

How the Air Felt on My Cheeks: Using Avatars to Access History

Perhaps I can never truly understand or appreciate such a large scale tragedy without having experienced it for myself. But then, how will future generations be able to understand what is happening in my lifetime?

“Alonso Milatovic Zorman,” June 8, 1977, Argentina¹

Before all of this I used to forget what day it was and I would ask my wife in the morning to remind me. But when I was in Pisagua [a camp for political prisoners in Chile’s far northern desert] I never forgot a day...It was my way of defiance, my way of keeping some kind of order as the world around me was stripped of boundaries and rules...I would try to remember the smells that day used to bring...How did the air feel on my cheeks?

“Alvaro Morales Castillo,” July 1978, Chile

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AFTER MORE THAN TWO DECADES teaching Latin American history at a selective liberal arts college, I remain uncertain about my students’ relationship to history. Not to the formal apparatus of historians, which most are comfortable with: the interplay between primary and secondary sources, the challenges of interpretation, the concept of a continually revised historiography. Rather, history as a real past which was experienced in myriad ways by real people. While some of my concerns are common for social historians keen to re-center attention from leaders to those far removed from the halls of executive decision-making, they also go deeper. I worry that my students read history as they would view a film: not only do they see it as a constructed and edited narrative (a valid approach), but they think of history’s citizens as actors, playing roles rather than living lives. Unable to experience it, my students’ view of history remains

conceptual. And, to the extent that history is abstracted, while students feel for its performers, those lives remain intellectually distant from their own. Yes, they will often picture themselves in that “film,” but not in the real life that it attempted to portray. Teaching history for me, then, has become a double challenge: to help students understand both “History” (the narrative crafted by the historian, based on documentation, supported by previous scholarship, and bound together through logical argument) and “history” (the real events that occupied real lives that are largely hidden from the documentation). When you pricked these people of the past, they bled; their lives were not textual even though we receive them in that fashion.

I was pondering this challenge when I came across a short article by Edith Sheffer, a Stanford historian.² She described how, in a course on German history, she allowed students to create unique characters, born in 1900, who, on the basis of student journal entries, would live through Germany’s difficult twentieth-century history. Students would create avatars based on the few demographic characteristics she gave them. They would be governed by a set of just three rules: the avatars couldn’t leave Germany permanently, die, or change the course of history. Students would post weekly entries on a course website tracking their avatars’ unfolding lives. Sheffer had me when she observed that the exercise allowed her students to understand “how ordinary people adjusted to extraordinary times.”

Dirty Wars and Democracy

My course on “Dirty Wars and Democracy” gave me the opportunity to adapt and expand Sheffer’s innovative approach. “Dirty Wars” is an intermediate-level history course that explores four “Southern Cone” countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay) where the military seized power in the 1960s and 1970s. The dictatorships came as a violent response to a number of leftist, nationalist, and populist leaders who had reached power in the previous period. These included João Goulart in Brazil (1961-1964), and the military leaders Juan José Torres in Bolivia (1970-1971) and Juan Velasco Alvarado in Peru (1968-1975). In 1973, Juan Perón, the populist leader of Argentina who had been in exile since 1955, returned, was elected president, and presided over the country’s descent into armed chaos until his death one year later. The most emblematic leader of the period, however, was Salvador Allende, a Socialist who was democratically elected president in Chile in 1970, an election that the Nixon Administration attempted to overturn in a series of covert operations.³ If the political forces that unfolded in each country were different, their leaders (with the always confusing exception of Perón) were nationalist, progressive,

and supportive of a strong state role in economic and social affairs. They drew support for their programs from the working classes, the poor, and indigenous populations. Allende, who led the *Unidad Popular* coalition of left and center-left parties, nationalized Chile's foreign-owned copper mines (with full support of the Congress), and moved to take over the largest monopoly producers in industry and banking, deepen the agrarian reform process, shift national income to the lower classes, and broaden working class and peasant access to education, health care, housing, and consumer goods.

By 1976, each of these governments had been overturned by the military, beginning with Goulart's ouster in 1964. Dictatorships quickly controlled not only the countries where weak institutional structures had facilitated previous military interventions (e.g., Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Argentina), but also the two countries with the strongest democratic and institutional traditions in Latin America: Chile and Uruguay. What is more, the dictatorships that seized control were repressive by any standard. Rather than round up, jail, or exile (presumed) opponents, the state forces began to "disappear" adversaries, denying any knowledge, or responsibility, for their arrests or deaths. An estimated 30,000 people died after being "disappeared" in Argentina.⁴ Torture, historically used on a selective level in many of these countries, became widespread. In Chile alone, some 40,000 cases of torture have been documented.⁵ Uruguay had the highest number of political prisoners in the world on a per capita basis.⁶

By 1990, with the return of Chile to civilian rule, the military was removed from political control throughout the Southern Cone. But the process of determining what had happened during the dictatorships and bringing those responsible for massive human rights abuses to justice is an on-going process. The most famous of these cases centered on the arrest of General Augusto Pinochet of Chile on an international warrant as he visited London as a civilian in 1998. While the British Law Lords ultimately released Pinochet to return to Chile sixteen months after his detention, their finding—that political leaders could not claim "sovereign immunity" against prosecution for crimes against humanity—was a milestone in international human rights law. Cases persist against military personnel in all of the countries, no more so than in Argentina, where military personnel, besides bearing the responsibility for the greatest number of disappearances, are only now facing charges of having kidnapped the infant children of murdered prisoners to raise as their own.⁷

I have taught this course for more than a decade, and it has always proven challenging. It requires that students understand why two stable democracies and two countries prone to militarism succumbed to martial rule at the same time; why these dictatorships were so much more

repressive than any that held power previously; how they sought to organize and prolong their rule; how and why they left power; and what has been done to confront the difficult problems of dealing with past human rights abuses following the return to civilian rule. Further, because human rights abuses were so pervasive, students could not account for them solely as the result of individual cases of abnormal or maladaptive behaviors, but rather had to come to grips with the ways that states can and do mobilize large numbers of citizens to carry out (or ignore) acts of repression on their behalf. The inquiry into why ordinary citizens commit unspeakable acts, and why even more look away from the moral chaos around them, was particularly challenging for young undergraduates.

Finally, the course has always been a difficult one for me to teach because I lived in Chile in 1972-1973, was in Santiago during the September 11, 1973 coup, lost close friends who were killed by the military, and saw parts of my own experiences incorporated into the historical and dramatic record of those events.⁸ Because the subject matter remained so emotionally fraught for me, I didn't broach it in the classroom until many years after I returned to the United States. Even now, during the first class of "Dirty Wars," I inform students of my own background and advise them that because the course will pose such an emotional (as well as intellectual) challenge for all of us, they should be prepared to commit to it at a higher level than is normal for a college class. For all these reasons, an avatar project seemed an exceptionally promising tool for "Dirty Wars," and I integrated it into the course when I offered it in fall 2010.

The "Avatar" Assignment

In the second week of class, each of the forty-three enrolled students drew a slip of paper out of a hat. On it, they found a sex, birth year (sometime between 1930 and 1965), birth place, parents' birth location if different, and parents' occupation. Some slips indicated a religion other than Catholic; those with no indication were told to assume that the family was at least nominally Catholic. Because the central focus of the course was on Chile and Argentina, individuals were assigned to one of those two countries. So, a student might pick:

Chile, male, 1955, Concepción; Father: coal miner; Mother: runs small store; or

Argentina, female, 1940, Santa Fe; Father: university professor; Mother: psychologist (family originally from Lithuania), Jewish.

Much like Edith Sheffer's project, this one had a few simple rules: avatars could not die or become incapacitated. If they left Chile or

Argentina, they had to remain engaged with an exile community in their new home. If they returned, the circumstances for their reentry would have to be consistent with history. For example, it is estimated that more than 100,000 people were exiled from Chile during the early years of the dictatorship; most did not return before September 1988 unless they entered the country clandestinely. Finally, they couldn't change the course of history.

Students were allowed a few days to swap slips of paper; by the following Monday, they had to provide me with their avatar's name following the standard practice for surnames in countries of Spanish ancestry. Thereafter, and for the rest of the course, students would write weekly journal entries for their avatar based on dates I would give out. The first entry, for example, required that individuals introduce themselves as of the late 1960s or early 1970s. Given that some individuals were less than 10 years old for that first post, I allowed their "parents" to write the early narratives. Entries were spread out over the decades from the early 1970s until a final entry dated in real time (late fall 2010) in which students could either sum up their avatars' lives still speaking as the avatar or reflect on the project in their own voice. The youngest avatars would be 45 in 2010, the oldest 80. The dates chosen for their entries (which were different for the two countries) usually corresponded with a significant political event: coups, life under the dictatorships, arrests of major figures after the fall of the dictatorships, etc.

The avatar project was one of four projects due over the course of the semester. (Two of the others were traditional papers, the third a small-group project that could be presented in a variety of other media: video, audio, fiction, etc.) Students wanted to know how long their posts should be, and while I observed there was no required length, I suggested that approximately 600 words (two pages) per week seemed reasonable. Most students wrote a short first blog post, perhaps two to three paragraphs; their second entry was often twice as long. By the third post, they were averaging 1,000+ words per entry. The longest complete blog was 15,000 words, the approximate length of a fifty-page paper.

Over the summer before the course began, I consulted with the Director of the Cooper International Learning Center (CILC), Barbara Sawhill, and her educational technology specialist, Justin Lócsei, both highly skilled in the educational uses of new media, to ensure that my learning objectives could be accomplished technically. The most important elements for me were that each student be able to establish a blog under his or her avatar's pseudonym, that all of the blogs be gathered together on a single "mother" page which would allow everyone in the class easy access the individual blogs, and that I would be the only one who could link the pseudonym to

a specific student. I will explain later why the issue of avatar anonymity was so important to the project, but for now suffice it to say that, after discussion with the class, we agreed to open the blogs to a wider public via a locally hosted version of WordPress, an open-source blog tool configured for use by classes, rather than protecting them behind learning management system (LMS) passwords. All the students would be able to view and comment on each other's blog posts, and I provided weekly comments on each of the forty-three entries. The Appendix provides additional details on how the assignment was structured, including the consent to allow public access to the project and its results, the nature of my comments, and grading. The CILC can provide the WordPress template and plug-in for anyone who would like to use them.

Having sent the list of avatars' names to my technical collaborators, I took the students to the CILC for a session on WordPress. Within about thirty-five minutes, students had a good introduction on how to post to and tag their blogs; add images, video, or sound; and comment on other blogs. The CILC and I continued to offer technical advice after that session, but requests for help slowed considerably within about two weeks. A few days later, the central blog had been populated with posts from each avatar; forty-three new-born individuals introduced themselves to the world.

Inventing a Self

Qué día tan fome. Saqué una nota mala en mi examen de inglés (las matemáticas las puedo hacer, la ciencia la puedo hacer, pero el inglés me cuesta mucho)—y, para colmo, tuve que pasar toda la tarde haciendo colas con la Mamá y Moshe. [What an awful day. I got a bad grade on my English test (math, I can do; science, I can do; but English is really hard for me)—and, on top of it all, I had to spend all day standing in line with Mom and Moshe.] (“Talia Sharim Hirsch,” April 9, 1973, Chile⁹)

Raised in a post-E. P. Thompson era, most of my students are accustomed to reading about subaltern lives that were shaped by work, family, community and spiritual rhythms, rather than by events dictated by political leaders. But in this course on the rise of dictatorships, seminal political events were the primary pivot around which students began to design their avatars' entry into the world. The nature of course readings and discussion initially encouraged students to define their avatars in (largely) political terms. They reflected on the chaotic days of 1972, when consumer goods in Chile were in short supply and mothers stood in line for hours to get a liter of cooking oil, as in “Talia's” post above, or when right and left Peronist factions took shots at each other as Juan Perón's plane touched down in Buenos Aires ending his seventeen-year exile.

They described their lives when the soldiers took over, when repression was most suffocating, when a plebiscite rejected an extension of General Augusto Pinochet's rule in Chile, or when the election of Raul Alfonsín restored democracy to Argentina.

As students struggled to create lives that were, at so many levels, unimaginable to them, they first structured them around the most dramatic events occurring in their assigned countries: disappearances, torture, fear. "It has been almost 6 years since the military took my husband, leaving me alone to raise Mariana" ("Claudia Arriagada Rojas," January 1980, Chile). "I couldn't stop imagining Aharon [the avatar's brother] trying to... explain himself. How was he killed? How much pain did they inflict upon him before they took his life?" ("Fernando Rottermund-Edleman," 1979, Argentina). Particularly when recording their avatars' lives under the dictatorships, student entries mirrored many of the testimonial sources we had read in class. But creating a character with verisimilitude, someone whose choices made sense to them, proved to be one of the most challenging aspects of the assignment.¹⁰ As one student remarked in her reflection, "There are so many details in a life that it becomes incredibly hard to fill them in. The person has lived so many years, seen so many things, known so many people" ("Martina Rodríguez Aguilar," Reflection).

Yet, as they grew more comfortable with the characters they engendered, their narratives gradually shifted from the dramatic (and melodramatic) towards the quotidian. "I am 55 years old now," writes "Soledad Medina Suárez" in 2005, "I have a partner and together we have a child and, as a country, we are beginning to dream new dreams. We are choosing to forget, or forgetting to remember, and amidst the dreams of our past, we are learning to recreate" (April 27, 2005, Argentina). Individuals found partners, had children, and, in their final entries, reflected on what they had been through, now with the eyes of grandparents, of individuals who had matured conspicuously over the course of the semester. "I have gone through a personal re-birth these last two years," wrote one student whose avatar was kidnapped by the Argentine military in 1977, "ever since I felt hope on Christmas in 1983. I have decided that bad things have happened to all of us, and the pain is great, but what is the use in staying angry?" ("Ricardo Cervantes García," December 11, 1985).

Reading the testimony of a number of women who survived extended imprisonment and torture in Southern Cone jails during this period, I am often struck by the importance that the slightest human interaction held for these captives, even as fleeting as when one brushed the hand of another blindfolded prisoner.¹¹ By placing themselves, virtually, in a situation filled with pain and loss, the students instinctively created for themselves the kinds of personal, family, and community support that made real life

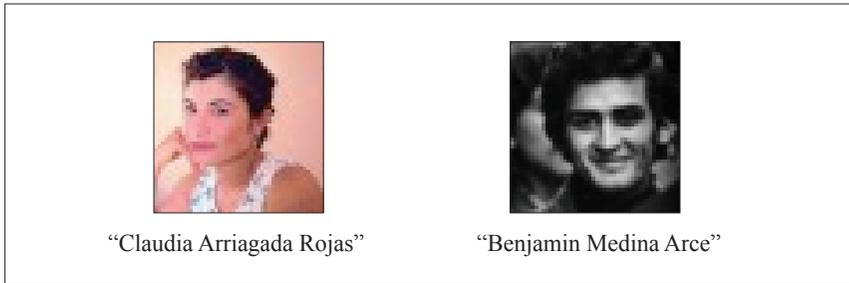


Figure 1: Photographic representations of student avatars “Claudia Arriagada Rojas” and “Benjamin Medina Arce.”

bearable for those who actually experienced such suffering. As time moved on, as students wrote entries for the late 1990s and early 2000s, I read more and more of children and grandchildren, the challenges of making a living, and the joys of companionship. “Politics,” a reflection on those events which mobilized public discussion in Chile and Argentina as people wrestled to come to terms with their past, were still important to the avatars, but, as with the lives we actually occupy, such issues occupied a more modulated space. One student summed this up in a striking fashion:

...There was a sort of settling in with the material we discussed in class, a sort of aging in my heart that accompanied (and oddly mirrored) what my avatar was feeling at the time. Big questions about memory, pain, loss, repression, and history which confound me, confuse me, make me struggle, stretch my heart, make me think that I don’t understand—all these conflicts remain just below the surface in my avatar’s mind. However, my avatar takes a different approach because she must live in Argentina, she cannot exist “ex tempore”, and so I have explored, through her, trying to be present and attentive to life experiences in history that would be much more comfortable to keep at arm’s (or even football field’s) length. My avatar is much more objective, much more calm, much more level-headed than I am: that is because she had to be, for her own survival (“Frederica Rojas Fuentes,” Reflection, Argentina).

Anonymity and Empathy

Of course, not all avatars experienced the same sense of loss. While creating the avatars’ demographic characteristics, I attempted to reflect an ample part of the social fabric that existed in those countries at that time. Some avatars were children of peasants, workers, or public sector middle-class employees; others were raised in homes of military officers or corporate leaders. Genealogy is not destiny, however, and many of

my liberal students led their avatars to rebel against the perspectives of their elite-sector parents. But others used the experience to try to come to grips with one of the central challenges of the course: to understand how “ordinary” people respond to authority.¹² The idea of constructing an avatar who could support authoritarian rule was more than disconcerting for my students; it was practically inconceivable. Operating in their created world, it was still easier for them to imagine being tortured than being a torturer. Knowing that this would be the case, I decided to make the blogs anonymous. If students knew each other’s identity, they would be much less inclined to occupy standpoints that were highly uncomfortable for them. They could, of course, make that identity known; but that would be their decision. As it was, many students reflected that writing anonymously allowed them to inhabit their avatars without a sense of guilt or a feeling of incompetence. “I’m so glad it was anonymous,” one student admitted. “I think I would have felt completely paralyzed if I knew my name was attached to it” (“Elias Vergara Vega,” Reflection).

“Nahuel Mellea Casares” was a Brigadier in Argentina’s Air Force. His father, an admiral in the Navy, died shortly after Nahuel began writing his journal. While the air force was not involved in many acts of day-to-day repression in Argentina after the military coup of 1976, investigations after the return to civilian rule in the early 1980s revealed that their planes had transported drugged prisoners over the Atlantic, dropping them to their death in the ocean.¹³ Nahuel’s journal entries hinted that he had been involved in these flights: “The long flights over a dark ocean allow much time for thinking. I do understand how things work” (December 10, 1983). But Nahuel’s creator looked for some way to understand his avatar’s actions, finding them in his personal situation: “I do have a family to provide for which takes precedence over everything in my life...Four beautiful children” (May 1975). He wrote that the “military does what it can do to protect the country...to save the country,” even as he allowed a shadow of doubt to inflect his entries: “I do sometimes doubt whether everything my job entails is completely necessary for the country’s welfare, but such thoughts are unproductive...I must do what I must do, and if I didn’t, where would that leave my family?” (December 10, 1983).

Like Nahuel, “Juan Hoffman Morales,” a captain in Chile’s navy, supported and actively collaborated with the dictatorship. “...I poured one more round...we raised our drinks to Pinochet...” (April 30, 1978). After Chile’s return to civilian rule in 1990 and the release the following year of the report of the National (“Rettig”) Commission for Truth and Reconciliation on politically motivated deaths and disappearances under Pinochet,¹⁴ Juan continued to defend his military colleagues. “[The report] is full of rumor and suspicion and has slandered the names of many

honorable officers” (March 3, 1991).¹⁵ But, like Nahuel, the hint of a doubt shaped his reflection: “I cannot imagine how I will look them in the eye again if any of it is true.” In the end, though, Juan defended the military’s role in protecting Chile’s security: “I refuse to believe that my friends brutally tortured anyone *who wasn’t a direct threat to the safety of our nation* and our families” (March 3, 1991; emphasis added). Similar to many who participated in human rights abuses in Chile and Argentina (or who advocate for the introduction of “regulated” torture in specific situations in the United States),¹⁶ the military avatars in this project never lost sight of their own moral compass, always providing explanations (rationalizations, some would call them) for why their choices were determined by a need to provide for their families or to secure the safety of the state when those in authority insisted it was being undermined. These were not easy positions for students to embody, but it proved to be an extremely valuable exercise when they did. As the student who wrote “Juan” mused:

Writing from the perspective of a Chilean Naval captain who most likely participated in violence was difficult. I...took the easy way out by making him a political conservative but not a torturer. I wanted to bring out his internal conflict over government actions, even as he remained a supporter. I think this project has also brought out the important point that those who commit violence may in fact be conflicted about their actions. They’re real people. They’re faced with situations and have to make a decision. They’re not sociopaths (“Juan Hoffman Morales,” Reflection).

In a similar vein, “Nahuel’s” creator observed:

Writing from the perspective of a conservative-leaning individual helped me understand how he might have thought about that crazy world he saw around him...When examining things from another’s point of view, the black and white fade to shades of gray. You understand, you empathize. You realize we’re all in this together. Personally, I find myself less inclined to hate or to be violent...If you truly believe that your view of the world and your system of morals are correct, then you’ll try to help others toward a similar viewpoint...Jumping into the shoes of someone who is too often labeled “the enemy” can help you to realize that they’re really not your enemy (“Nahuel Mellea Casares,” Reflection).

Psychologists have long considered empathy, the capacity for imaginative attribution, to be not just an important human characteristic, but a critical foundation for promoting cooperative, pro-social, and satisfying relationships. Cultivating empathetic response is arguably a meaningful part of a student’s overall moral education.¹⁷ Similarly, many historians have argued for the importance of empathy in the cultivation of more significant historical understanding among students.¹⁸ The call for greater attention to empathy as a learning and behavioral outcome seems even more

expedient as researchers have observed a marked decline in dispositional empathy among college students from the 1970s to the 2000s.¹⁹ Although the reasons for this are complex, scholars have nonetheless suggested that empathy is teachable in children and young adults.²⁰

The obvious benefit of using avatars to encourage student empathic responses was one of the most critical factors leading to the avatar project, an objective confirmed by a number of students who noted how important it was to “jump into the shoes” of another. I expected that students completing this assignment would write *themselves* into their avatars—e.g., “I tried to channel some of my own interests into my character, such as my hopes to be a doctor, and forced myself to question how I would react to all these challenges and obstacles standing in my way to achieve my dream” (“Bertha Rodríguez Luis,” Reflection). But the empathetic consciousness that structured the project allowed students not just to shape their avatars in their own image, but to learn from the individuals they had created, a confirmation of the constructivist approach to learning. Students were learning by constructing their own knowledge, not repeating what they read or what I taught them.²¹ The student who wrote for “Isabel Carrasco-Vera” contemplated that “By literally placing yourselves in the shoes of someone like Isabel, it is possible to feel a part of that history...By becoming a part of her, I was able to learn so much more, and I cherished that I was able to gain such a vast amount of appreciation for the people who actually lived” in Chile at that time (Reflection). If students felt any concerns about the demands of the project, it was largely because they wanted to do justice to their avatars’ lives. As one student aptly concluded, “...*writing* a ‘primary account’ feels like a much larger responsibility than *reading* one” (“Martina Rodríguez Aguilar,” Reflection; emphasis added).

Teaching Difficult Histories: The Role of Emotion, The Importance of Ambiguity

The topics covered in “Dirty Wars” are emotionally, as well as intellectually, demanding, particularly as I worked to prevent students from distancing themselves from the subjects of our inquiry. Students were cautioned not to create a distance between themselves and the appalling acts they read about by dismissing the latter as (solely) the product of aberrant personalities, or to look at authoritarianism as something that couldn’t happen “here” (wherever “here” happened to be for the student).²² Even as the course distributes its focus between the dark night of the human soul and a study of human resiliency and hope, students who have been conditioned to check their emotions at the classroom door often aren’t sure what to do with their feelings. But emotional responses are an important

part of the overall learning process. Both psychological research and my own experience of keeping in touch with students over twenty-five years indicate that emotional events are remembered much better than non-emotional ones.²³ I discuss the role of emotions with students and how a community of learners needs to be aware and supportive of the feelings of others—and of myself—as we explore difficult topics.

Because of this, I designed the avatar project, to borrow from a different classroom experience, “to construct a place where historical conflict is not an abstract concept to be examined and analyzed as an academic exercise, but a personal and emotional encounter with the lived experiences of others.”²⁴ The difference is that these lived experiences would be of their own making.

One example can suggest the importance of this approach. In 1988, Chileans went to the polls to decide whether to confirm General Pinochet as president for the next eight years after he had already been in power for fifteen years. The plebiscite, in which voters selected either Pinochet or “No,” was called for in the transitional articles written into the constitution Pinochet pushed through in 1980. But the opposition movement remained unsure to the last moment whether he would allow either a fair election or a negative outcome. In the event, there is substantial evidence to suggest that Pinochet was only prevented from shutting down the vote count running substantially against him by the concerted opposition of the other military chiefs. The “No’s” had won.²⁵ The students could read about this process in a variety of sources, but not what it *felt* like. Such emotions were a critical part of the history, whether one supported or opposed Pinochet’s election, and that is what the journals captured:

The release I feel today is unbelievable. Like the string that held all my bones tightly together was cut. The tension from yesterday is gone, celebration has replaced it. I feel hopeful that my country will be redeemed. And it is the people who have redeemed La Patria... The joy is unbelievable, the country is pulsing with emotion (“Alvaro Morales Castillo,” October 6, 1988).

Today has shown that the people of Chile have a short memory. How do they so quickly forget what Pinochet has done for them?... They are impatient, spoiled children (“Juan Hoffman Morales,” October 6, 1988).

Sofie, Gabi and I returned to the church... We stayed first in the parsonage and then in one of the little antechambers off the narthex, crowded round the radio from mid-afternoon until nearly three in the morning, when it was announced... the No vote was leading. We exploded... and I swear you could hear much of Valdivia explode as well (“Benjamin Medina Arce,” October 6, 1988).

The challenge of making history *real* to students and the challenge of presenting history as experienced by *real* people were, ultimately, one and

the same and involved crafting a structure whereby students could take part in that history. As one student wrote, "...this assignment taught the human aspect of what went on in the Southern Cone...I was emotionally invested in the narrative. It served as a reminder that behind every history lesson, behind every news story I read about, there are humans" ("Nahuel Mellea Casares," Reflection). And it was the desire to humanize the history they were narrating that led the students to commit many more hours to the project than I could have asked of them as they researched the context of their avatars' lives. They wrote about earthquakes in Valdivia, the formation of peasant unions in the 1950s in Maule, what happened when girls began attending universities, and how hospitals were organized in the 1980s. "Before every entry, I would try to give myself a few days just to read and do research, knowing I wouldn't necessarily include that information in my entry... [E]very week I found myself...feeling something—remembering" ("Fernando Rottermund-Edelman," Reflection).

One of the unexpected products of personalizing history in this fashion arose when students encountered difficult decisions whose consequences, as those in real life, were unknown. Many of the students entered the class with a clear set of political convictions. They knew where they stood and were confident that, under pressure, they would act in a morally consistent way. They would have ranked themselves at the top of Kohlberg's stages of moral development.²⁶ The avatar project forced them to reconsider their certainties and to confront highly ambiguous situations, to deal with "shades of gray," as one student put it. To be clear: students did not question their own moral values. No avatar (or student in a personal reflection) came away from the project extolling brutality as a positive or even necessary force or suggesting that they could hide from difficult choices. But they were less able to predict how they would act in thorny circumstances, and therefore less dismissive of morally ambiguous actions taken by others. In short, they were moving toward William Perry's notion of context-appropriate decisions.²⁷

For example, when the class discussed the construction of post-conflict societies in these countries and whether the goal of such a process should be "truth," "reconciliation," or "justice," most students spoke for justice. But writing for their avatars, many discovered that the answer to such an impasse was much less clear. In 1985, after a return to civilian rule in Argentina, most of their military chiefs were tried and convicted of human rights abuses. Shortly after the guilty verdicts were announced, "Alonso Milatovic Zorman" wrote, "I am not entirely sure that they went about [the trials] in the best way possible. I am not even sure that there is a correct way to deal with trials like these. How is a country supposed to punish its leaders...for the death or disappearance of thousands? I know that there are many people who think



Figure 2: “Luisa Altamirano Fernandez” included a photograph of her mother, a nurse, and father, a journalist.

that they should receive the same punishment they used during the regime and be sentenced to death but I do not think that I agree” (December 10, 1985). Alonso came to discern that his perspective was shaped by his own circumstances: “I also understand that it is much easier for me to have this opinion since my child is still alive and healthy and I never had to experience torture first hand” (December 10, 1985). “Luisa Altamirano Fernandez,” a Pinochet-supporting nurse who found herself treating a young student for the severe burns he had received in an anti-government rally, wondered how she would “feel about this regime if [she] had to sacrifice [her political beliefs] for the safety” of her family (August 1, 1986). Thinking through historical processes from the perspective of a unique individual shaped the way many students understood the past. “*La cosa mala es que personas piensan en su perspectiva del pasado como un dato, o algo absoluto, cuando en realidad es completamente subjetiva. Hasta que la gente chilena se da cuenta que la verdad es diferente para cada persona, no podemos arreglarse como una nación unida...cachai?*” [What’s bad is that people think that their view of the past is a fact, something absolute, when in reality it’s completely subjective. Until the Chilean people realize that the truth is different for each person, we can’t get ourselves together as a unified nation...you know?] (“Claudia Arriagada Rojas,” December 12, 2010).²⁸

The structure of the academic enterprise stresses the importance of answering questions correctly. We help our students learn how to research

difficult questions and reach well-reasoned answers. We understand that many questions can be answered in a number of ways. But rarely do our students wrestle with questions that might not have an answer. Coping with a lack of certainty is part of a process of maturation, but schools rarely allow for it. “Amancio Torres Rodríguez” watched his daughter grow up under the Chilean dictatorship, longing for the day when “children will play in the streets and no soldiers will be allowed to enter stores with guns” (September 17, 1986). His author described him as an apolitical man who just wanted to live a “normal” life. When reflecting on the project, the student wrote, “I do not necessarily feel proud of the entries that I wrote for Amancio, but the process of writing them has left me with a series of unanswerable questions that I would like to investigate further...” (Reflection).²⁹

At the same time, the students more strongly appreciated the importance of history, not only as a methodology through which they could approach an understanding of the past, but as a way of seeing themselves within history, as the product of multiple (often conflicted and conflicting) pasts. This is a central lesson of psychologists and historians who study the post-Holocaust generation or who work on postmemory in the Southern Cone countries.³⁰ To the extent that we are formed by what has come before, the ability to move past a traumatic past depends on coming to terms with it, rather than walking away from it.³¹ Like so many Argentines, “Valentina Ortiz Cabrera” worried, “Mami [mother] seems to have expended all of her energy on forgetting and denial and just tries to hold it together with what little is left. But she is living proof that that is no way to live, to heal, to move on. Not for a person, and not for a nation. I don’t know yet what the right way is, but I know that the future depends on figuring it out” (December 12, 2010). Impressed by the testimony of Southern Cone victims, as well as confessional accounts by perpetrators, many students led their avatars to stress the exigency of transmitting their experiences to their children and grandchildren.³² “The only way to ensure remembrance is to pass our stories to the next generation and to the next. We must keep telling,” urged “Alvaro Morales Castillo” (October 14, 2010). “Alonso Milatovic Zorman” tied the urgency of transmission to the fragility of human memory, writing, “Part of me worries that...everything that happened to me in the past [will] become harder to remember until it is completely gone from my mind,” suggesting a double move against the temptation to forget a painful past and the looming shadow of Alzheimer’s. “Many of my memories have been passed down to my daughter for I always make sure to answer every question she has about our country’s past and about my life...” (April 20, 2005). Similar thoughts were shared by “Paola Jiménez García,” when she wrote:

As I sit down to write my final thoughts and close the diary on this chapter of my life, my thoughts, as always, drift back to my father. I picture him sitting by the radio on one of those nights in September of 1973, listening to the rhetoric of the right and slumping even deeper into his melancholy and hopelessness. And yet, these thoughts (although they sadden me) give me strength because I am certain that I have been able to reconcile with the past, and do what my father could not and harness my memories of those years in order to live my day-to-day life with happiness and contentment (2010, Chile).

One student concluded her journal with three haiku, including this final entry:

Can we remember
 What we choose to forget so
 Daughters never will

(“Soledad Medina Suárez,” March 24, 2010, Argentina)

Conclusion

Reading my students’ blog entries as they materialized on the course website week after week, I was often stopped short in my tracks. What I read made me weep, smile, worry, and rethink my own conclusions. Their work was original, creative, compelling, and insightful. It was filled with detail and emotion. Collectively, the posts revealed an appreciation of the past as a history that was lived by individuals and represented by scholars. It was an indication that the students could claim ownership not just over their learning, but over the very history they were studying. Not only did they know *more* about the past, they had matured as learners and as individuals.

This is not to say that there weren’t problems with the project; indeed, there are a number of aspects that I will change the next time I use it in this class (or others that lend themselves to the project). The avatar project is an approach to the study of history that can work best when examining a short period of time, ideally, 60-100 years, or a single life time. To carry a journal beyond one generation would dilute its impact and present an impossible challenge to the journal writers. Students need to have a strong background on the period of history that their avatars will be occupying. As it was, some students who drew an Argentine avatar felt at a disadvantage. Given my own background in Chile, I inevitably offered students more of a feel for what it was like to live there than in Argentina. Further, some students expressed significant misgiving about the project, arguing that it was “presumptuous” or “disrespectful” to “put words into peoples’ mouths by relating a past that isn’t yours.” Some

expressed how “fictionalizing accounts of such serious events” made them feel uncomfortable, or expressed a frustration at being unable to get at the kind of details which would have made these lives more real.

For me, the most serious problem with the project was its failure to take advantage of student cross-commentaries on the blogs. The course blog was set up so that every student could read and comment on all the other posts. While I was surprised to find that, in a very few cases, some students’ avatars got together in their virtual lives and even lived together for a period of time before going their separate ways, there was very little student-written commentary. With forty-three students in the course, they were unable to keep up with all the posts—indeed, it was very hard for me to do so—and were reluctant to comment when they had only read one or two posts. When discussing this problem at the end of the course, one student offered a very promising solution. She suggested dividing students into smaller groups of four to eight, with avatars from both Chile and Argentina equally represented. These students would be expected to read the other blogs in their group and to comment on them in a timely fashion as part of the project. Students would both be able to begin a “conversation” with other avatars and could more deeply engage with someone from the other country.

Working with students to promote historical thinking has always been a challenge. Can students ever put themselves in the place of a merchant in central Mexico in the 15th century, or a Peruvian nun absorbed in prayer in a Lima convent in 1750? The conceit of assuming another’s identity suggests a suppleness and complexity of imagination that is generally beyond their grasp. While we can never *be* someone else, evidence from the avatar project indicates that, with the proper scaffolding, students can access those lives. History is not a “Back-to-the-Future” time machine which, without any effort on their part, can speed students into the past.

But there are distinct advantages to encouraging students to “feel what people during the time period felt,” a process which, for a large number of the students, “made it real—not just something in textbooks” (“Fernando Rottermund-Edelman,” Reflection). Occupying a moment in history allowed the students not only to empathize with others, but to understand how complex and contingent a history built on many lives must be. The students in my “Dirty Wars” class had many occasions to demonstrate their grasp of the history of the Southern Cone countries in class discussions and their other assignments. But in their week-by-week posts, they showed me that they cared about this history, and that they more than met my entreaty to commit fully to the course. The work that they have done has already allowed them to continue to think about the past as they move on to live their own lives. “Frederica Rojas Fuentes” put her avatar to rest in her final

entry. “I feel a sense of loss and sadness,” she wrote, “today was my last post. My avatar’s life was so deeply colored by the events in Argentina from the seventies until the present day, that leaving her behind is in some ways a blessing—she was so tired, so much did she want to be released from the world which had written out her life as much as she had tried to inscribe her own life with meaning in the middle of turbulent political times... Now I am done—the questions that this course raises are still with me, but my avatar is now at rest. Will she pop up again some day? Will the lessons that she taught me bring me forward? I hope so.”

Notes

1. All direct quotes from student blogs are identified by the pseudonyms adopted by the students when creating their avatars, the date of the journal entry (not when it was written in reality), and, when appropriate, whether the avatar was in Chile or Argentina. I discuss the role of anonymous authorship later in the article.

2. Edith Sheffer, “Creating Lives in the Classroom,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 22 November 2009.

3. Peter Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability* (New York: The New Press, 2004). Kornbluh’s book includes copies of U.S. State Department and other official files documenting Washington’s attempt to deny Allende the presidency.

4. CONADEP (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons), *Nunca Más (Never Again)*, 1984, <http://www.nuncamas.org/english/library/nevagain/nevagain_000.htm>.

5. National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture (Comisión Nacional Sobre Prisión Política y Tortura, “Valech Commission”), reprinted by United States Institute of Peace, “Commission of Inquiry: Chile 03,” <<http://www.usip.org/publications/commission-inquiry-chile-03>>. The Commission submitted its original report in 2004, revised its figures upward in 2005, and added nearly 10,000 more cases between 2010 and 2011.

6. The historiography of the “Dirty Wars” in the Southern Cone countries is extensive. For Argentina, see: Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Paul H. Lewis, *Guerrillas and Generals: The “Dirty War” in Argentina* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001); and M. Patricia Marchak, *God’s Assassins: State Terrorism in Argentina in the 1970s* (Montreal, Canada: McGill University Press, 1999). For Brazil: Alfred Stepan, *Authoritarian Brazil* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973); Maria Helena Moreira Alves, *State and Opposition in Military Brazil* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1985); and Alfred Stepan, ed., *Democratizing Brazil: Problems of Transition and Consolidation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). For Chile: Pamela Constable, *A Nation of Enemies: Chile Under Pinochet* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993); Steve J. Stern, *Remembering Pinochet’s Chile: On the Eve of London 1998* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); *Battling for Hearts and Minds: Memory Struggles in Pinochet’s Chile, 1973-1988*

(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); and *Reckoning with Pinochet: The Memory Question in Democratic Chile, 1989-2006* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Mark Ensalaco, *Chile Under Pinochet: Recovering the Truth* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 1999); Mary Helen Spooner, *The General's Slow Retreat* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2011); and Heraldo Muñoz, *The Dictator's Shadow: Life Under Augusto Pinochet* (New York: Basic Books, 2008). For Uruguay: Lawrence Weschler, *A Miracle, A Universe: Settling Accounts with Torturers* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and Servicio Paz y Justicia, *Uruguay Nunca Más: Human Rights Violations, 1972-1985*, trans. Elizabeth Hampsten (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992). For general studies of terror in the Southern Cone and U.S. policies: Cecilia Menjivar and Nestor Rodriguez, eds., *When States Kill: Latin America, the U.S., and Technologies of Terror* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2005); Patrice J. McSherry, *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); John Dinges, *The Condor Years: How Pinochet and His Allies Brought Terrorism to Three Continents* (New York: New Press, 2004); Martha K. Huggins, *Political Policing: The United States and Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); and Anthony W. Pereira, *Political (In)Justice: Authoritarianism and the Rule of Law in Brazil, Chile, and Argentina* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005). For post-dictatorial processes of justice and reconciliation: Naomi Roht-Arriaza, *The Pinochet Effect: Transnational Justice in the Age of Human Rights* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Carlos Santiago Nino, *Radical Evil on Trial* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996); Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Transitional Justice and the Challenge of Truth Commissions*, second ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010); Leigh A. Payne, *Unsettling Accounts: Neither Truth Nor Reconciliation in Confessions of State Violence* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

7. See, for example, Alexi Barrionuevo, "Daughter of 'Dirty War' Raised by Man Who Killed Her Parents," *New York Times*, 8 October 2011.

8. Costa Gavras' 1982 film, *Missing*, was based on the death of two close U.S. friends and colleagues and was partially informed by my testimony.

9. This entry was written by an English-dominant student who had spent some months in Chile. While I allowed students to write in Spanish, I also cautioned that I wanted them to adopt the voice that would permit them to be most fluent, most colloquial. Some Spanish-dominant students wrote in Spanish, as did this English-dominant student, and some practiced code switching, with greater or less ease.

10. See, for example, John A. Shedd, "Bringing Ordinary People into the Picture," *The History Teacher* 41, no. 1 (November 2007): 25-37.

11. Alicia Partnoy, *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival in Argentina* (San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press, 1986); Luz Arze, *El Infierno* (Santiago, Chile: Planeta, 1993); Lina Penna Sattamini, *A Mother's Cry: A Memoir of Politics, Prison, and Torture under the Brazilian Military Dictatorship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); and Eduardo Galeano, *Days and Nights of Love and War* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).

12. Students watched and discussed recreations of Stanley Milgram's famous "obedience to authority" experiments, as well as Philip Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment.

13. Horacio Verbitsky, *The Flight: Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior*, trans. Esther Allen (New York: New Press, 1996).

14. National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation Report (February 1991), available at: <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/collections/truth_commissions/Chile90-Report/Chile90-Report.pdf>.

15. The Rettig report did not, in fact, name any names. In responding to each student's entry, I tried to adopt the same standpoint as the avatar, writing supportive comments and asking them leading questions as a way to provide direction for future entries. At the end of my commentary, and speaking in my own voice, I would correct any details in the avatar's entry that needed correcting. See Appendix for further explanation.

16. See, for example, Alan Dershowitz, *Why Terrorism Works: Understanding the Threat, Responding to the Challenge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), Chapter 4.

17. See Martin L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

18. Among others, see O. L. Davis, Jr., Elizabeth Anne Yeager, and Stuart J. Foster, eds., *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

19. Sara H. Konrath, Edward H. O'Brien, and Courtney Hsing, "Changes in Dispositional Empathy in American College Students Over Time: A Meta-Analysis," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 15, no. 2 (August 2011): 180-198.

20. S. L. Hatcher, M. S. Nadeau, L. K. Walsh, M. Reynolds, J. Galea, and K. Marz, "The Teaching of Empathy for High School and College Students: Testing Rogerian Methods with the Interpersonal Reactivity Index," *Adolescence* 29, no. 116 (Winter 1994): 961-974.

21. Robert B. Innes, *Reconstructing Undergraduate Education: Using Learning Science to Design Effective Courses* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004).

22. Over the years, I have had many students in class whose parents or grandparents lived in one of the countries we were studying during the dictatorial period. Some had been introduced to the topic by their parents; others took the class because their parents would not discuss it with them. I will never forget the day when, after lecturing on the growing bitterness of the conflict in Chile in 1973, highlighted by the right-wing assassination of President Allende's military aide-de-camp, a student lingered after class and said, simply, "That was my grandfather."

23. See, for example, Linda J. Levine and David A. Pizarro, "Emotion and Memory Research: A Grumpy Overview," *Social Cognition* 22, no. 3 (October 2004): 530-554, and Chad Berry, Lori A. Schmied, and Josef Chad Schrock, "The Role of Emotion in Teaching and Learning History: A Scholarship of Teaching Exploration," *The History Teacher* 41, no. 4 (August 2008): 437-452.

24. Maia G. Sheppard, "Creating a Caring Classroom in which to Teach Difficult Histories," *The History Teacher* 43, no. 3 (May 2010): 419.

25. Muñoz, 203-208.

26. Lawrence Kohlberg, "The Claim to Moral Adequacy of a Highest Stage of Moral Judgment," *Journal of Philosophy* 70, no. 18 (October 1973): 630-646.

27. William G. Perry, Jr., *Forms of Ethical and Intellectual Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1999), and George A. Thoma, "The Perry Framework and Tactics for Teaching Critical Thinking in Economics," *Journal of Economic Education* 24, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 128-136.

28. Written by an English-dominant student who had spent the previous semester in Chile. Some of her entries were in English; others in Spanish.

29. This student spent the semester after the class studying in Chile.

30. See, for example, Susana Kaiser, *Postmemories of Terror: A New Generation Copes with the Legacy of the "Dirty War"* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

31. This theme dominates many of Chilean filmmaker Patricio Guzmán's documentaries. See, in particular, *Obstinate Memory* (1997) or *Nostalgia for the Light*

(2011).

32. Leigh A. Payne, *Unsettling Accounts: Neither Truth Nor Reconciliation in Confessions of State Violence* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

33. Mark Sample, "A Rubric for Evaluating Student Blogs," *ProfHacker: Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 September 2010, <<http://chronicle.com/blogPost/A-Rubric-For/27196/>>. See, also, his follow-up article, "Making Student Blogs Pay Off with Blog Audits," *ProfHacker: Chronicle of Higher Education*, 11 October 2010, <<http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/making-student-blogs-pay-off-with-blog-audits/27559/>>.

Appendix: Structuring the Avatar Project

Structuring and Scheduling the Posts

Students had to write a total of eight blog entries over the course of the semester. Their first entry was assigned during the third week of class and was due at the start of the fourth week. By the time students wrote their first (introductory) post, they had a substantial background on histories we were studying. The dates around which they were to organize their journal entries were always scheduled after we had studied that period in class. More often than not, the dates I gave them were keyed to important political events. For example, the fourth post was to be written sometime in mid-1986 for the Chilean avatars. This was after the large-scale opposition demonstrations that had gained strength since 1982 (as well as a nearly successful assassination attempt on Pinochet, September 8, 1986) were ended and the opposition engaged in discussions on whether to trust Pinochet and organize for the scheduled 1988 plebiscite. For Argentina, the post was to be dated December 10, 1983, the day of Raul Alfonsín's inauguration, which ended more than seven years of military dictatorship.

Commenting on the Posts

As noted, I commented on each of the forty-three weekly posts, although there were so many that I wasn't always able to respond the same week that they were posted. My comments were generally short (a paragraph, two at most), and always mirrored the voice of the avatar. For example, when "Juan Hoffman Morales," a Chilean naval officer, passed along his wife's complaint that she couldn't find any consumer goods in the stores in late 1972 and that this was President Salvador Allende's fault, I commiserated, and suggested that he use the naval commissary, and then offered some approaches for the student to follow up on: "But now, more seriously, what's the talk at your base? Do you think it was a good idea for Allende to bring in officers to the cabinet? I have my doubts. I thought that the October strike would knock some sense into his head, but it just seemed to make him more intransigent. So, tell me all—what are the other officers saying?" (Volk response to "Juan Hoffman Morales" posting, December 1972).

I also used my comments to correct (in my own voice) any errors of fact or history that the students had made in the posting.

I tried to comfort avatars whose relatives had been disappeared, and, at times, when the writers grew despondent, I felt responsible to craft a positive response. “Ricardo Cervantes García” closed his final reflection by writing, “Some say that sharing one’s memories is a way to place oneself in the history of all people. I have shared so very little of that time. This must mean that I am a mere wisp on the people’s canvas of history. When I die, my death may be a tiny black dot.” My response to such pessimism, I felt, could not be perfunctory. “Even if you didn’t share your memories with others,” I wrote, “you did with me, Ricardo... And because you did, I feel it is OK to tell you what I can see: You are 60 years old; that may seem to put you on the edge of your life, but you still have a lot ahead of you... Take the lessons you have learned, expand that tiny black dot on the canvas of history. Your memory is your strength. Find it again” (Volk response to “Ricardo Cervantes García”).

Grading the Project

As the last exchange makes obvious, this was not a project in which I could determine grades in a traditional fashion. As important as the details of the history that the avatars narrated was the way in which they attempted to become their avatars. Narrative style, emotion, insight, and growth were important factors that I took into account. Rather than give letter grades, for each posting, I assigned a grades of 0-4 (using checks, pluses, and minuses) based on the 5-point rubric developed by Mark Sample.³³ A “0” for a missed post; “1” for a post that was half-hearted, short, and unfocused; “2” for a post which had some details but didn’t develop the avatar or the history; “3” for a good post which was consistent with the history, provided details, and developed the character/s; and “4” for a post which was exceptional in its narrative, emotional power, and detail. Very few students missed their posts. As Sample suggests, the important part of grading blog posts, particularly when there are a lot to be read, is to have a system which can be easily applied and explained to students.

Making the Website Public

The decision to make the blog posts public, rather than protecting them behind a password, was made by the class as a whole based on a discussion of the pros and cons. While a central part of the decision was being able to write anonymously, students also wanted others to see the project. While the project has not generated any comments from anyone outside of the class, other history faculty have examined it as they considered whether such a project would work for their classes. Indeed, it would be my hope that others can see the value of adopting a similar approach where it made sense.