



Rebecca J. Atencio. *Memory's Turn: Reckoning with Dictatorship in Brazil*.

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Over the past two decades, cultural works that treat the horrors of the Brazilian military dictatorship have gained momentum. In politics the same can be said: on December 10th, 2014, Brazil's Truth Commission published a list of 434 persons who died and disappeared during the period of authoritarian rule from 1964 to 1985 as a gesture to end amnesty for torturers. Rebecca Atencio's *Memory's Turn: Reckoning with Dictatorship in Brazil* is a well-researched and timely book that investigates the interplay between cultural works (literature, television, physical memorials and performance) and human rights during and after military rule in Brazil. The introduction of her book presents four key concepts: *simultaneous emergence* – the simultaneous apparition of several cultural works; *imaginary linkage* – the relationship between cultural works and institutional mechanisms; *process of leveraging* – people and groups who capitalize on the imaginary linkage to promote a certain agenda; and *propagation* – the new initiatives that may arise from cultural works for continued cultural memory work. Moreover, the introduction offers abundant information on the advent of grassroots organizations and the memory politics from the Médiçi government to Dilma Rousseff's, with a keen eye

on how presidential administrations, writers and activists relate to the 1979 Amnesty Law.

The first chapter, "Testimonies and the Amnesty Law," demonstrates how Brazil's Amnesty Law became linked to certain testimonies published by former armed militants after its signing in 1979. Those works are Fernando Gabeira's *O que é isso companheiro?*, Alfredo Sirkis' *Os Carbonários*, and Renato Tapajós' *Em Câmara Lenta*. Inspired by terminologies coined by Steve J. Stern, Atencio finds that cultural works oscillate between two poles, usually sharing characteristics of both. Those poles are referred to as "formulas for closure" or "wedges." The former bears on the artistic and/or legal gestures that seek to put the brakes on memory work, and is evoked by Atencio as "reconciliation by institutionalized forgetting." The latter, however, strives for the contrary: to drive further memory work. In her textual analysis, Atencio illustrates that Tapajós, unlike Gabeira and Sirkis, raised the question of accountability for human rights crimes. While over the short run Gabeira's and Sirkis' works reinforced the Amnesty Law's formula for closure, over the long run, both of them – and most notably Sirkis' – became wedges by inspiring blockbuster adaptations such as the television program *Anos Rebeldes*, which aired on TV Globo in 1992.

The second chapter, "A Prime-Time Miniseries and Impeachment," examines how *Anos Rebeldes* and the impeachment process of President Fernando Collor de Mello became linked in the popular imagination through the protests of the *caras-pintadas*, a student movement that strove for Collor's impeachment based largely on the premise of corruption. Despite sacrificing historical truth through the social

merchandising of the "never again" and *ditabranda* (soft dictatorship) message, *Anos Rebeldes* made a positive impact on memory politics in Brazil. According to Atencio, the program exposed to public scrutiny "a potent legacy of authoritarianism and silencing force in national culture: the continued censorship of information about crimes against humanity on television" (75).

The third chapter, "Literary and Official Truth-Telling," explores Fernando Bonassi's testimony, *Prova Contrária*, and Brazil's first official truth report, "Direito à memória e à verdade," ratified in 2007. Atencio observes that the report makes apparent Brazilians' rights to memory and truth but renders justice elusive: the demands of some families for punishment were silenced in the report. In Atencio's view, justice-recast-as-revenge clashes with the hallmarks of Brazilian national identity, such as conciliation and cordiality that underscore the preference for the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Whereas "Direito à memória e à verdade" presents a vision of reconciliation by memory that eschews the question of individual criminal accountability, *Prova contrária* moves in another direction: it brings the disappeared, the negation of justice – and their effects – within range of visibility.

The final chapter, "From Torture Center to Stage and Site of Memory" focuses initially on the play *Lembrar É Resistir*. In 1998, then secretary of justice in the state of São Paulo, Belisário dos Santos Jr., donated the building of the Departamento de Ordem Política e Social [DOPS] – notorious in the Brazilian political imaginary mostly as a space of imprisonment and torture than as an historical archive – for use as a cultural center. Opening on September 9th, 1999, *Lembrar É Resistir* invited audience

members to symbolically occupy the former station house of the São Paulo political police, and became a smashing hit. Not after long, the state government shut down the play, and independently converted the space into the "Memorial da Liberdade." In 2006, however, *Lembrar É Resistir* would realize its wedge characteristics: in the same place where *Lembrar* was staged, a new memorial opened, the "Memorial da Resistência," resurrecting key ideas from the play.

Overall, *Memory's Turn: Reckoning with Dictatorship in Brazil* is an indispensable book for those who might be interested in learning specifically about the politics of transitional justice in Brazil. What I found to be lacking, however, is a theoretical exploration of fundamental concepts like historical memory, collective memory, remembrance and amnesia, among others, and their relationship to the discussion on the politics of memory in Brazil's transition to democracy.

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