

**Museums: from metonymy to metaphors – examples of Rio de Janeiro**

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**ABSTRACT**

Traditionally, museums were supposed to be metonymical, meaning they showed off part of what they guard. But since the mid-twentieth century, museums can also be assembled as metaphors of what they represent. This article intends to discuss the reconstruction of the Museu Nacional from Brazil, after the fire that destroyed a great part of its collection and installations in September 2018. In which concept will Museu Nacional rely on to rebuild itself? Through bibliographic research, documentary research and in-depth interviews with Brazilian museums directors, this article points out that, even if Museu Nacional will remain a metonymical one, it has already achieved an aura of metaphor, especially due to people's reaction to the burning tragedy.

**Keywords:** Museums Conceptions and Definitions; Rebuilding of Brazilian National Museum; Metaphorical Museums, Museums at Rio de Janeiro.

## INTRODUCTION

Just a few hours after the burning which destroyed the most important Brazilian natural and anthropological museum, Museu Nacional (The National Museum, in English), on September 2nd, 2018, the mayor of Rio de Janeiro, the city where the museum was located, made a polemical statement. He posted on his personal page at Facebook what should have sounded as a national call for the rebuilding of the museum, but instead lightened up a controversy: "let's recompose every detail eternalized in paintings and photos and even if it is not the original will forever be the memory of the imperial family that gave us independence, empire, first constitution, and national unity" (Crivella, 2018). Shortly after his posting, hundreds started to reply that a museum isn't a building that can be repaired exactly like the original, mainly because such an institution is formed by its history and also how visitors use it.

This discussion leads us to a wider one. What is, in fact, a museum?

Traditionally, museums were constituted as spaces to store and display objects related to a theme or subject. They initially began as private collections (of art or singular objects) of wealthy individuals, families or institutions, often displayed in "wonder rooms". Then, national museums became guardians of imperialist spoils. All of these collections are usually organized by chronology, geographic origin, or any other logical system. But even when it focuses on a very specific theme, we can understand that what is being shown is only a part of the whole. For this reason, traditional museums can be seen as metonymy.

Since the first half of the twentieth century, with MoMA in NY, or since 1977, with Pompidou Centre in Paris (just to mention some significant examples), museums began to be thought like multicultural spaces with many activities besides the exhibitions. Concerns aside from maintenance and documentation of collections, sometimes these activities become more attractive than their exhibitions. As a consequence, today, some museums are metaphors of what they represent – such as the Museu do Amanhã (Museum of Tomorrow), or the Museu de Favela (Museum of Slum) both in Rio de Janeiro. These institutions designate the qualities of the subjects they represent, but do not exactly store objects related to such themes.

Those examples enlighten a question faced by Museu Nacional, who needs not only to rebuild itself physically and museologically speaking after the complete fire destruction but also urges to find its new mission. Will the rebuilt museum be a metonymical one, picking objects from particular collectors and receiving other countries donations and help? Or will it be reconfigured as a metaphor museum? With this question (the need to re-signify itself) as background, and considering the analysis of the museological conceptions of other museums from Rio de Janeiro, this article intends to discuss the possible paths for the reorganization of the first Brazilian museum. Would virtual exhibits be a solution? How could the museum become a cultural creation place and its democratic distribution?

What does it mean to be a museological equipment is a crucial issue for museums nowadays – institutions survival and sustainability have been put to the test in a scenario of the global crisis (Cândido, 2013). In order to discuss that subject, this paper is based on an empirical study conducted by the two researchers which include a literature review and in-depth interviews with managers and their different museums' conceptions.

## METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

This article presents the results of empirical research based on three methodological procedures – bibliographic research, documentary research, and in-depth interviews (Payne & Payne, 2004).

The bibliographic research, “the fundamental first stage of empirical research” (Stumpf, 2015) was conducted mainly about museums definitions and conceptions, which lead us to a literature review that composes the article theoretical framework.

Documentary research gathered journalistic articles, interviews, and podcasts about Museu Nacional, its fire, the reconstruction work, and also about other kinds of museums located at Rio de Janeiro. Another important documentary source was the museums' institutional sites. This material helped us to assemble the problem context since the method refers to the analysis of documents other than bibliographical sources that contain information about the phenomenon we wish to study (Bailey, 1994)

In-depth interviews were conducted with the directors of four museological institutions at Rio de Janeiro – Museu do Amanhã, Museu de Favela and Museu de Arte Contemporânea (Museum of Contemporary Art), each one representing a different museum conception. While Museu do Amanhã is a museum without *acquis* but with a very impressive building, Museu de Favela is a territorial museum that doesn't possess objects but a local culture experience. Both are metaphorical examples. Meanwhile, Museu Nacional, a classical definition of what a museum is supposed to be a repository of collected data and objects, dedicated to their exhibition, research and preservation, that is, a metonymical one. From another perspective, MAC is an art museum, whose collection comes, in great part, from one particular collector, in a lending system. These last two are (or at least were, until the fire) metonymical ones.

The importance of in-depth interviews is related to their ability to provide elements for understanding a situation or the structure of a problem (Duarte, 2015). Three interviews made for this article followed the semi-structured model, in which the researcher uses an interview script but let the conversation flows while is attended to key issues. They were all face-to-face interviews, with the participation of both researchers. The fourth one was conducted by email.

Data were analyzed through descriptive/interpretative techniques (Yin, 2016), in order to understand the meaning and to find common patterns.

## WHAT IS A MUSEUM?

According to the International Council of Museums, in a 2006 definition which should be revised until the end of 2019, “a museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment” (ICOM, n.d.). In Brazil, according to Law No. 11,904, dated January 14, 2009, which instituted the Statute of Museums, they are "non-profit institutions that preserve, investigate, communicate, interpret and exhibit, for the purposes of preservation, study, research, education,

contemplation and tourism, collections of historical, artistic, scientific, technical or other cultural value, open to the public, at the service of society and its development". (Brasil, 2009).

The same definition can be found at Instituto Brasileiro de Museus (Brazilian Institute of Museums), an autarchy responsible for the National Policy of Museums (PNM, in Portuguese), who is also in charge of thirty museums management, and credit a wider role to museal equipment.

In the world of culture, the museum takes the most diverse and engaging roles. A desire for memory entices people and leads them in search of old and new records, taking them to the field of museums, in which the doors open more and more. Museology is today shared as a practice at the service of life.

The museum is the place where sensations, ideas and ready images radiated by objects and references gathered there illuminate essential values for the human being. A fascinating space where one discovers and learns, in which one widens the knowledge and deepens the awareness of identity, of solidarity and of sharing.

Through the museums, social life recovers the human dimension that vanishes in the hurry of the hour. The cities find the mirror that reveals the face erased in the whirlwind of everyday life. And every person welcomed by a museum ends up knowing more about itself. (Ibram, n.d.)

Sensations, essential values of human beings, social life, belonging and experiences are attributes increasingly used by metonymical museums, what turns them towards a more symbolical – and at the end, even more metaphorical – practice.

## MUSEUMS CATEGORIES (FROM METONÍME TO METAPHOR)

At mythological Greece, Mouseion was the nine Muses temple – daughters of Zeus, the most important god, and Mnemoise, the memory goddess. And Muses were inspiring deities of art, literature and sciences studies. So museum, originally, was supposed to be a contemplation site, but not exactly a collection keeper, although the sacred aura was inscribed at its origins since it designated a religious building. And, although its ethnology is related to the daughters (the Muses), it ended by representing the mother's virtue (Memory).

That's from the fourteenth century that we have begun to hear of princely collections, but it's mainly from fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with ultramarines voyages, that nations started gathering collections formed with abroad objects. The eighteenth century is the great archeological discoveries period, and it's also when the royal families collections around the world became national museums (Suano, 1986). The organization of the large national museums' collections of is also related to the constitution of nation-state sovereignty

(ideological construction born at the end of the eighteenth century) and the legitimization of its nationalist and imperialist policies.

Little by little, museum was letting to be a place with the exclusive function of arts and curiosities exhibition, changing into a research institution, also concerned on population education. By the end of the nineteenth century, there were two kinds of museums conceptually different: those based on history and on national culture, as Louvre; (1793); and those related to national sciences, archeology and ethnology, like Britain Museum (1753). The British was the first national museum opened to the public, but the Louvre was the first collection to be called a museum.

Debates around the urgency of new museal practices have begun after the Second World War and have turned more present during the 1960 decade, inside political and cultural democratization movements. That's when the museums started to move from their headquarters towards developing communities' activities. (Suano, 1986). Maybe, the main paradigm of this movement were art museums and their need of trying to help the public understand contemporary art, and not simply exhibit them.

At art-dedicated spaces, the debates about educational functions of the exhibitions and the museums role are contemporary of artistical vanguards from early twentieth century, like MoMA (1939), the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), of London (1947) – inspired by Leeds Arts Club (1903), also from England – and mainly Pompidou Center, at Paris, which incorporated museological and cultural center functions. Thereafter the debate on museums public service role intensified.

Considering the background of various social movements, like the black movement, the feminist movement and the hippie movement, it was in the late 1970s that Hugués Varine-Bohan (a French intellectual, that was director of the International Council of Museums from 1965 to 1974) diagnosed that, from the nineteenth century, the development of museums became a purely colonialist phenomenon, from which the European countries imposed on the rest of the world their vision of cultural heritage, forcing other peoples to see their own culture by the eyes of European culture (Chagas & Gouveia, 2014).

New fields of knowledge were established at the end of the twentieth century and, with them, interdisciplinaries became increasingly fluid. In parallel, the possibilities of interactivity and museal practices grew. Thus, it becomes increasingly difficult to establish categories for museums, although, in this research, we had the concern of interviewing directors from quite different museums.

The concept of Social Museology, for example, dates from 1993 and "translates a considerable part of the effort to adapt museological structures to the constraints of contemporary society" (Moutinho apud Chagas & Gouveia, 2014, p.15).

For social museology, the basic functions of a museum, with which to preserve, research and communicate, should be carried out in a participatory manner, with social agents as the first concern, as well as the social, economic, political and environmental problems faced by the communities, aiming its socio-cultural development (Tolentino, 2016, p. 32).

According to Costa (2006), in that year in Brazil, the categories of museums were defined, by the extinct Ministry of Culture<sup>1</sup>, according to the characteristics of their collections, being: Anthropology and Ethnography, Archeology, Visual Arts (including in this category sacred art and applied arts), Natural Sciences and Natural History (including biological sciences, geosciences and oceanography), Science and Technology (including cultural goods that illustrate events or periods of history), Image and Sound, and lastly, Virtual (related to cultural goods that are mediated through interaction technology, like Internet). Still in 2006, the Brazilian National Museum Directory (in Portuguese, Cadastro Nacional de Museus) was created with the objective of processing and sharing the statistical information of Brazilian museum diversity (Ibram).

In the midst of such pre-established categories, mentioned above, the presence of the Virtual Museum gets the attention. It is important to fix that, in the same year, the International Council of Museums released the definition we mentioned above, the one that talks about tangible and intangible heritage, which means that immaterial patrimony was already being considered.

In 2011, the Guide of Brazilian Museums did not establish categories for Brazilian museums. In the document, they are presented by geographic regions subdivided into states. However, the headings "Museums in Deployment" and "Virtual Museums" complements this indexation (Ibram). Even though, it does not help us to conceptualize a virtual museum-

Almost every 20 electronic addresses listed there are nowadays disabled, but among those accessible, there are many kinds of sites: some are a compendium of other museums, some just lead to Facebook pages, some are a set of links and news. Although they are rather public and unrestricted, in general, they seem more like websites with some sense of history than museums, considering the functions expected of them, such as a good display of their collection, interactivity with the public, research development and educational action.

In Brazil, it is at the beginning of the twentieth century, and within the context of Social Museology, that the museums that patrimonialize the territory, culture and social history begin to emerge. Museums that preserve the day-to-day life of communities and museums without walls. The favelas<sup>2</sup> turn to be seen as territories and communities with their own cultures, and arise o Museu da Providência (Rio de Janeiro, 2005), o Museu da Maré (Rio de Janeiro, 2006), o Museu de Favela - MUF (Rio de Janeiro, 2008), or Muquifo (Belo Horizonte, 2009).<sup>3</sup>

Museu de Favela was established on 2008, as part of a governmental program, to create strategies to enhance the social and collective memory of the favelas of Cantagalo and Pavão-Pavãozinho, inventorying the memories of their residents. (Carvalho, Pinto, & Souza, 2016)

“When we started to design the museum, we wanted an open-air museum, that can show the territory, the whole community, the favela way of life”, told Antonia Ferreira, one of the Museu de Favela founders and nowadays a member of its board of directors, in a interview that took place one afternoon at the museum base (they refuse to call it a headquarters). “We had two purposes: to allow who is outside the community to understand it and to rescue the

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<sup>1</sup> In 2019, due to the administrative reform conducted by the elect President of Brazil, the Ministry of Culture was extinct and turned into a Special Culture Secretary, joint to Citizenship Ministry.

<sup>2</sup> Brazilian name for slum.

<sup>3</sup> Providência, Maré, and Muquifo are Brazilian slums.

history of the community.” Among its activities, an oral history program, that collects local residents’ testimonies; virtual expositions and guided tours through the favelas of Cantagalo and Pavão/Pavãozinho. “We have a live and mutable museum”, says Ferreira, “because it relies on the local culture”. So, for us, this is a metaphorical museum, not because it is located on a slum, but because of its proposal.

Another example of metaphorical museums is Museu do Amanhã, the most visited museum of Brazil, with around a million visitors per year. (MUSEU DO AMANHÃ, w/d) “Until recently, the museum concept was a well-defined one: an institution without profit, open to the public, which guards a collection. But today, it doesn’t have to be linked to the past or to the collections”, affirms the knowledge development director of Museu do Amanhã, Alfredo Tolmasquin. “We belong to a new category settled by ICOM, the future museums”. For him, museums that are so attached to their collections value, above all else, the support, not their meaning. “They value the object, the book, the document, not the information it carries. We don't need so many physical spaces, since the access to knowledge is no more restricted, because of new information technologies”.

Although it's considered as a science museum, Museu do Amanhã calls itself as a museum of ideas.

An environment of ideas, explorations, and questions about the time of great changes in which we live and the different paths that open to the future. Tomorrow is not a date on the calendar, it's not a place we're going to get to. It is a construction in which we all participate, as people, citizens, members of the human species (Museu do Amanhã, n.d.).

Tolmasquin stresses that the museum belongs to an international movement however is the first one to become real and to be a model for others, like the Futurium, from Berlin. “The content of a museum of ideas, therefore, is more linked to the immaterial patrimony than to the material patrimony of humanity. Their shows are not presentations of objects, but of narratives, both those of their curators and those constructed by the public itself” (Santa Cruz, 2017, p. 188)

Museu do Amanhã has already been described as “a little trippy, a little hippy, very worthy but rarely dull” (Watts, 2015). The equipment is one of the central works of the revitalization project of the port area of Rio de Janeiro, implemented over the two-term Mayor Eduardo Paes (2009-2012 and 2013-2016). Since its conception, the project has been criticized for being part of a city model focused on mega-events such as the World Cup and the Olympics, and for provoking the gentrification of some areas of Rio de Janeiro, favoring real estate speculation.

One special aspect of this museum is its architecture. Designed by Spanish Santiago Calatrava, this iconic building lays on the border of Guanabara Bay, as Museu de Arte Contemporânea (located, more precisely, at a nearby city, Niterói. functions in one architectural landmark, a building designed by Oscar Niemeyer, the most infamous Brazilian architect

## THE MUSEU NACIONAL REBUILDING WAYS

The first Brazilian museum, Museu Nacional was created by a decree of the prince regent D. João VI, in 1818. Inspired by the European museums of natural history, with scientific collections, libraries, archives, laboratories, and exhibitions, it was initially called the Royal Museum and operated in a not so big building in the Center of Rio de Janeiro (Pires, 2017).

His transfer to Paço de São Cristóvão, the residence of the last emperor of Brazil, occurred in 1892, already in the Republic. The Palace was registered by the Institute of Historical and Artistic Heritage (Iphan) in 1938 and eight years later the University of Brazil, which in 1965 became the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, incorporated the Museum.

Considered the largest museum of anthropology and natural history in Latin America, Museu Nacional as said, was a metonymy museum, with a collection of 20 million items, such as fossils, mummies, indigenous pieces and rare books – covering different areas of knowledge, like: vertebrate and invertebrate, entomology, geology, paleontology, ethnology, archeology and anthropology – as well as international post-graduate courses.

In the year of the fire, Museu Nacional celebrated 200 years, amid financial and structural difficulties. A Brazilian newspaper article, dated 05/31/2018, reported that the institution had to resort to "virtual crowdfunding to reopen dinosaur room and expects public money to be restored" (Canônico, 2018). Without resources for maintenance, a sinister in the proportions that happened in September 2018 rises as the chronicle of death announced.

The loss of the museum generated a national commotion and, as soon as possible, actions began to be made to keep the museum in focus, to continue to sensitize the population for its importance and to highlight the greatness of its collection. One was the exhibition "Arqueologia do Resgate: Museu Nacional Vive" (Archeology of the Rescue: National Museum Lives) that brought 180 pieces of its collection, being 103 rescues of the debris of the fire, in different stages of conservation, to an important and much visited cultural center installed downtown. But one piece deserves special attention. It's a replica of a Throne of an Ancient African Kingdom, whose original was donated to Dom João VI in 1811 and was part of the collection of the Museu Nacional since its foundation. The stunningly perfect replica was produced on papier maché by a 13-year-old student, from the 11 visits he made to the museum with his parents, to a fair organized by his school, which intended, after the fire, to reproduce, with the students' contribution, a school visit to the Museu Nacional. "We made the students' families and the surrounding community visit the school as if they were visiting the museum," the school principal said. "If it makes sense for you to work in a museum, that's why," added Claudia Carvalho, curator of the exhibition. (Lisboa, 2019)

It's fundamental to rebuild the imperial palace and the collection, according to Alexander Kellner, Museu Nacional director. He believes that a museum is defined by having collections and producing exhibitions. "I'm gonna say something to you: Museu do Amanhã is not a museum, in my conception. It's a cultural center", stresses Kellner.

That is the same opinion of Marcelo Velloso, MAC director. Yet, he points that "any museum – be an art museum, a Science one, a History one – is necessarily an experience and interaction space". Tolmasquim, from Museu do Amanhã, believes that, before the fire, Museu Nacional was almost a repository, like a technical reserve opened to the public. "Now it has the opportunity to get up-to-date conceptually speaking. It can still be collection-based

but look for a more current language, to attract a younger audience". The MAC director underlines that museums must break the bubble in which they have been for centuries and establish other means of interaction with society.

More and more museums are turning to programs that are out of exhibition scope to attract new audiences. Musical presentations, festivities, among others, occur in the spaces of the museum and do not necessarily have any relation with the exhibitions on display. These are actions that seek to establish the relationship of the museum with other public, who seek to break the barrier that exists between the general public in relation to museums - especially art museums (VELLOSO, 2019)

We may notice that those who said that a museum must have a collection in order to be defined as a museal institution, are the ones from metonymical museums. Kellner, for instance, is absorbed by the collection reconstruction. He informs that they have three different sources: material left at the technical reserve; material rescued from the ashes and donations. "We're not going to rebuild Museu Nacional as if the fire hadn't happened. The fire is already an element of our History".

In fact, at the exhibition "Arqueologia do Resgate", the fire evidences are a presence - some specimens got "glued" to their original support, others changed its colors due to heat. Surprisingly, some items survived intact.

Despite those affirmatives, we found pieces of evidence that inevitable there's is an influence of the new languages and technologies (metaphorical) into the reconstruction process. Since it's not possible to visit the museum at the present time, the institution team produced an audio visit that can be heard at Spotify, divided by the exhibition rooms of the burned museum.

## OTHER METAPHORICAL MUSEUMS

Huyssen (2000) works with the hypothesis that memory and musealization are needed together to build a protection against obsolescence and disappearance, to counteract our deep anxiety about the speed of change and the continual shrinking of horizons of time and space. It is a condition no longer linked to the institution of the museum in the strict sense, but a tendency infiltrated in all areas of daily life, which includes the valuation of urban restoration, the appeal to vintage objects, to "self-documentation in the creation of homepages and custom sites" (Huyssen, 2000).

In the same way, the sense of patrimonialization is now quite broad. It is larger than the valuation of the historic buildings and includes the concept of heritage that is quite vast, including the sense of inheritance and legacy, and consequently of preservationism. Because heritage is the sum of historical, artistic, cultural or natural – material or immaterial – assets whose value is recognized by a certain population group, and that for this reason must be preserved.

Maybe this patrimonialization and musealization of life are behind some situations in which the word "museum" itself is used as a metaphor. Considering specifically the nineteenth

century, we can perceive this word being used within the spectrum of "panoramic will" (Turazzi, 2009), present in a period that promoted universal fairs, bibliographic compendia, panoramic roundabouts, dioramas, and cosmoramas. One Brazilian example is the name of one that was probably the first illustrated newspaper in Brazil: *Museo Universal – Jornal das famílias Brasileiras* (Universal Museum – Journal of Brazilian families), published between 1837 and 1844).

We can give other examples of this metaphor in the field of art exhibitions. The "Museum of Arte Util", (useful art, in English) proposed by the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, was an exhibition which took place between 2013-2014 at the contemporary art museum Van Abbemuseum, in the Netherlands. It transformed the museum into a place where the value of use of art, and its social function, would be researched. The exhibition was built with the collaboration of space users. Several living projects were to be held at the museum, such as the Honest Shop, which sold products developed for and by the local population. Another project of the Museum of Arte Util was Light Therapy, by the Slovenian artist Apolonija Šušteršič, where a room was designed to increase communication and social interaction, taking advantage of the benefits of ultramarine light. (Van Abbe Museum, 2013)

After that, the project took place in several museums in Europe and the United States. It is a collection of artistic practices, where users are invited to propose projects to be included in the archive organized as a website. The idea of collection and archive probably gave rise to the use of the name museum for the project. (Projects, n.d.)

Still, in the field of the art exhibition, a recent and very controversial Brazilian example was the "Queermuseu". Opened in 2017, in the city of Porto Alegre, the exhibition was suddenly self-censored and closed by its own sponsor bank, due to the immediate negative repercussions of its theme regarding differences and transgressions. After a very well-succeeded crowdfunding project, the exhibition was reopened at Rio de Janeiro in 2018, with enormous public success. According to its curator (Fidelis, 2018), the name Queermuseum was used in the same sense adopted by the French writer and critic Georges Bataille to define the magazine *Documents*, he edited in 1929 – 1930, that means a deviant museum.

The magazine published previously unpublished works of Picasso and Miró, as well as primitive art and comics, archeology and ethnography, but also abject and eschatological themes. It was a pornographic catalog of sexually deviant although the magazine's editorial board was highly distinguished, and most of whom had a background in museum work (Brooker, Bru, Thacker, and Weikop, 2013). Probably the magazine was a museum because of its large thematic range.

Probably this board, with working experience at museums, understood its function of sheltering the records of the time and, perhaps, they intended to develop an eye for art.

## FINAL NOTES

This article intended to discuss opposite conceptions of museums – from metonymy to metaphor, a very contemporary debate, even though not with this nomenclature. At the moment we're finishing this article, Brazil has a week dedicated to museums, whose theme is the future of traditions. By the same way, in 2018, curators and art museums boards had a meeting at Hong Kong to discuss the future of museums. So, we assume this is a nowadays question.

With this framework, his paper analyses the case of Museu Nacional, which suffered burning in 2018. The reconstruction of the museum passes also through defining what is the conception it will follow.

According to its Director's words, we may assume Museu Nacional will be rebuilt as a metonymical museum, due not only to what they have already successfully rescued from the ashes but mainly because of the spirit that conducts the rebuilding work.

By another way, we notice that this whole process has a permeability condition. Some initiatives are more related to a metaphorical museum, like the audible visit and incorporation of the burning as an item of the museum's collection.

It is also emblematic the fact that the museum is using dust, ash, and debris from the rubble of its fire, together with synthetic resins, to manufacture the raw material with which they are producing 3D prints of archaeological pieces that had been scanned over 15 years.

That is: this museum of metonymic characteristics is now enveloped in a heavy load of symbolism, more common in museums that we call metaphorical.

Whatever model Museu Nacional will adopt from its restoration, it has already absorbed a new kind of item to its collections: individual and collective memory.

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