



Photo: Clara Han

## Depths of the Present: State Violence and the Neoliberal State

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On November 28, 2004, President Ricardo Lagos presented the findings of the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture, the first official acknowledgment of the widespread use of torture under the Pinochet regime during the democratic transition. Known informally as the Valech Commission, the Commission's mandate was to "determine, in accordance with the antecedents that they present, who are the persons who suffered privation of liberty and torture for political reasons, by State actors or persons in its service, in the period understood between September 11, 1973 and March 10, 1990" (CNT, 2004).<sup>1</sup> Out of 35,868 persons who presented antecedents, 27,255 individuals complied with the "strict requirements to be accepted by the Commission" (Lagos, November 2004). Victims of torture would receive what President Lagos had earlier called, "austere and symbolic" reparations: a life-long pension for the victim of 112,000 CLP (188 USD)<sup>2</sup> equivalent to 1.5 times the minimum pension; guaranteed access to continued studies; free health care through the *Programa de Reparación y Atención Integral en Salud* (Program of Reparation and Integral Health Services), and housing subsidies.

How was this official acknowledgement received in specific worlds? Since 1999, I have been conducting longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork amongst families in La Pincoya, a *población* (town) in the northern region of Santiago, Chile. I have explored how

modalities of care amongst the urban poor have evolved in the wake of the Pinochet regime's (1973–1990) profound reorganization of both the state and everyday forms of relating, and in the wake of the democratic state's selective interventions on poverty, human rights, and mental health. For those who suffered state violence waged in the name of market reforms, the re-founding of an everyday materially shaped by these reforms means that state violence resulting in human rights violations and the ongoing oppressions of economic insecurity and inequality, while not identical, must be held together in the same frame of inquiry, as they are lived for many in La Pincoya.

I first arrived to La Pincoya several years after the National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation released its report, The Retting Report, in 1991.<sup>3</sup> Emphasizing the establishment of “consensus” and “moral healing,” the Retting Report provided a temporality to state violence that has endured throughout the democratic transition. Framing violence as an aberration from Chile's history of democratic rule, the Report sought to identify the ideological bases that generated human rights violations, while advancing ethical practices of forgiveness in the constitution of the self: the “moral debt” that society owed to the victims of human rights violations (Grandin 2005). It generated an official account of democracy dissociated from the historic struggles for economic justice and equality that would implicate the *actual* institutional arrangements of the state.

Yet, how the official acknowledgement of torture was cast locally was tied into the ways in which families and neighbors attempted to secure an everyday within an economic system—“*el sistema*” or “*el modelo*”—that many said “*nos duele*.” In this context, those who sustained torture under the regime ask how the state could acknowledge their present and the futures that they aspired to. Thus, rather than conceiving of memory as assigning meaning to past events, through either hegemonic or oppositional practices, ethnography may help us consider memory as experiments at arriving at the present in the midst of official narratives that render the past as a “paid debt” and the future as where the prosperous nation is heading (Cavell 1988).

Consider the words of M, a social leader and Communist party member in La Pincoya, who commented on the Valech Report's release during a local meeting:

The system hurts us, Clara. In this [the Valech Report], we are not in agreement with the government, not at all. It's that, you know, they say that if the affected [tortured] passed away, there is no benefit. What happens with the family that suffered also? Really suffered ill-being [*malestar*]<sup>4</sup>. They suffered as well, the children, the woman, they *suffered* [emphasis his]. Because they were not well. In terms of human rights in Chile, in one way or another we were all tortured, psychologically, of life, of health, and already from direct cases. For them [the wealthy], it is natural [to achieve well-being]. For the worker, it is more difficult to arrive to this place. Others who have a lot, they will never recognize what to us hurts us. That is the difference. How much does it hurt us to pay for education, how much does it hurt us to pay for health.

To speak of torture expresses that which was already hurting: the everyday itself, materially, spiritually, and politically in terms of unemployment, the privatization of public services, and a life in debt. These words require an understanding of the specificity of state violence—in this case, what the state wielded violence in the name of. Such specificity shapes the ways in which past and present relate in ordinary life, depending on how one is inserted into the present. For many in Chile, the very dayliness of unemployment and debt constitute a continuous past of state violence transfigured, made present in and as the everyday.

Indeed, while the state's acknowledgement of human rights violations has focused on the reparations of past acts of violence, M's evocation of the ongoing hurts of the system indicates a desire to have aspirations for democracy, and not only injuries, officially acknowledged. Let us listen to Héctor's ambivalence over the Valech Report. I asked Héctor, a former Communist militant, if he had considered providing his testimony. He responded:

I did not fight to have an income. I fought so that the things in this country would turn out better for everyone. I, fighting in order to have benefits, as if I retired because I was a combatant. I don't want this. I desire that my fight has been to achieve something for this society. And that society affects me as well. The better the society is, the better am I. It is not something personal. So, if there were not such a difference between those who earn more and those who earn less, we would achieve everything. Those are my aspirations.<sup>5</sup>

## **A Time to Cry**

As these aspirations go unacknowledged by the state, instants of mourning this actual everyday emerge. At the time of my conversation with Héctor, his family was facing increasing household economic pressures. Héctor worked in the warehouse of a CD/DVD factory. His wife Ruby had been working in piecemeal sewing in order to care for their sickly youngest child. But, with mounting debts and earning little, she began to look for work outside the house. She was offered employment as a nanny in the house of a young wealthy couple. Her son would have to go back to daycare, which she said, "will destroy me inside." At this point, Ruby felt that there were no other options. A week into her work, Ruby awoke with swollen eyes. She told me it was because of her dream.

First, I saw Héctor drunk. He told me that he wanted to sleep with another woman. I said, "If you have so many necessities, then, go do it." And Héctor got up from the chair and walked out of the house. I watched him turn the corner, and thought, this is the last time that I will see Héctor, and I began to cry. I began to walk down the street. I walked and walked until I encountered a woman and her child in the middle of the street. She said to me, "My child has died." She was sobbing, and I too cried for the woman. Crying, I closed my eyes, and when my eyes opened, I was in a factory, where all the women were talking about an abusive boss. They worked without contracts and worked in fear. I cried with those women.

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The dream evokes the breaking of the natural and the social. Contracts are ruptured. Love is betrayed. The natural generational order is undone. The historical, political, and intimate merge together in allusions. The woman holds and mourns for her dead child in the street and not in her home. Can Héctor's drunken desire to sleep with another woman be read as his political involvement, and his turning the corner, the threat of him being disappeared?

To listen to Ruby's dream and to see her swollen eyes makes me ask not *where* the real resides, or position the dream as a "threshold" between wakefulness and sleep, as in the frame of a door, or the image of entering an "outside" (Pandolfo 1997). Rather, I worry how my writing can acknowledge that dream and Ruby's tears. To find my way, let me listen to what Ruby says about her swollen eyes, "*Perhaps it is because all the crying was done in the dream, and not in reality, where it should be done.*" For Ruby, the dream-work was in what the dream itself allowed or opened.<sup>6</sup> My sense is that it opened a time to cry, to mourn with others who are hinged upon her. In the dream, Ruby, the mother, and the worker mourn this actual everyday in which the past is experienced in the minute instabilities of everyday life. They mourn an everyday in which the investment of love in the world—that aspiration for a better, eventual world—is not returned. But, even more, it is betrayed by the pressures of debt and the threats to and losses of loved ones. The dream articulates the truths of her everyday life, and with her virtual tears, indicts them. For the ethnographer, to generate a matrix of words to receive this dream and let it do its work is perhaps less a political challenge to a hegemonic instrumentalization of memory than an ethical disposition to allow for what is already there—the past continuous—to emerge.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Valech Commission was created in the wake of a series of high-profile political events: the embattled process of the Mesa de Diálogo between 1999 and 2003 that brought human rights lawyers, high-level police and military officers, religious leaders, government officials, and academics together to bring new information to light about the detained-disappeared and to mutually re-visit the past; the 1998 detention of Pinochet in London, his extradition to Chile and the stripping of his legal immunity in 2000, and the suspension of his trial in 2001 when he was declared to be mentally unfit; and finally, the 2003 proposal of the ultra-right wing party, the Unión Democrática Independiente, to bring an end to the ongoing cases involving kidnapping with respect to the detained-disappeared.

<sup>2</sup> Based on the CLP/USD November 2004 exchange rate: 596.72CLP/1 USD. Source: [Banco Central Base de Datos](#). Last downloaded July 2, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> The National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, or the Retting Commission, was named after its chair, Raúl Retting, an elderly politician of the centrist Radical Party who had been elected to the Senate in 1949 and served as Ambassador to Brazil during the Allende administration.

<sup>4</sup> There are several translations of *malestar*, including unease, sickness, unrest, discontent, which do not seem to get to the existential sense of the word used here. I translate literally as “ill-being.”

<sup>5</sup> It is important to emphasize here that Héctor’s remark that all lives have equal value should be taken as an *expression of his aspirations*, not that he is saying that all lives are valued equally within the *actual* political and economic system in which he is living. Indeed, he makes this point clear in the way he frames his aspirations and his desire to continue criticizing society.

<sup>6</sup> In a way, we can think of this dream as a dilating of time itself.

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