When Prison Craftwork Speaks: Spectral Testimony in the Southern Cone Post-dictatorship

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The Southern Cone:
Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay

The dictatorships

- Chile: Augusto Pinochet 1973-1990

- Argentina: The Military Juntas 1976-1983

- Uruguay: Civic-Military Dictatorship 1973-1985

- political repression, unlawful detentions, political imprisonment, torture, assasinations, disappearances

Where I started…

- Transitional Justice - Truth, Justice, Memory

- How to leave testimony about a "limit experience"

- How to represent disappearance – what strategy can represent an "absence"?

- How to resist the repressors' desire to "forget" and move on

An unstudied phenomenon: Prison craftwork

- To date, I have found three publications total – all focused on Chile, none scholarly in nature.

- Chile: artesanías carcelarias

- Uruguay: manualidades

- Argentina: sporadic examples that survived the repression, in line with the type of craftwork done in Chile and Uruguay

My focus: the materiality of the past used to rebuild the truth of the violence as
counter-memories to "official" narratives

- prison craftwork,

- recovered forensic evidence (both human and material),

- the DNA of the bodies of the children of the disappeared

My Questions

- How does this material create testimony about the past?

- How is it being used by memory activists in the Southern Cone today?

- How can we differentiate the type of work this material does, versus other works of memory?

- Is there a particular theoretical framework that can be developed to discuss this phenomenon?

My approach – interdisciplinary, drawing from various theoretical frameworks

- Literary Studies (Latin American testimonio theory)

- Object-oriented ontology (primarily Graham Harman's re-reading of Heidegger's tool analysis)

- Trauma Studies (mostly Elaine Scarry's analysis of the scene of torture, the unmaking and remaking of the world during and post-trauma)

- Holocaust and Memory Studies (Giorgio Agamben)

- Theories of the Ghost (Jacques Derrida; Avery Gordon)

Observations

- In the scene of torture, the subject who is tortured undergoes a change, producing a "new noticing of things" that opens him/her to seeing the "tool being" of objects.

- This "new noticing of things" gave the prisoner the capacity to see new uses in everyday objects of the concentration camps, political prisons, or torture centers and gave way to a turn to these items as material allies in the fight for survival.

- We observe this in the way survivors write about objects in their testimonial writings.

- We also observe the turn to the material in the fight for survival through the prison craftwork – a creative form of escape/strategy for survival.

Observations

- In the period of the post-dictatorship, such objects put on display in memory museums/projects turn to the object as a witness (Agamben's complete witness).

- In the post-dictatorship, the second generation "disappeared" – those "disappeared with life" are reading the ghostly testimony of the past in their DNA and revealing truths meant to be long-forgotten. The same is true for forensic readings of the bodies of the disappeared that have been recovered via mass graves.

- In the post-dictatorship, children of disappeared parents and memory projects more generally are also attempting to activate the past via objects using the personal belongings of their disappeared parents to re-individualize them from the collective masses of the disappeared.

My theoretical concept: Spectral Testimony

- Combines:
  - Jacques Derrida's discussion of the ghost in *Specters of Marx*
  - Giorgio Agamben's discussion of the complete witness in *Remnanats of Auschwitz*
  - Avery Gordon's discussion of the political capital of hauntings in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*
- "Spectral testimony" = the type of testimony given by objects.
- Inaccessible (the object can't speak), but capable of an effect
- Requires an act of deciphering on the part of the "reader," thus its spectral nature.