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Review/Reseña

Mariana Achugar, *What We Remember: The Construction of Memory in Military Discourse*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishing Company, 2008.

Understanding Military Discourse in Post-Dictatorial Uruguay

Macarena Gómez-Barris

University of Southern California

As an interdisciplinary field memory studies has, over the last twenty years, made an enormous impact in the academy and far beyond. Its classic studies have become canonical in the U.S., Europe, Latin America and Asia, and in each region the field has produced its own powerful contributions regarding the aftermath of political terror. Even though Holocaust studies remains the most extensive literature regarding memory and violence, Latin American memory studies has become a full fledged field contributing enormously to our understanding of hegemony, official memory, counter-memory, cultural memory, and the subjectivities

produced in the wake of State Terror. In bringing into focus social justice movements, digging into the archives amassed at non-profit institutions, and deepening semiotic analyses of visual and popular culture, the field has recently produced an abundance of approaches for understanding the experiences and machinations of such terror in a landscape of erasure, refusal, and forgetting. More recent scholarship has emerged forcefully on the scene in relationship to the wars of Central America, US Empire, exile communities, the effects of culture, film studies, and analysis of artistic practices.

Within this context, Achugar's 2008 book *What We Remember: The Construction of Memory in Military Discourse* is a potent study on the dynamic socio-semiotic aspects of memory through a detailed analysis of the military as an institution that produces multifaceted discourses about its central role in State violence. The book might well be compared to Feitlowitz's brilliant monograph, *A Lexicon of Terror* (1998), which unpacked the manipulation of words, memories, and discourses in the Argentinean Dirty war, effectively illustrating how language was used to produce high degrees of confusion, fear, and tacit consensus in a populace. Published a decade after Feitlowitz's work, Achugar's book is much indebted to the lineage of memory studies that linguistically takes apart, through an analysis of semiotic patterns, what is remembered and narrated with respect to State violence. Where Achugar's book departs from Feitlowitz's approach is precisely in its methodology, for she does not interview a broad range of social actors to interpret their discursive experiences of dictatorship, but rather begins from a more narrow set of texts that show discursive repetition at macro and micro levels. In some ways this is a less sweeping project than that of Feitlowitz's account of the Argentinean case. However, the success of this approach is enormous in that by the end of the book the reader has systematically traveled through the Uruguayan memory-scape by means of a series of military texts; more importantly, the reader is astonished by the range of discursive strategies that military officers deploy toward sustaining and producing coherency regarding the past. That is, Achugar's contribution is to break open the idea of monolithic military discourse by pointing out the panoply of discursive

strategies that are necessary to maintain power. In addition, she subtly highlights the contradictory qualities of the military's discursive productions by offering glimpses into the very hard work of self-representation in a fractured transitional socio-political sphere.

Achugar's book is profoundly concerned with the main questions of sociology, linguistics, and anthropology drawing from and contributing to each through a careful and sustained analysis of dominant military narratives as historical document. She is interested in describing institutional power and meaning through rhetoric. Achugar's study explains the circulation and persistence of Uruguayan military narratives within the public sphere, providing insights into the sociolinguistic practices of memory. She aims to understand how the military ideologically interprets events, and, moreover, sustains political dominance using memory narratives as a principle strategy. What Achugar is after, then, is nothing short of exposing the military's contradictions in its transitional effort to reassert its power through manipulation, rhetorical confusion, and its own diminishing of its role in collective violence. How is Achugar able to accomplish this important task?

Throughout the book, Achugar considers the dialogues, struggles, sticking points, and constructions of authoritarianism and institutional memory by closely reading a series of texts penned by the military. She traces its human rights discourses from the early 1970s through to the contemporary period using the individual book chapters, and the sum of its parts, to discursively unpack how the military makes its identity cohere through its vision and efforts at consolidating national community.

Each chapter takes a unique approach toward exploring how military language is made to produce consensus, stability, and the appearance of historical facticity. Highlights include Chapter Four's discussion of *El Soldado*, which analyzes the military magazine over a ten-year period, and a close analysis of a 2007 commemoration speech in Chapter 7, "What is our Story?" In the book's introduction, Achugar states that her approach draws from a broad range of fields that include sociology, psychology, anthropology, cultural studies, history and semiotics. However, her strongest methodological emphases are semiotics and textual analyses,

which serve her especially well in Chapter Five, “Individual Memory: Analysis of the Confession of a Repressor.” Since this was my favorite chapter (out of a total of seven) I will take up a bit more space to summarize its contribution.

Chapter five takes as its central object of study a confession letter that was written to the newspaper *El País* on May 5, 1996 by retired captain Jorge Tróloci. Within a climate of political impunity (Law of Expiry 1986) and increased international pressure on national military perpetrators, Tróloci’s ‘confession’ is one of the few accounts from the Uruguayan military perspective that comes out of personal involvement in the practice of terror. Despite his numerous human rights violations and death squad collaborations between 1973 and 1985, Tróloci’s narrative seems to be relatively tame, making halting admissions, weakened statements, and providing half-truths. Achugar’s method of discourse-semantic analysis is extremely effective in this chapter, delineating how Tróloci’s moves to linguistically distance the experiencer from the phenomena (109). Thanks to this work, Tróloci’s narrative becomes transparent and undebatable in its omissions. For instance, in a close discussion of interiority, Achugar establishes how Tróloci depersonalizes and abstracts a sequence of events in which he participated: “I remember the fear I experienced when with 14 armed sailors I had to aim at a multitude of workers that, if they had won the strike, would have represented a raise for my scant salary, such was the state of things.” Achugar rigorously analyzes the quote to argue how Tróloci uses nominalizations as a strategy of sympathy with working class actors, thus distancing himself from the violence he perpetrates against them as a powerful actor of the authoritarian regime. In analyzing Tróloci’s text through voice, intertextuality, the deployment of universal truths, and syntactic structures, Achugar is able to evaluate the degree to which the letter’s author is motivated by ideology, his occlusion of personal responsibility, and the shifting frames of reference that obscure blame on him or the Uruguayan military.

In a beautiful section within this chapter subtitled “Frames of self-presentation,” Achugar relates how Tróloci offers multiple presentations of himself, alternately moving from victim, to group member, to agent, and

ultimately describing himself as “sorcerer/repressor” (117). “But afterwards, in 1974, I became a professional sorcerer, I became a member of the combat forces against the guerrilla, this is my great confession...” (ibid). Here, Achugar brings forth the use of terms such as “sorcerer’s apprentice,” “I worshiped the Devil,” and “coven” as a linguistic format that emerge in Trólucci’s testimonial. One weakness here, both despite and maybe because of Achugar’s adherence to a particular methodology, is that she stops short of a fuller interpretation of this kind of language. In this instance she misses an opportunity to discuss both the Christian rhetoric of many Southern Cone authoritarian regimes, and their Manichean tendencies as exemplified by Tróccoli’s text. Though the introduction locates the Uruguayan dictatorship within the Cold War, in the individual chapters Achugar rarely returns to a wider interpretation of military discourse as a way of not only achieving many kinds of consent, but also as a way of self-representation that informs a macro ideological ontology. Thus, I can only conclude that her rigorous framework and method constrict her from making larger connections, despite the fact that she systematically and successfully lays the foundation for such insights. Though Achugar nicely contextualizes the confession within the genre of testimonial, she does not delve into the differences between testimonials from powerful actors in relationship to testimonials from positions of alterity.

Even though she is at times too faithful to her method, with *What We Remember* Achugar has produced a work of extraordinary importance that lays the groundwork for other studies of official memory and their circulation. Importantly, the methodological insights of memory studies have challenged conventional disciplinary frames, wherein the objects often exceed the approaches of a single discipline. Achugar’s work contributes to this literature by detailing how sociolinguistics matters in the political and cultural field of transition democracies. By studying language, Achugar shows us how to reckon with power as a way to unsettle acceptance of any given reality.