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Review of *Watermarks: Urban Flooding and Memoryscape in Argentina*.

Susann Ullberg. Sweden, Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, 2013.

The disastrous flood in 2003 of parts of the Argentine city Santa Fe caused twenty three immediate deaths, another hundred indirect casualties, and about a hundred and thirty thousand inhabitants had to be evacuated. An interesting question is whether it was to be understood as a naturally or politically caused event; a pertinent question both for environmental anthropology as well as for crisis management. The urban flooding, and the way the victims and other citizens in the city remember, forget and make sense of the flooding, as well as the consequences for vulnerability, resilience and adaptation, are at the centre of the doctoral thesis *Watermarks: Urban flooding and memoryscape in Argentina*, authored by Susann Ullberg.

In Argentina there is a strong focus on memory and remembrance due to the historical experiences of violence and dictatorships. In this context remembering is often considered a moral responsibility. The concept “memory work” helps us to understand and analyse what is remembered and, equally important, what is forgotten. The flooding in 2003 in Santa Fe became known as *the Flood*, even though the city has been known for the floods since the foundation in colonial times. Certain things have to be forgotten in order to make place for what is to be remembered. The concept *memoryscape* relates memory and landscape. It directs the attention to the spatiality of memory and how people remember through the physical environment, something which is fundamental for a disruptive experience like when the flood enters the home and destructs everything in its way, or kill family members and friends. “Watermarks” in the title refers to two different aspects of the investigation about the flood. Firstly, the way the water from a flood leaves a mark on the wall of a house, or in the territory, and secondly, a watermark is revealed when holding a paper to the light for examination.

The thesis is based on prolonged and multisited fieldwork in the Argentine city of Santa Fe, among middle- and low-income districts. It was initiated in 2004, a year after the Flood struck. Ullberg has collected her empirical data through interviews, participation in activities, and by accompanying actors to different places that are important for the construction of the “memoryscape”. She concludes that the way a railway bank is explained and understood shows how it makes up not just a material and territorial border, but also a social border between those who generally have been saved from flooding, and those who are conceived as “flooded” or “flood-able” (*inundados*). Bureaucratic documents, infrastructure, memorials, rituals and everyday practices are also part of the study.

The aspect of social inequality and disaster vulnerability plays a central role in the analysis. The thesis problematizes the common assumption that the experience of recurrent disasters leads to

learning and adaptation. Ullberg refers to the discursive shift that took place after hurricane Katrina in 2005, from “disaster resistant communities”, to “resilient communities” that are able to deal with disasters (p. 9). In her analysis, she distinguishes three groups who were affected by the flooding, but who express different approaches to the Flood: flood-victims, flood-activists, and flood-prone activists. The first group made up an accidental community of memory. The second formed a polity of remembering through their post-disaster protest activities. The third group showed an embedded remembrance of many different floods, and as the term “flood-prone” indicates, they show more profound disaster vulnerability due to social inequalities. The latter group is living with flooding as constant risk, and it is possible to talk about a “culture of disaster” – this is cultural adaptation whereby threat has become an integral part of the daily human experience (p. 10). For this latter group, Ullberg comments, returning to “normal” is returning to being disaster vulnerable.

In the chapter called “Flood management and the logic of omission”, Ullberg deals with how authorities approached and handled the flooding before, during and after the disaster in 2003 – or, in other words, their role in the memoryscape. When the Salado River flooded the city, the Mayor declared on the radio that evacuation would only be necessary in certain areas, mass evacuation would probably not be required, and certainly not on the Westside and Southwest Side. Just a few hours later, both of these districts were completely flooded (p. 78). The political and bureaucratic logic of omission is something which is claimed to be characteristic for political life in Argentina in general. The logic implies that there are incentives to *not* remember past decisions and arguments. A symbolic example is given, in the book, by an official who indeed had developed a flood management plan, which was simply “cajoneado”, that is, to put in a drawer and forget. Ullberg explains: “the verb *cajonear* is used in Argentina to denote a hindrance, delay or holding back of a question or a procedure within a public organisation.” (p. 183)

Impunity and the voicing of blame is a central topic among Argentine social movements. Impunity refers to how politicians and authorities are not held accountable for their responsibility in crises. Both the Mayor and the Governor, at the time of the flood, “insisted publicly that this had been an absolutely unpredictable disaster brought on by the uncontrollable forces of nature” (p. 112). Ullberg shows how the group which she categorizes as “flooded-activists”, in distinction to the “flooded-victims”, draws on popular culture in their wide repertoire of actions. For example, they play with the title of a song by the rock band Bersuit Vergarabat, “La Argentinidad al Palo” (Argentinianism beyond the limit) from 2004. They use it on a poster produced for the second anniversary of the Flood. The song deals with particularities of the Argentinian identity, like how profound nationalism and patriotism figure parallel to the occurrence of numerous violent crises and corruption (p. 143). On the poster the activists make a play with words, and write “Impunity beyond limit” over photos of the politicians who were considered to be responsible for the flood. A specific case of impunity concerns how the politicians of Santa Fe inaugurated a part of the levee which was never even constructed. Through the 15 metres wide hole in the levee, the water entered with full force.

The experiences and production of memoryscape in the city of Santa Fe is taken to be representative for Argentina, and this is the reason that the country, and not Santa Fe, figures in the title of the book. Recent Argentine experiences of disasters are the urban flooding in La Plata in 2013, with 78 casualties, and the contemporary explosions in gas fields three blocks from the urban area of Plottier in the Province of Neuquen, where the authorities claim that the smoke imply no health and

environmental risks whatsoever. These cases seem to show similar traits to the logic of omission that Ullberg analyses.

Watermarks makes me think about my own experiences of collaborating in a research proposal with an interdisciplinary Canadian-Argentine team, on climate change mitigation, and the communication challenges that we encountered during the proposal writing due to differences in the understanding between countries, and between different disciplines, of risk, politics and mitigation. Ullberg's book would have been good to have then, and it will be of great importance for any organization that wants to understand the political culture that circumscribes crisis management and risk reduction in Argentina. Since the book is written in an accessible way, *Watermarks* can be recommended for anyone who has an interest in Argentine culture and politics.