communities established in national (or in the process of becoming nationalized) territories that have had to deal with State authorities and with the State’s efforts to homogenize them; however, they also had to form relations with the local populations, the majority of which were indigenous. These groups were quite different from the communities, and in these interactions, the conceptions and perceptions regarding cultural alterity were displayed, along with the similarities and differences between State policies and ethnic proposals. The question is: where should one look? How can these collective imaginaries flooded with differences be accessed? Where to find a *locus* to observe these communities relationships with ethnic alterity? We believed that museums could be the meeting points as well as the conflict points. The museums texts could be interpreted as *challenges* to other alternative stories and as *signs* of those narratives that the State attempts to impose as hegemonic<sup>13</sup>. Museums are the place where the stories of self-representation are woven along with the narratives of the others, that is, those who are beyond their imaginary limits or borders. In the museum stories are told and silences are imposed; associations are made; things are said and actions are taken based on what is said; values circulate, and there are both intentional and unintentional marks. These impromptu records reveal how the other is conceived and thus give us insight into self-perception, the two issues that interest us the most.

Both the Welsh and the Mennonites have been obsessed with memory and with the transmission of the between generations. Each community has its own museum and in some cases, such as the Fernheim colony in the Chaco Region of Paraguay, there are two museums. Similarly, the Welsh communities of the Patagonia also have museums, some of which belong to the community while others are family and State-run museums. In this work, we will look exclusively at the Jacob Unger Museum in the Fernheim Mennonite colony and the regional Welsh museum in Gaiman, in the province of Chubut, in southern Argentina.

The exhibits of the Unger Mennonite Museum and the Welsh museum in Gaiman can be analyzed from several perspectives (i.e. material culture, iconography or the theory of reception). This study, however, is limited to the historiographical stories that circulate in the museum, the political and ideological bias evident in the construction of such stories and the potential effects that these narratives can have when defining identities (those of the community and inevitably, those of others). The *political* problem of traditional museums is not related to the biased visions or stories they may contain. The danger lies in the way in which the museums present these tales – tales which all social scientists know to be historically determined – as if they were comprehensive and definitive knowledge that directly represents reality as opposed to offering an interpretation of reality.

This article is the result of many visits to the museums in which we have “surveyed” them in their entirety, analyzing each and every one of the exhibit rooms. In this analysis, we have followed the guidelines used to analyze a text (the text or texts of the museum) and we have taken into account the narrative structure of the museum based on the following aspects: spatial syntax, the narrative structure<sup>14</sup> with the paratexts<sup>15</sup> and the mechanisms for opening and closure.

14. See Mieke Bal (2004).

15. See Gérard Genette (1997).

## Nature and culture in the Jacob Unger Museum

The Mennonites have been moving around the world since the 16th century, in an attempt to continue to uphold three principles they refuse to renounce: pacifism, Anabaptism and the German language. Latin American governments opened up their borders to these groups, mainly farmers and artisans. Three waves of Mennonites have migrated to Paraguay from Eastern Europe, Russia and Canada: in 1927, the Menno Colony was founded (its center is located in Loma Plata); in 1930 followed the Fernheim colony (Filadelfia); and in 1947, the Neuland colony was added (Neu Halbstadt). Paraguay is home to approximately 27,000 baptized Mennonites; a little over half of them live in the district of Boquerón, in the region known as Gran Chaco. The Boquerón community is composed by reformed Mennonites, along with those from Friesland, Volendam and Sommerfeld, who reside on the other side of the Paraguay river, in the eastern region. The rest of the Mennonites are members of non-reformed communities who can be distinguished by the way they dress and their rejection of modern life. With a community organized around livestock and agricultural coops, the reformed

Mennonites have a hospital; nursing school; music conservatory; primary, middle and high schools; a teaching training school with three different levels; a psychiatric hospital and a leprosarium, constructed to help combat this illness among the indigenous population.

The Mennonites in Paraguay are considered foreigners or "gringos" by the locals. In spite of the fact that they have Paraguayan citizenship and a Mennonite governor, they pay taxes and have accepted bilingual education, they are still not viewed as part of the national community. The purpose of community museums is to counter this symbolic exclusion by demonstrating and explaining the secret of the community's success. The Jacob Unger Museum is the first of these public institutions; a Mennonite teacher had the idea for the museum, which was founded in the Fernheim colony in 1957. The museum's first exhibition – which is now a permanent one – is local fauna donated by the taxidermist Unger and serves as didactic material for biology classes. In 1980, on the colony's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Museum received its current name and was reopened. A great number of ethnographic materials and objects belonging to the pioneers were incorporated. That is the moment when the current exhibition came together<sup>16</sup>.

The new pieces from the Mennonite pioneers and indigenous population serve as more than just didactic material for the school. They target a wider audience: first, the Paraguayan visitors who begin visiting the zone thanks to the construction of the Transchaco highway in 1964, and second, the new generations born in the colonies. In terms of the visitors from other parts of Paraguay, the museum attempts to respond to a question that is floating in the air: what are the reasons for the economic success of a small group that chose to live in a particularly inhospitable, poor region of an underdeveloped country? In terms of the second group, the narratives are directed to the new generations of Mennonites, who did not experience the first years of the colony and who run the risk of disregarding the epic narrative of their community, forgetting the effort and the sacrifice (faith, work and unity is the slogan of the colony) that allowed them to triumph in this land.

The museum is managed by a cooperative, which is one of the two institutions – the other is the civil association – that governs the community. The urban centrality of the museum and its impact on local life are unquestionable. At the corner of Hindenburg St. and Unruh St., they are part of a city square that is home to the most significant institutions of the colony: the cooperative, the bank, the supermarket, the civil association, the industrial plant and the Education and Culture Department. The hospital is only a few feet away. The museum has two floors and a rectangular shape. It is made of wood with a hip roof; it has a corridor running along the perimeter and other typical elements of local construction; some of its other architectural features correspond to Central European buildings. On the ground floor, next to the entrance, there is an iron framework, the remains of old farming equipment. The ground floor leads to the garden in the back, which leads to Parque de los Recuerdos, a space that commemorates the community's history.

The Pioneer Room is located on the ground floor. This room provides a chronological presentation, from the Mennonites' departure from Russia to their arrival and establishment in the colony. The work-related objects, machinery and

equipment stand out above the other objects. There are two main themes within the exhibition: technology and daily life. In the technology room, the objects are organized to show the evolution of Mennonite technology, from the butter churn to the colony's printing press, from the candles and kerosene lamps to the electric installations. The other theme, daily life, involves everyday objects such as clothing, personal belongings, watches... Daily life has a peculiar order, a unique organization: from porcelain to tin, from tin to steel. The first display cases (which are locked) show porcelain plates and other objects belonging to people with a certain social position and cultural education. The Mennonites brought the porcelain with them to show where they came from but they had no trouble exchanging it or substituting it for tin plates (also on display at the museum outside of the glass cases) that local society handed out to each Mennonite family. It was the acceptance of these new living conditions and the hard work (represented by numerous objects related to carpentry, ironworks, milk processing...) that allowed them to get a notably improved level of life (see Photograph 1). The improvements are represented by the press, the electric light, the hospital alarm and the books produced by the community.

The Mennonite family is the main subject of the museum. Gender references are rare here, except for the photographs, where not surprisingly, all of



Photograph 1 – *Mennonite technology*, Jacob Unger Museum, May, 2010. Photograph taken by the authors.



17. To reach the upper floor, visitors must take a staircase located outside the building. Many visitors come to the building, see the objects on the ground floor, go out into the garden, go back through the museum and leave without visiting the top floor.

18. See Calvin W. Redekop (1980).

the local authorities portrayed are men, since the beginning of the colony until the present day. There is also no reference made to life in the community today; the exhibit ends at an indefinite moment in time as if it were not necessary to put on display the current situation of the colony or the community's success. The prosperity is evident to anyone who steps foot into the area. However, it is necessary for the community to explain these differences, the fact that they live in such an alternative reality: this is the question to which the museum provides an answer.

The ground floor and the top floor of the museum represent different and un-connected worlds<sup>17</sup>. The upper floor shows the exhibitions dedicated to fauna, Paraguayan history and indigenous collection. There is no continuity, meeting point or connection between the pioneers' epic narrative and the fauna, ethnography and Paraguayan history information. The exhibition room on the first floor is organized in three different spaces. The first has remains from the Chaco War (1932-1935) in which Bolivia and Paraguay fought for sovereignty in Northern Chaco. In this exhibit, Chaco War constitutes the only mention of the home country and its inhabitants, who are represented as soldiers. If Mennonites are linked to hard work and sacrifice, in this representation, Paraguayans are connected to the horrors of war (grenades, ammunition and wood crosses). Bearing in mind that the Mennonites are a pacific group, this association seems significant and far-reaching. It is not surprising, then, that in the Mennonite children's drawings, Paraguayans always appear as soldiers while the Mennonites are sketched as merchants<sup>18</sup>.

Indigenous residents are represented by objects such as axes, baskets, ceramics and textiles and, in the case of the Ayoreos, by arms and trinkets. There are almost no texts explaining any aspect of the indigenous world. Little distinction is made among the different indigenous communities and little emphasis is given to their history or their differential features. The texts that accompany the ceramic works provide more information about who donated it or the place where it was found than about which ethnic group the piece belonged to or which uses they gave to those objects. The way in which ethnographic materials are classified as the local fauna: birds, mammals and reptiles are shown in the glass cases without offering any additional information (see photograph 2). Similarly, the parts of the exhibit on the indigenous world offer little in terms of narratives or explanations; materials are organized according to a formal, non-functional logic: all of the feather head pieces, all of the hats and all of the fiber bags go in the same category, regardless of whether any of these objects was important in terms of everyday life (gathering berries) or a ritual value (in religious ceremonies).

The Ayoreos deserve special mention because they were the most belligerent group in the region since the beginnings of the colony: in the Museum they are set apart from the other tribes and associated with the legend of ferocity and violence. Today the Ayoreo are still a feared ethnic group, with a capacity for resistance and a will to remain on the outskirts of white or *mestizo* society. A text points out that a Mennonite family, the Stahls, was killed by the Ayoreo Indians in November 1947. The ages of the murdered children and wife are listed. Nothing is said about the conflict over the land between the indigenous peoples who had lived here long before the colony; no mention is made of the fact that the colonists



Photograph 2 – *Indigenous world*, Jacob Unger Museum, May, 2010. Photograph taken by the authors.

believed that they were purchasing empty lands or of the threat that the colonists represented for traditional Ayoreo life and for continuing their hunts.

In the three rooms on the upper floor, there is but a single map of the regional divisions within Paraguay. There are no local maps of either the village or the colony; it is as if the Mennonite' spatial organization and control did not require spatial representations<sup>19</sup>. The familiarity and control of nature was one of the first challenges they had to confront. The collection of fauna is one example of this attempt to know, control and dominate their surroundings and then pass this knowledge on to future generations. Something similar could be said of the indigenous artifacts. Part of the natural surroundings, the ability to recognize and categorize indigenous people became a strategy for control. That is why the cultural differences and characteristics of the tribes are not considered important: what matters is an operative classification between the violent and the pacific, among those against whom the colony would have to protect itself and maintain a distance (the Ayoreos<sup>20</sup>) and those who may be assimilated (the populations that speak the Enlhet languages and the Manjuí, the other two ethnic groups in Chaco, who have been proletarianized). Therefore, the ethnic classification presented in the Unger Museum is not only about historic or ethnographic criteria: it is also based on practical considerations of the present, of the need to recognize a potential threat.

What is the purpose of the permanent exhibit at the Jacob Unger Museum? The museum is oriented and organized to respond to the question of the

19. The lack of maps is noteworthy in all Mennonite museums. In the museum of Menno Colony, there is a striking number of watches on display but not a single map, as if time were a more important variable than space. When the museum director Walter Ratslaff was consulted, he responded: "Place was just as important as time, wasn't it? Territorial borders do not move but history does, correct? History changes. However, the borders in the modern world, where we are, do not change Wars for the sake of warfare and wars today are no longer common. Wars are waged in other ways (...) without modifying borders." Cf. Walter Ratslaff's interview.

20. The Ayoreos have been the objects of systematical harassment by Evangelical groups; see Richard Arens (1976); and Jose Antonio Perasso (1987).

21. See Glyn Williams (1975; 1991).

Mennonites' success. Hard work, faith and unity have been the ingredients which, according to the museum's narrative, have permitted this result. It is a sign that these people have been chosen by God. When the museum focuses on effort as a key part of the process, it is betting on a single path to economic development, one based on the accumulation and control over space.

In a hostile ecosystem, with a war that broke out as soon as they got settled in a land in which they were surrounded by hostile tribes, the triumph over adversity appears to be magnified. There is mention in the exhibit of the environment, the Chaco environment, which must be dominated and forced into production. The domination of the physical space has allowed the Mennonites to develop, while those who have attempted to adapt to it like the indigenous residents wallow in poverty and are absorbed by the environment. In this heroic setting, the Paraguayans are characterized exclusively in terms of their willingness to go to war, while the indigenous people are assimilated to the world of nature, along with, for example, the capybara. In contrast to the evolution of the Mennonite community, which is represented by the progressive incorporation of work tools and electric energy, there are the monotonous handicrafts of the original groups. The Mennonites have nothing to do with the preexisting worlds, the indigenous and Paraguayan ones. And it does not seem there was any desire to repair this physical and symbolic separation, given that this characterization justifies the separation of the colony of these other realities.

#### The Gaiman Welsh Museum: Evolutionism, technology and machismo in the extreme south

Welsh immigrants arrived to the Patagonia Region in the last third of the 19th century, in an attempt to construct a new sovereign political space in which they could maintain their customs and beliefs. The room to exercise political and religious freedom in Wales had been reduced by the British crown, and the community leaders were sure that it was necessary to abandon the island to create a new Wales. They believed they had found the right place when the first contingent arrived in the Patagonia in 1865. There they lived on relatively good terms with the indigenous groups that inhabited the region while they successfully began planting grain and forming agricultural industries. Unlike the Mennonites, the Welsh had to share their territory with other national migrants, and they were forced to obey the authorities in the country that received them, turning their hypothetical New Wales into yet another Argentina province<sup>21</sup>. The descendants of the Welsh migrants have integrated into Patagonian society on the whole, particularly in terms of urban life. They now represent one of the most important ethnic groups in the current province of Chubut, especially in the areas where the original colonizers established: Gaiman, Trevelin, Trelew and Rawson.

In 1957, Chubut went from being a national territory (directly ruled by national government) to an autonomous province. After passing its first constitution,

the provincial state began the process of taking its first steps as a government. One of the activities organized by the new province was to promote a sense of belonging among the new province's inhabitants through different mechanisms, operations and symbolologies. The creation of its own educational system, of a provincial coat of arms in 1964 (that includes an ear of wheat that makes reference to the Welsh colonization), and of *places of memory*, such as museums, seem to belong to the purpose of inventing traditions. In this context, the fact that it has been just about one hundred years since the first Welsh colonists arrived to the province was a strong point in this policy of provincial identity. The Welsh colonization has been used ever since as a unique element of the identity of the province of Chubut; this focal point has encountered resistance in certain regions of the province, such as Comodoro Rivadavia, where there were no Welsh settlements.

The Gaiman Museum was started in 1960 at the initiative of Virgilio Zampini, the local historian and then-director of culture of the province of Chubut. He attracted the interest of the Camwy Welsh Association of Education and Culture in the possibility of forming a museum. Since 1904, the association has been a meeting point for residents and Welsh descendants; the group also administered the bilingual high school Camwy, which had been founded in 1906. The official attempt to promote and appropriate the Welsh community memory to turn it into a source for provincial memory and veneration represented a change to the initial efforts to establish the Gaiman museum, which was limited to a few glass display cases at the Camwy School. At that point, Zampini asked the association to start recovering artifacts and objects related to the Welsh colonization in the Chubut valley; as part of the process, he provided two sound recorders<sup>22</sup>.

The Camwy Association started forming the collection after receiving the State's invitation to do so. Mrs. Tegai Roberts, a member of the Camwy Association, was entrusted with the task of creating this first "official" space for the memory of the Welsh colony. The association thus began to receive donations that included family objects and work tools from the first colonists in the region. Tegai Roberts was in charge of visiting the families to convince them of the need of making their family relics into a collection that would be exhibited for the community and for the province, conveniently centralized and protected. For several years, the small museum remained at the Camwy School, taking up a single room that would open to the public three days a week.

When certain railroad routes were suspended during the presidency of Arturo Frondizi (1958-1962), it marked the end of the Gaiman Station, which had been erected in 1909. The tracks were lifted and the small local station was emptied. This is when the association had the idea of establishing the museum in the semi-abandoned station. To do so, it began negotiating with the old railroad company, which donated the location in 1965; however, the museum was not able to relocate until the station was fully emptied out in 1968. For more than 40 years, the small Regional Welsh Museum has functioned in this building, which was subject to very few renovations before housing the new collection (this destination of a former railroad station is not unusual in the Patagonia, where the shutting down of railway lines left stations, installations and adjoining lots in the

23. These newspapers have been consulted by different researchers from local and foreign universities. This is the case of Marcelo Gavirati and Fernando Coronato, who have consulted the archive frequently. One result of this task is the book compiled by Tegai Roberts and Marcelo Gavirati (2008). Glynn Williams has been one of the researchers that has studied the Welsh colonization on Chubut from different perspectives; see Glyn Williams (1991).

hands of the local governments). The museum is owned by the Camwy Association, and it cannot be considered a government-run museum, though the province does provide it with a small subsidy, the equivalent of the salary of its director.

The old train station is divided into five different exhibition rooms, an archive and one external warehouse. Nearly 3,000 objects from Welsh colonization are on display; all have been donated or are on permanent loan from residents in the lower valley of Río Chubut. Along with familiar household objects (clothing, personal possessions, dishware), the museum has numerous rural tools. The archive houses a large collection of old photographs and issues of the local Welsh paper, *Y Dragod*, which has been published continuously since 1891<sup>23</sup>.

The first exhibit room is one of the largest: it is the waiting room of the old railroad station. Covered with signs providing historic information, it has a glass display case with dresses, a sewing machine and old photographs. Next door, the second room houses kitchen utensils and other daily (feminine) objects. A kitchen cabinet displays dishes and tea cups, as well as books on the Patagonia, which are on sale. The third room has stone objects produced by the *Tehuelche*. On a wall in the same room, at a height of approximately meter and a half, there are three rifles on display that belonged to the Welsh explorers. There are also tools used by the Welsh colonists for their economic activities, such as dairy production. A photograph of a traditional English dairy supports the idea that the techniques utilized by the colonists were taken from the Old World.

The fourth room displays some of the family recreational activities done in the colony and also focuses on the figure of David Roberts, one of the main supporters of the plan for the Welsh to settle in the region. A large portrait of Roberts is centrally hung on the wall. The fireplace reinforces the idea of intimacy in the home, an idea confirmed by the presence of music instruments (a piano, large accordion and harp), embroidered pieces and dishware (see Photograph 3). Next to the fireplace, there are two wooden armchairs (the kind that generally is used as throne in the coronation of the winners after each *Eisteddfod* festival), and flower arrangements.

The last room is the largest in the museum and it presents objects related to administrative aspects of the colony. Due to the density of the historical information contained here, the presence of maps and the solemnity of the room, it is perfectly clear to visitors that this room holds important objects related to public life; therefore, there is no room here for images or narratives that include women. The most important space within the room has a large table with a red tablecloth and a great number of maps and architectural plans. Travel journals of important figures in the colony are also on display, as well as the acts of the first community court and editions of the different Welsh newspapers edited in the region. Finally, a large shelf displays the chalice and the hymn books used in Welsh chapels towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the wall, there is a large map of the colony in Chubut with the lot divisions that correspond to each family. There are also photographs of important men from the Welsh land company and biographical information about David Roberts and the first colonists.

Like the Mennonite museums in Paraguay, at the Gaiman historical and

regional museum the main emphasis of the exhibition is on daily life. Daily life is inevitably associated with home life and intimacy: the dishware used for serving tea or for having lunch at home, the kitchen utensils, the embroidery, etc. All of this is presented as the framework not only for a dense family life (clearly the most significant life within the community) but also as a regulated universe destined for women. Within the museum, Welsh women are clearly relegated to the private sphere. This is why a single room can display both a musical instrument and a cradle (see photograph 3).

Women's participation in public activities, in the sphere of decision-making or in outdoor world remains invisible. Considering that women's roles in family reproduction and in domestic, private activities are a constant in European rural societies until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is thus no surprise to find this pattern in a colony of English speaking protestants who settled in the southernmost part of the world in 1865. What is strange, however, is the fact that at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this criterion is still what guides the organization of the exhibit, making the "roles" of each gender appear natural.

The gendered division of work as presented in the exhibit makes it clear that tasks related to the sensitive, creative world (playing music; embroidery, etc.) correspond to women, while public functions and those related to the outdoors are masculine. The maps, the land company, the court, the travel journals, all objects that make reference to measuring and controlling time and space and those relating



Photograph 3 – *Welsh daily life*, Gaiman Museum, October 2010. Photograph taken by the authors.



to disciplining one's peers within the framework of political and community life: all of this is an exclusively masculine world. What the museum shows is that the colonization was done essentially by families in which men and women roles were not only completely different but also complementary. The division of labor, family and political tasks is naturalized based on the gender that handles them. Thus the museum ranks the activities: women's tasks are less relevant and less worthy of exhibition than those done by men (non-domestic work, i.e., politics, trade, the exploration of lands, negotiations with the national State, presentations, public discourses, the distribution of lands, imparting justice, etc.).

As in the Jacob Unger Museum, there are also indigenous artifacts. Similarly, stone tools are displayed with no information provided on their use, origin, data or usefulness, except in the case of the arrowheads (see Photograph 4).

Nothing is said about the other tools there, but that lack of information becomes especially enlightening when viewing the rest of the exhibited items in the third and smaller room. The room has tools for making dairy products, buckets, sieves, presses and different containers used in the Welsh home and agro-industrial production. Most of these artifacts have small signs that indicate their original owner and what they are used for.

According to the museum presentation, the Welsh colonization progressed essentially due to the self-sacrifice and effort of the Company leaders, owed to their intrinsically entrepreneurial spirit. In contrast, the original inhabitants



Photograph 4 – Indigenous (unnamed) tools, Gaiman Museum, October, 2010. Photograph taken by the authors.

were pushed off the land due to their inferior economic, technical and military development. In this way, the Welsh occupation of the coastal terrain in the central Patagonia Region can be attributed to their technological superiority (understood as the capability for greater economic productivity). The contrast is aimed at showing the technological superiority of the Welsh in comparison to the indigenous people. On the other hand, a few meters higher than the arrowheads on the same display wall are the rifles used when the Welsh were settling in their colonies. Here the technological difference is not only aimed at pointing out the greater productivity and efficiency of the Welsh, but also their warfare superiority.

In Welsh and Mennonite museums there are many tales of peaceful contacts and harmonious relations between the indigenous and the colonists at the beginning. *Strangers became neighbours* is the title of a Mennonite text that reproduces these friendly contacts, while Glynn William's text on the recovery of the history of the Welsh in the Patagonia repeatedly makes reference to how much the Tehuelche chiefs appreciated the pleasant disposition of the Welsh colonists<sup>24</sup>. There is little doubt to this. Having fled to an inhospitable land, with little knowledge of their surroundings, both Mennonites and Welsh took advantage of indigenous assistance to make the forests of El Chaco and the flat plains of Chubut an inhabitable place. As pacifists and profoundly religious people, they were not violent with the indigenous people, i.e., there was no physical extermination: this does not mean, however, that they considered these people their peers or that they respected or valued their differences. In the interviews with the Mennonites and the meetings with descendants of the Welsh colonists, there is a certain mythologization of these relationships, an idyllic naturalization of the interethnic relations that can be attributed to a great extent to the revival of original cultures over the past few decades. Perhaps more than the Paraguayans or the Argentines, the indigenous people provided the clearest proof to the colonists of what a Mennonite and a Welsh were *not*.

#### Conclusions: us and them in community museums

The museums seem a place where the community tries to show the best of itself and simultaneously leaves something unsaid in the attempt. In the two analyzed museums, the community speaks for the others, for those who are different. The others are translated, as if they were minors or people who need to be sheltered and educated. The colonists' values (accumulation, efficacy, progress) are presented as universal, natural values that allow to evaluate the indigenous cultures. The former are related to culture and the path to welfare and happiness; the latter are linked to nature, to noise, to anarchy. A similar dichotomy is established by the State, as indicated at the beginning of this work. So, it does not seem like the problem lies in the dimension of which ruling actor is represented (the nation or the ethnic group): the question lies in the way in which the other is represented. Everything seems to indicate that at the Mennonite and Welsh community museums,



25. See Jacques Hassoun (1996).

the displacement of the national community to the ethnic community does not produce a similar change in the position of the subjects that speak or in the consideration of those about whom things are said.

How can this situation be reverted or subverted? How can more representative, democratic museums be constructed, as opposed to ones that reproduce the exclusions of national states? What can be done to ensure that the move towards ethnic identities is not merely a new distribution of power, but a process of overcoming and growing together, one that incorporates the multiple types of rationale and logic that exist? Creating good narratives. What does "good" mean in this context? Narratives that show difference but that allow it to circulate. Narratives that include differences, otherness and singularity and simultaneously stimulates the appropriation of these differences. Narratives in which difference is maintained just as it is: essentially but not in operative terms, incomparable. Incomparable does not mean non-transferrable. It implies that one does not assume or promote any kind of evolutionism when creating or visiting a museum.

The relation to difference has its own history and it is useful to remember it in order to take a different position with respect to alterity. Historically, two positions can be distinguished with respect to difference; each of these also involves other positions with regards to the way the subject is conceived along with the cultural heritage<sup>25</sup> that the subject bears:

1. *Denial: a starving "we"*. Ethnic or cultural difference is not substantive because all humans, belonging to the same species, are subject to the same needs and desires. Although there are other cultures and ways of conceiving the world, these can be classified according to the degree to which they satisfy human needs, which are always defined by the hegemonic culture. Those who dare to bring up other needs or desires are considered alienated in diverse aspects. The others, in essence, are like us, and thus we can speak for them. What is more, we should speak for them because our common humanity obliges us to do so. The denial of difference has historically sheltered a model of cultural integration based on assimilation. This position involves a universal conception of the subject, of a supposed "common humanity" represented by the developed Western world to justify the domination of all those who are different due to the long-desired wellbeing. This universal subject, who is only different in appearance, is the bearer of a legacy, of a way of conceiving and acting in the world. But is it possible to form this universality of the subject given the notable differences it involves? To put it another way, how is it possible to incorporate both heritage and legacy? Those who deny difference or minimize it take a position of rupture and ignorance in terms of the past, which they consider "traditional" and often believe to be an obstacle for modernity and development.

2. *Radicalization: an anorexic "we"*. Those who are different are so different that the only thing to do is to keep them encapsulated within their own singularity. This position involves a conception of the subject as a walled up entity. In this case, the heritage is a legacy that must be maintained intact, mythologized and fetishized, to protect itself against the threat of the other. The heirs are entrusted with the mission of protecting what they have received and conserving it without any changes or stains. It is an impossible mission but many ethnic communities have dedicated entire lives to its.

However, a third position can be taken that would allow us to resolve some of the issues that have been described. Good museum narratives should be constructed from a perspective that included *acceptance and circulation* to create an *othern-us* (in Spanish *nos-otros*). The difference cannot and should not be denied because it is a condition of identity, an antidote against alienation<sup>26</sup> and there is no individual or collective action possible without identification. But this implies an ironic, non-essentialist conception of the subject, who has been socialized in certain ways and inculcated with certain values but who can and should question this heritage. A subject who recognizes difference as part of his own identity, as something foreign. To distance oneself, it is necessary to call upon difference, otherness, what is not one's own. By questioning the legacy he or she has received, the subject can also incorporate elements from other traditions and appropriate aspects of other cultures. Alterity is acknowledged to make it circulate, to put it into movement, to transmit it. In this formula, universality is not despised, as could be deduced from certain ethnical practices; however, this is not the universality of values but the universality of the positions of the subjects. These ironic subjects (who deny all single, literal meanings) do not confuse what is theirs with what is good: they question what is their own and what is appropriated and acknowledge that all appropriation involves necessarily betraying the legacy. A museum that is capable of responding to this demand would be culturally more democratic, politically more inclusive and socially much more useful.

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#### INTERVIEWS

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