

Lost in a snowstorm, we are friends (an American painting)

A conversation performed at the *Moment of Exchange Memorial*



Let's talk about the video *Lost in the snow storm, we are friends*. The thing that I call moment of exchange is, in this case, that of a bullshit snowstorm when we are supposed to work together for each others survival. We become 'friends in adversity', *solidaire* in the summer snow, no less.



Still of video *Lost in a snow storm, we are friends*

Lost in a snowstorm, we are friends (an American painting)
Paloma Ayala
2018
www.palomaayala.com

Written in the form of an interview or a conversation, *Lost in the storm...* explores relationships between fictional and non-fictional narratives. Not always linear, it plays the misleading game of having the looks of truth, but contents that are just partly that. It talks about exchange between narratives and images, emotional and historical moments, scientific references, memories of dreams, of the moment before and the after.

Is this a false memory?

A false memory creates convoluted relationships that appear unclear. In the video, the date: '2 de Abril, 1967', the encyclopedic text about Dr. Elizabeth Loftus' research, the colonial-American nostalgia present in the painting by Charles M. Russell, and climate change, all these things are not regularly looked at in relation to each other. They are not usual friends. The false memory is a kind of information that indeed informs of things that happen, but are

not part of the evident description of an object. In this case, snow is perceived as an impossible substance in a specific city of the north of Mexico, not because snowfalls do not happen at all there, but because they barely do, they barely exist. In their subtlety, snowfalls bring a slow transition in change, so slow, that we do not record it as a moment of importance.

Dr. Loftus said once, that our most vivid memories are those which are altered by current emotions or ideas, and by the way we carry them outside of our personal space, into the shared realm. I think that the summer snowfall probably happened, but because of our current times and lives, we now connect it to impossibilities. An unfeasible climatic event, and the improbable political act of the Catahujan indigenous tribes working together with the European subjugators, are two stories that seem to connect by a belief in their impossible nature. But it does not mean that they do not trigger relevant thoughts, like climate change or our colonial history, both denied and tampered with by the current administration of the US government. It also reminds us of that other history when the border was 500 km north of where it is now, and these lands were identified as one bigger cultural area.

So the moment of exchange is prompted by a false memory, a fiction. Are false memories as much part of people's personal lives and collective history, as real ones?

It is very difficult to determine reality in a memory of a single person. A single-sided story requires examination, a comparative context that proves veracity in relation to the stories of the other witnessing bodies. However scrutinized, the plural story will not always generate authenticity. The manifold nature of the moment of exchange adds complexity to the recollected reality, yet still does not make it true.

I think your question is more about how the plural experience of an event is affected by the individual post-event recollection, the idea that any post-event activities will continue to affect that memory. It is like saying that all the people that will see your work of art, the components of your public, will affect it at some point because they will manage to bear on your position and extend it or destroy it by adding theirs.

Yes, the public sphere does that to things.

The moment of exchange, or friendship, in your so-called 'American Painting' story, is proved only by the subjectivity of an event retold by a painter.



In the picture, there are two officers and five Catahujans, if I am correct. But for us, the public, that moment of exchange is influenced by the leading questions of Mr. Russell, who is telling a colonial story from the romanticizing point of view of a white Euroamerican. Look at the details of the painting... the gesture of that man describing the skull of a buffalo who went astray and died without the protection of the hoard. I think that the summer snowfall story is more capable to be true than the 'friends in adversity' snow story of Mr. Russell. My question to you would be: is placing both events next to each other, helping you to instrumentalize a notion of fictional reality? I mean, artistically, you are appropriating a film created over fifty years ago, a text from an encyclopedia, and a painting by another artist. I can only understand that you do this on purpose, correct?

Yes. The painting *Lost in a snowstorm we are friends* by Charles Marion Russell is quite inspiring. It reminded me of how as Mexican born and raised in the border, I have experienced the United States, my personal history of displacement, these imaginations of how far away lands and times look like, and also the imaginations of how did we look like before the Europeans came, or before Texas was won in war by the US.

In the painting, the whited out context, the storm, renders the background barely existent. The things that exist are the "friends" and their drive for survival. A utopia of coexistence, but only in these terms. I will assume that me and him (Charles M. Russell) share a joy for telling stories that have a "stranger than fiction" feeling, even if he did not do it on purpose. The painting is simplifying the colonial conflicts. The issues of racism and domination of foreign territories.

As a matter of fact, I would ask him to do the cover illustration of this publication if i could. The Mexican adult-comics scene took a lot from these representations, and I frequently feed from their styles and formats to communicate my ideas.

Then I found the snowfall footage in Youtube, carrying this weird date, '2 de Abril, 1967', telling an uncanny story of a day in the life of a post-industrial city, Monterrey. A dream that according to Don Horacio Alvarado, famous hobbyist of our local History, happens only every 100 years. Unbelievable... just as the "friends in adversity" story. I titled the video with the painting's name, then added the text about Beth Fishman to bring back first, the issue of whoever is telling the story is who determines if it is believable or not. The language of science in this case gives credibility to the second thing, which is simply the joy of telling fictional narratives that as you put it, trigger thoughts about the here and now. I never thought of the climate change issue until you said it, actually. That's a new.

I was also thinking of Beth's ability for community outreach. You'll find plenty of TED talks and lectures by her, online. Check it out. She is better known for her married name Loftus, but I hate it when women take the husband's name, so you're gonna have to forgive this one.

Her research focuses on memory and our recollection of events affected by emotional states, subsequent experiences, and leading false informations. Her experiments have proven the unreliable nature of memories. She is one of many scientists that had been under attack in the past 30 years by a blind belief in the truthfulness of experiential knowledge and the inaccessibility of scientific language to a wider public. More than once was she sued by court witnesses with traumas that she evaluated as not real, but were felt and suffered. It's pre-Trumpian.

(pause)

... In fact I claim Beth Fishman as one of my fictional characters. "Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental."

Let's come back to the issue of exchange and purposely making narratives coming from different sets of origins, cross... or collide, as in the image provided by the Loftus' research narration in your video. As I understood, you are trying to affect the stories that already have a preconceived place, by altering the opinion that the public might have of that narrative...Yeah, in order to affect their opinion on further narratives. The moment of exchange is when transformation is expected. People do not fight change in this moment, as they do in other moments of a process. Pointing out the moment of exchange or enlarging the moment as something important, is a way to extend a conversation. And this I like to do.

This conversation, which is about snowfalls, friendships, moments, can extend.

Maybe this is the moment of mentioning that the place where we are now is at the "Moment of Exchange Memorial", localized in the cross of Paricutín and 2 de Abril streets, or?

Yes. In Monterrey.

Why did you decide to place the memorial here?

Because of a picture of children playing during the snowfall of 1967, taken precisely in this crossroad. That historical event that links their lives with the lives of children on a different side of the globe. Plus, the names of the streets are so perfectly matching. Paricutín is the name of a volcano that suddenly arose out of the cornfield of farmer Dionisio Pulido in 1943. I mean, literally in the course of one day, this guy heard thunders from under the ground, witnessed the fracture of his fields, and saw the creation of a crater from which a whole mountain grew. WTF? Just an amazing story. The Paricutín was active for nine years



Picture of the snowfall of 1967 in Paricutin cross with 2 de Abril streets, Monterrey, Mexico

and then died. It is now a beautiful mountain in the state of Michoacán, Mexico.

[Dionisio Pulido reported:

At 4 p.m., I left my wife to set fire to a pile of branches when I noticed that a crack, which was situated on one of the knolls of my farm, had opened . . . and I saw that it was a kind of fissure that had a depth of only half a meter. I set about to ignite the branches again when I felt a thunder, the trees trembled, and I turned to speak to Paula; and it was then I saw how, in the hole, the ground swelled and raised itself 2 or 2.5 meters high, and a kind of smoke or fine dust – grey, like ashes – began to rise up in a portion of the crack that I had not previously seen . . . Immediately more smoke began to rise with a hiss or whistle, loud and continuous; and there was a smell of sulfur.

He tried to find his family and oxen but they had disappeared so he rode his horse to town where he found his family and friends, happy to see him alive. The volcano grew fast and furiously after this.

Celedonio Gutierrez, who witnessed the eruption on the first night, reported:

...when night began to fall, we heard noises like the surge of the sea, and red flames of fire rose into the darkened sky, some rising 800 meters or more into the air, that burst like golden marigolds, and a rain like artificial fire fell to the ground.]

The quote is from the website of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History (<https://naturalhistory.si.edu/onehundredyears/expeditions/Paricutin.html>). They funded the research of geologist William Foshag, who studied this volcano activities until its extinction. The video in the website shows a man that very much looks like Francis Alys in the middle of a performance, trying to understand the extraordinaires of that specific ecology, with his body.

As I think of sudden growth of mountains, thunders underground, and witnesses that describe the natural as magical, I also try to imagine the exchange moment between an American scientist, the peoples that he recorded, and his Mexican colleague Dr. Jenaro González Reyna, who developed research as well. You know, in our Mexican nationalistic imaginary, revolution came from the cornfields, from the proletariat who were farmers. Michoacán has nowadays a high concentration of criminal groups and some of the most active community-guerrillas defending themselves from those groups. It is easy to make a metaphoric bridge from the volcano to the issue of social revolts. What's not so easy is to bridge to the witnessing concern: who was present, who recounts that story and how?

The other street is named after the date of a historical battle when Mexican batallions won against French occupational forces in 1867. 2nd of April is also the date in which 15,000 people marched on the streets of Monterrey against the oppression of the fascist oligarchical government and against labor mistreats.

That happened in 1903. Some of the protesters were brutally assassinated by the police.

Isn't it funny, both funny haha and funny odd, that 100 years after that battle, a heavy snowfall would bring a break to the activities of a progressive industrial and hard-working city? According to Don Horacio Alvarado's spoken chronicle, the snow brought a warm feeling to the 'hearts' of the inhabitants.

He mentioned that these climatic events occur once every 100 years, no? Which of those rarities do we need in order to take a rest: that of a snowfall or that of 15,000 people raising their voices? What is a rest if not a weapon? What is a snow fight that happens every 100 years?

[From here I see the building of Multimedios Televisión. Does your exchange moment includes the media as a historical instance?](#)

Multimedios has been located here since 1968. It is currently the most influential media agency in the city of Monterrey, probably in the greater area of cities connected to here, like Saltillo, Reynosa, Nuevo Laredo, etc. You have seen the city, this place is huge. Imagine its network.

It is meaningful that the memorial is here, yes. Media plays a definite role in how we remember.

[You mentioned Don José Alvarado before. I am familiar with his TV broadcast "Reportajes de Alvarado". They made reportages about local history and culture in the state of Nuevo León, where this city is positioned. As I understand, they reported the snowfall of 1967 as a rare event that stopped the dynamics of the city and shifted](#)



The Moment of Exchange Memorial looks like a snowman

the psyche of Monterrey into a playful mode. Don Horacio Alvarado said this in the narration of his reportage, which you mention before:

[April 2, a day that would be marked in the history of Nuevo León as the white day that paralyzed the city, and covered it with a magical cloak that brought a pleasant sensation of tenderness to the hearts of the inhabitants. It filled the children with an unusual sort of joy, because their illusions were turned into snowflakes. A reality! Something they did not believe, but that filled their little heads with white snow bits.

People took out their warm clothes, their boots, to enjoy a unique show. The schools and factories were empty, because nobody felt that they should study or work. Everything was happiness. Camera films sold out from stores. By 10 in the morning there was not a single roll for sale. [...] a few cameras were installed to capture this Christmas postcard view to send images to Mexico City, because they did not want to believe that it was snowing in Monterrey, since it is an extremely rare phenomenon. Experts say that it only occurs once every 100 years.

It was a magical day, because men, women, children, all filled their bodies with a very special feeling. There was no place for sadness, anger, hatred and resentment. It was something that changed the faces of the people, now everything was smiles and exclamations of joy.]

Lástima que la nieve sea una cubierta tan delgada y efímera...

It's the only democratic thing in this city, the weather. We kind of hijack it with the crazy notion of comfort we created in modernity, and still keep in such high esteem. It's so fucking hot in the summer that I cannot judge people, honestly, when they go from home to car to classroom to office to mall, with minimum transition phases when they actually feel the wave of 43 C air, 19% opaque because of pollution. The same happens in winter, all living spaces are heated. We scarcely live outdoors.

I loved "Reportajes de Alvarado" as a child, thanks for bringing it up. My dad is a sucker for local traditions. He would take me and my siblings everywhere in the state. You have to keep in mind that here, few care about their history. My dad does. We saw caves, archaeological sites, hiked in mountains and deserts, ate amazing foods, heard all kinds of stories. I keep a bit of that from him.

Maybe the 19% opaque air is what happened that summer of '67. People were dazed in a quasi opiate dream out of the bad air. A 'Lourdes sighting' sort of condition, a collectively created false memory. I am fascinated by that event.

It is indeed interesting. It also connects Monterrey with the space you live in now in Switzerland. In a way, that summer snowfall event separates itself from the flow of Monterrey's own History, so much, that one can place Switzerland next to Mexico. I am interested in the malleable aspects of History, the narratives of the past that get stopped or changed or re-invented. Parts of your video contain Loftus' narration written, instead of spoken. The small messages seem to inform of the images that we are about to see. They are that 'leading question' that Beth Loftus affirms, acts as affecting agent of memory. Annett Busch wrote something like "These scenes are not so much about deciphering symbolisms, but about discerning

how its echoes reach us.” (How much the heart can hold, 2017)
I want to understand your work in this way, not as images that inform about themselves, but about us and the mental correlations that we are able to build in the now, the before and the after of our memory. I think of the snowfall as a fiction that is unfolding in front of us, though one is not necessarily aware of which part exactly is true or which part fictitious.

I come back to the question of why are you making a montage of a 50 year old image, while you reference an even older American painting and some scientific research?

“Fatigued images for the fatigued now. [...] Standing still could be the precursor of moving on...”, said John Akomfrah from his work Transfigured Night (2013). The moment of encounter with a memory, as fatigued as it may be, is exciting, it has a spirit of nostalgia and curiosity. In German curiosity is “Neugier”, the root ‘neu’ means new. In this case, it is not the quality of the video, or the painting as media, that I find attractive. I do not care if it looks old, ‘illustrationy’ or grainy. The core of the work deals with memory and history. In my confused, revolted, thirty-eight year old mind, a series of experiences of life in different places overlap. Many people, languages, cultures. These memories are mine in the way Beth Fishman says that any recollection has the quality of fiction. I tell the story, I use these events to tell that story, embedded clearly in that fictional aspect. I re-act.

I understand the ethical claim of authorship when using images, or footage, found online ‘cause of the way we relate and handle them as artists. Is that where your question is going?

I think the images I found for this specific work are fatigued. I think I am standing still, but hoping... really hoping to move on.

Beth Fishman said “If you saw it with your own eyes, does not mean it happened. Memory worked like a tape recorder before (under other psychological theories). Memories were accurate. With a little help of drugs and hypnosis, one could uproot them as if they were potatoes. Now we understand that we may as well have made everything up, even our recollections. We should profoundly re-evaluate our common histories.” (The Potato Theory: Inside the Psychologist Studio with Beth Loftus)

Interesting. Though this is not my kind of moving on. What I mean is not a juridic gesture that decides that this happened, this did not, this affected positively, this negatively. Not a pointing finger. The moment of encounter with a memory should have a gesture like looking into the infinite... of stillness. Imagine if we would collectively stopped and looked into infinity at some point of the day.

Dramatic.

It would acknowledge the fictitious nature of the whole endeavor.



P- Well, to that I say "fatigued image the precursor of moving on..." (J. Akers, 2013). I think the images I found for this specific work are fatigued. I think I move on.

A- The moment of encounter with exciting. It has a spirit of nostalgic stillness... like looking into the infinity into infinity at some point of the day.

P- Dramatic.

It would acknowledge the fictitious nature

A- Let's come back to the issue of exchange from different sets of origins, cross-cultural, present in your video stories that already have a pre-recorded opinion that the public might have of

P- ...Yeah, in order to affect their opinion on further narratives. The moment of exchange is when transformation is expected. People do not fight change in this moment, as they do in other moments of a process. Pointing out the moment of exchange or enlarging the moment as something important, is a way to extend a conversation. And this I like to do. This conversation, which is about snowfalls, friendships, moments, can extend.

the fatigued now. [...] Standing still could be the precursor of moving on..." (J. Akers, 2013). I think the images I found for this standing still, but hoping... really hoping to

memory, as fatigued as it may be, could be and curiosity. It should have a gesture of imagine if we would collectively stop to look

of the whole endeavor.

and purposely making narratives coming collide, as in the images provided by Beth As I understood, you are trying to affect place, maybe fatigued, by altering the narratives.