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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Memory Scripts and Life History in the Shadow of Brazil's Dictatorship

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Abstract

This article proposes the concept of 'memory script' to analyse how, in the aftermath of political violence, memory activists narrate their lives in a way that is practised, repetitive and performative. Through a self-reflective life history of Aluízio Palmar, a Brazilian human rights activist and former political prisoner who suffered intense torture under military rule, this approach seeks to elucidates the personal and political contours of somebody's decision to transform their experiences into a public narrative. A close reading of Palmar's various platforms of memory-sharing reveals the complex moral reckoning of an activist's own trauma.

Keywords: memory; life history; Brazil; dictatorship; trauma

In December 2019, Aluízio Palmar, a Brazilian human rights activist and former political prisoner, was sued by his own torturer, a retired Army lieutenant named Mário Espedito Ostrovski. In the 2nd Civil Court of Foz do Iguaçu, Ostrovski filed charges of defamation and 'moral damages' relating to Palmar's efforts on social media to expose him as a torturer. Both men were now in their 70s, and they had not encountered one another since 1969, when Lieutenant Ostrovski subjected Palmar, 26 years old at the time, to intense physical and psychological torture. Palmar had been imprisoned for his role as an armed militant, one of some 5,000 Brazilians, most of them young people, who had taken up arms against the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985.[1] Ostrovski had been a state agent in an authoritarian Cold War regime. Nearly half a century later, in a context of reemergent reactionary politics under the far-right President, Jair Bolsonaro, the lawsuit reflected Brazil's contentious – and still unfolding – history of dictatorship.

[1]The estimated number of armed militants in Brazil as given in James N. Green, *Exile within Exiles: Herbert Daniel, Gay Brazilian Revolutionary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 88.

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In the four decades that elapsed between Palmar's torture in 1969 and Ostrovski's lawsuit in 2019, the two men remained connected, however indirectly, by the legacy of amnesty in Brazil. As part of the dictatorship's negotiated transition out of power, it had passed the 1979 Amnesty Law that, on the one hand, allowed political exiles like Aluízio Palmar to return to Brazil, but, on the other, also gave full immunity for human rights abuses like those committed by Lieutenant Ostrovski.[2] In the aftermath of the official end of military rule in 1985, amnesty remained a central axis in the memory battles that helped define post-dictatorship Brazil. For human rights activists like Aluízio Palmar, the 1979 Law stood as a barrier to truth and justice. Despite social movement campaigns and legal challenges that sought to overturn the Law, amnesty remained the status quo; unlike neighbouring Argentina and Chile, which held criminal proceedings and issued Truth Commission reports in the 1980s and 1990s, Brazil had no human rights trials as part of its process of transitional justice. When Brazil finally did hold a National Truth Commission, in 2013, it was one of the last countries in Latin America to do so.[3] The Commission, moreover, was entirely investigative – it could only document, not prosecute, cases of torture, disappearance, sexual violence and political repression.

In the absence of legal justice, former victims of Brazil's dictatorship brought public attention to their own life histories as a way to challenge the legacies of the Amnesty Law. Sharing memories of torture and imprisonment served as a counter-narrative wedge into the dominant culture of impunity. Starting in the 1990s, human rights activism made significant inroads: although the 1979 Law remained untouched, various campaigns successfully pushed for financial compensation for victims and their families, and a series of cultural and political movements brought attention and legitimacy to the stories of people like Aluízio Palmar.[4] The momentum of the 1990s and early 2000s led to Brazil's Truth Commission, but it also generated backlash – the 2018 election of Bolsonaro signalled a pendular swing against the human rights advances of the previous decades. Amidst this shifting context, Ostrovski filed his lawsuit.

For Palmar, being sued by his former torturer did not require the unearthing of repressed memories; far from it. Since the late 1990s, Palmar had been in a near-constant mode of auto-biographising. At that point in his career, he had taken up a search for the bodies of six militants who had been disappeared by the military regime in 1974 – several of the disappeared had been in his same revolutionary group, and he himself had nearly fallen into the trap that led to their deaths. As part of his search for the disappeared, and in an effort to shine a brighter spotlight on the details of his own life, Palmar shared his memories: he wrote a memoir, gave

[2]Lei da Anistia, no. 6683, 28 Aug. 1979: https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/leis/l6683.htm (all URLs last accessed 6 May 2024).

[3]Commissão Nacional da Verdade (CNV), *Relatório*, 2 vols. (Brasilia: CNV, 2014). Colombia issued its final Truth Commission report in 2022, though it related to a period of armed civil war rather than a military dictatorship. And in 2020, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador signed an executive order to form the country's first-ever Truth Commission, related to state-sponsored violence in the 1970s. The Mexican Commission remains pending.

[4]A good overview of these cultural and political campaigns is Rebecca J. Atencio, *Memory's Turn: Reckoning with Dictatorship in Brazil* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014).

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public speeches, led seminars with university and high school students, contributed to Brazil's Truth Commission (both the national proceedings and those of the Paraná State Commission), and sat for countless interviews with journalists and scholars. Bearing witness to the violence he had suffered in the twentieth century – at the hands of Lieutenant Ostrovski and other military perpetrators – became a biographic tool in his pursuit of justice in the twenty-first century. And it was this propensity to discuss his past that led to the lawsuit.

The lawsuit reflects a broader theme not only in Palmar's life, but in how he has told his life story. Premised on his memories of resistance and repression during the dictatorship, Palmar's late-in-life role as an activist centred on the repetition of his personal stories. For Palmar and others across Latin America and globally, narrativising memory has become a political strategy. Within a dominant culture of impunity, where the default has been to ignore or cover up the history of human rights violations, activists like Palmar have sought to disrupt that impasse through a repeating practice of bearing witness. And for scholars of memory, human rights and the legacies of political violence, the emphasis on telling life histories offers a rich, if complicated, field of study. By situating the extensive life history interviews that I conducted with Palmar as part of his human rights activism from the past two decades, and by triangulating these memories with a diverse range of documentary evidence, I seek to offer a useful framework not only for analysing memory as the intersection of the personal and the political, but also for elucidating the contours of somebody's decision to transform their experiences into a public narrative. Through a close reading of the life history and memories of one individual, this article explores the complex moral reckoning of an activist's own trauma.

Memory Script

This article derives from a larger book project, based mainly on interviews that I conducted with Palmar.[5] Over the course of nearly 40 hours of interviews, what had begun as a more straightforward biography took on broader dimensions. As I brought in other sources and reflected more deeply on my exchanges with Palmar, the project shifted. I focused more not only on the question of memory and memory-sharing, but also my own role as a biographer. This process led to the formulation of what I theorise as a 'memory script'.

As exemplified by my analysis of Palmar, the idea of memory script helps us understand how individuals express their memories in a way that is practised, repetitive and performative. By approaching memory as a process of self-narration, I explore why people share certain memories in certain ways, and how different moments and platforms of memory relate to each other.[6] Instead of focusing on a particular output of someone's memories – a book, or a social media post, or

[5]Jacob Blanc, *Searching for Memory: Aluízio Palmar and the Shadow of Dictatorship in Brazil* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming 2025).

[6]Here, I am in dialogue with cognitive science and critical literary studies, in which the idea of 'scriptotherapy' has, since the early 1990s, become both a psychoanalytical practice – an exercise for the recovery of trauma through writing – and a scholarly framework, most often associated with analysis of feminist autobiographies. For more, see Suzette A. Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998).

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testimony to a Truth Commission – we can analyse a given memory as part of a person's self-initiated life history.

My biography project of Aluízio Palmar engages the robust field of memory studies, a broad and interdisciplinary arena that in recent years has been refreshed through new studies of memory and the intersection of race, gender, and archival silences.[7] The field of memory studies has grown to such an extent that most countries, Brazil very much included, have developed their own bodies of scholarship on their respective national memories.[8] In Brazil, the field includes recent explorations of literature, theatre and visual arts from scholars like Lua Gill da Cruz and César Alessandro Figueiredo, as well as the analysis and curation of oral testimony archives such as the work of Carolina Dellamore.[9] Much of this scholarship deals with the history of dictatorship, but with important contributions about memory and the legacies of slavery and other forms of violence in Brazilian society.[10] Across Latin America, the field of memory studies is particularly vibrant in relation to military regimes, and scholars have already established a set of innovative analogies for understanding the aftermath of political violence. Chief among these are Elizabeth Jelín's notion of a 'memory entrepreneur' ('*emprendedor de memoria*') and Steve Stern's idea of a 'memory box'.[11] Whereas the former elucidates the efforts of a range of actors involved in contemporary memory struggles, and the latter helps explain how individuals contribute to a collective process of remembering and forgetting, my hope is that memory script can offer a complementary framework for understanding the process of memory-sharing.

There are three main characteristics of a memory script: it is practised, it is repetitive, and it is performative. First, memory-sharing is a learned practice, built up over years, and exhibited across different platforms. We see this throughout Palmar's memory work, which began with his investigations in the 1990s into six militants who had been disappeared by Brazil's dictatorship, then spread to his writing, organising and public speaking. His practice of memory revolved around a book that he wrote in 2005, entitled *Onde foi que vocês enterraram nossos mortos?* ('Where Did You Bury Our Dead?'). The book is primarily an account of his search for the bodies of the six militants, but with interwoven autobiographical sections as

[7]Examples include Ana Lucia Araujo, *Slavery in the Age of Memory: Engaging the Past* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020); and Altınay Ayşe Gül *et al.* (eds.), *Women Mobilizing Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

[8]A good overview is Myrian Sepúlveda dos Santos, *Memória coletiva e identidade nacional* (São Paulo: Annablume, 2013).

[9]Lua Gill da Cruz, '(Sobre)viver: luto, culpa e narração na literature pós-dictatorial', Master's thesis, Universidade Estadual de Campinas, 2017; César Alessandro Figueiredo, 'A ditadura militar no Brasil e o teatro: memória e resistência da classe artística', *Revista Eletrônica de Ciência Política*, 6: 2 (2015), pp. 7–27; and Carolina Dellamore *et al.* (eds.), *A ditadura aconteceu aqui: a história oral e as memórias do regime militar brasileiro* (São Paulo: Letra e Voz, 2017).

[10]For example, Marcelo Moura Mello, *Reminiscências dos quilombos: territórios da memória em uma comunidade negra rural* (São Paulo: Editora Terceiro Nome, 2012).

[11]Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Steve J. Stern, *The Memory Box of Pinochet's Chile*: Book 1: *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London 1998*; Book 2: *Battling for Hearts and Minds: Memory Struggles in Pinochet's Chile, 1973–1988*; Book 3: *Reckoning with Pinochet: The Memory Question in Democratic Chile, 1989–2006* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004, 2006, 2010).

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well, straddling the lines between memoir and investigative journalism.[12] Palmar's writing is reflective of what Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith term 'the ethics of recognition', through which narratives relating to human rights can activate 'the affective, emotional, and cognitive dimensions … in the social field where literature enfolds into politics'.[13] As Palmar's book went through several reprintings between 2005 and 2019 and helped grow his profile as a human rights activist, his practice also grew institutionally, through the Centro de Direitos Humanos e Memória Popular (CDHMP) that he established in the southwestern border city of Foz do Iguaçu and also a website that he launched for posting digitised archival material from the years of military rule.[14] Across these various memory initiatives, and influenced by similar campaigns that he observed in Brazil and across Latin America, Palmar learned and practised his craft.[15]

The second characteristic of a memory script is that it is repetitive. Compared to the first characteristic of being a learned practice, it is not just that someone does the work a lot; it is that the content of the work tends to follow a similar script. As a recurring practice of bearing witness, the repetition of a story helps it gain power – and it also elevates the position of the storyteller. As with other human rights activists who had survived the violence of dictatorship, Palmar's life story served as a form of legitimacy to help support new social movements. After being released from prison by the military government in 1971, he spent most of the 1970s in exile before finally returning to Brazil in 1979 – six years before the official end of military rule. In those early years back home, he was extremely hesitant to share his story. He took part in mobilisations to end the dictatorship, but he never spoke openly about his participation in the armed Left or his time in prison. It was only in the 1990s, when he began what was essentially a one-man investigation into the disappearances, that he began speaking about himself. The memories of his own experience formed a cycle of testimony and visibility: the more he talked about having fought against and survived the brutality of dictatorship, the more attention was brought to his efforts to locate the bodies. Memory-sharing is also context-specific, and, as Adam Gaffey writes in his study of ceremonial memory, 'every moment of repetition is a new opportunity to refashion, reimagine, and reconstitute the meaning of public discourse'.[16] When oriented toward political campaigns in the present, the patterned sharing of memory is not merely a

[12]Aluízio Palmar, *Onde foi que vocês enterraram nossos mortos?* (Curitiba: Travessa dos Editores, 2005). Throughout this article, my citations of this book relate to the 4th edition (2012), downloaded from https://www.marxists.org/portugues/tematica/livros/diversos/onde.pdf. Among the hundreds of memoirs from former militants and political prisoners, arguably the most famous is Fernando Gabeira's 1979 memoir, *O que é isso, companheiro?* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora CODECRI, 1979).

[13]Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 5.

[14]CDHMP: http://www.cdhmp.com.br/. The website for posting archival material is called 'Documentos Revelados' ('Documents Revealed'): https://documentosrevelados.com.br/.

[15]In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Latin America has been at the centre of new legal norms and social movements relating to global human rights. For more, see Kathryn Sikkink, *The Justice Cascade: How Human Rights Prosecutions are Changing World Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011).

[16]Adam Gaffey, 'Imagining the Words of Others: Public Memory and Ceremonial Repetition in American Public Discourse', PhD Dissertation, Texas A&M University, May 2013, p. 4.

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ritualised repetition of suffering or the Freudian 'acting out' of trauma.[17] Amidst the shadows of dictatorship, the repetition of memory is a way to bring renewed attention to past experiences of repression and resistance.

And for the third quality of a memory script: it is performative. A memory script, like all scripts, requires an audience. It is meant to be performed and received – that is how it gets its power to shape a narrative. As Diana Taylor has observed in her study of gender and human rights activism with the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, '[p]erformance, as a carrying through, needs the audience to complete its meaning, tie the pieces together and give them coherence'.[18] The performance of memory is a way to transform the personal into the political, and to exorcise one's own demons toward a broader social goal – an outward performance of suffering that scholars such as Ana Elena Puga and Víctor Espinosa describe as a form of pragmatic activism.[19] For human rights activists, the telling of one's life history offers an individual platform for pragmatically curating a personal story. As a practised and repeating form of memory-sharing, the self-narration of activists like Palmar serves to transform intimate life histories into public narratives.

For Palmar, as it is for countless former political prisoners across the globe, the process of sharing his memories cannot be disentangled from the trauma of the memories themselves. Among the abuses that military agents inflicted on Palmar were physical beatings, simulated drownings, mock executions and solitary confinement. For nearly three decades afterwards, Palmar refused to discuss his traumatic experience in prison. Only in the early 2000s, once he became a full-time human rights activist, did he begin speaking more openly about his torture. It is now a fixture in his memory activism. Yet the fact that he is willing to talk about his trauma does not resolve a host of underlying ethical and methodological questions. For survivors of torture, being interviewed about their trauma can inadvertently mimic the torture itself (e.g., an interrogator's questions).[20] Asking a person about their trauma, even someone like Palmar who has chosen to speak repeatedly and publicly about their experience, requires careful attention to the emotional process at hand.[21] For scholars of memory, grappling with a subject's trauma is both deeply

[17] Van Alphen discusses the ritualised repetitions of narrative of suffering in his study of art, memory and the Holocaust (Ernst van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997)). Freud discusses 'acting out' in relation to 'working through' past traumas (Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through', first published as 'Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten (Weitere Ratschläge zur Technik der Psychoanalyse, II)', *Internationale Zeitschrift für ärztliche Psychoanalyse*, 2 (1914), pp. 485–91, available at https://marcuse.faculty.history.ucsb.edu/classes/201/articles/1914FreudRemembering.pdf).

[18] Diana Taylor, 'Performing Gender: Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo', in Diana Taylor and Juan Villegas (eds.), *Negotiating Performance: Gender, Sexuality, and Theatricality in Latin/o America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 302.

[19] Ana Elena Puga and Víctor M. Espinosa, *Performances of Suffering in Latin American Migration: Heroes, Martyrs and Saints* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

[20] Ana Carla S. P. Schippert, Ellen Karine Grov and Ann Kristin Bjørnnes, 'Uncovering Re-Traumatization Experiences of Torture Survivors in Somatic Health Care: A Qualitative Systematic Review', *PLOS ONE*, 16: 2 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0246074.

[21] A useful guide is 'Interviewing', in Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Manual on Human Rights Monitoring* (revised edition) (New York and Geneva: UN, 2011).

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fundamental and deeply perplexing – such that an entire subfield known as 'trauma studies' emerged in the 1990s to help make sense of something that is hard enough for survivors themselves to understand, let alone anyone else.[22]

For a memory script analysis of Palmar's life, a key question relates to the narrative characteristics that arise from trauma. Psychologists use the term 'autobiographical memory' to explain how people integrate a complex range of single, recurring and extended events ('episodic memory') into 'a coherent story of self that is created and evaluated through sociocultural practices'.[23] A person's narrative of autobiographical memory is always subject to change, and this is especially true for survivors of torture, who, studies have shown, can have fragmented and inconsistent memory of the traumatic events.[24] Trauma disrupts a person's ability to construct a coherent narrative and it can distort a person's perception of time. This means that even activists like Palmar, who publicise their experience for political purposes, also carry with them an impossibility of narrating their memories in a purely documentary way – or, as the Brazilian literary theorist Márcio Seligmann-Silva has written, 'the representation of catastrophe … calls into question the universal elements of language itself'.[25] As such, this article uses the concept of memory script not to graph Palmar's narration of events onto a rigid template of 'the truth', but as a framework for contextualising his process of memory-sharing.

But how do we balance a scholarly inclination to provide readers with a consistent narrative path, and a source base that can resist an entirely linear progression? There is no obvious solution, no way to reconcile the subjectivities of a person's memories – whether traumatic or not – with the exercise of objective narration. Instead, two elements will coexist in this article: the larger narrative will proceed chronologically from Palmar's memories as a young revolutionary in the 1960s through his human rights activism in the early 2000s, while the traumatic memories on which much of the article is based will sometimes present a narrative that, on the surface, may seem irrational or untruthful. And it is precisely in these moments of tension, and through the questions they elicit, that an approach of memory script can help make sense of the external factors that orient the expression of traumatic memories.

Methodology

Over the course of two years, I conducted 25 in-depth interviews with Aluízio Palmar, amounting to nearly 40 hours of interview recordings, which I also

[22]Pioneering examples include Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992) and Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). It should be noted that 'trauma theory' has come under criticism because of trauma's Western medical and psychoanalytical heritage. For more, see Irene Visser, 'Trauma Theory and Postcolonial Literary Studies', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 47: 3 (2011), pp. 270–82.

[23]Robyn Fivush and Matthew E. Graci, 'Autobiographical Memory', in John H. Byrne (ed.), *Learning and Memory: A Comprehensive Reference*, 2nd edition (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Elsevier 2017), p. 119.

[24]A. Ehlers and D. M. Clark, 'A Cognitive Model of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder', *Behavioral Research and Therapy*, 38: 4 (2000), pp. 319–45.

[25]Márcio Seligmann-Silva, 'A história como trauma', in Arthur Nestrovski and Márcio Seligmann-Silva (eds.), *Catástrofe e representação* (São Paulo: Escuta, 2000), p. 75.

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complemented with a wide range of archival sources and interviews with dozens of people from various stages of his life, including family members, colleagues and former militants. While doing the interviews with Palmar, I also analysed his memoir and his testimony to the Paraná State Truth Commission,[26] I watched online videos of his talks, and I pored through his online presence, initially a WordPress blog and then a Facebook page, in addition to his back catalogue of presentations and interviews on YouTube. This iterative process was especially useful because, in our interviews, his initial reaction to many questions was to tell me the same stories, with the same details, that he has told elsewhere. Knowing the general parameters of Palmar's accustomed memory script allowed me to anticipate emblematic anecdotes and get more information than he might have provided otherwise.

My methodology is also self-reflexive, meaning that I write about my own exchanges with Palmar at key moments.[27] This requires entering an uncomfortable space of analysing – and at times complicating – the statements of a torture victim who has dedicated the second half of his life to human rights activism. Writing a biography of a person who is still alive is tricky enough, and it can be even more complicated when you maintain an active relationship with that person while researching and writing about their life. For example, when I discovered some discrepancies across Palmar's various platforms of memory, I shared my findings with him: his reaction to them forms part of my analysis. The point here is not to highlight misaligned memories for the sake of fact-checking. As the historian Alessandro Portelli writes, 'oral testimony … is never the same twice. This is a characteristic of all oral communication … Even the same interviewer gets different versions from the same narrator at different times.'[28] However, because Palmar's memory script is comprised of more than just oral history interviews – it also includes a range of written sources and public presentations – my analysis is based on a triangulation of his various platforms of storytelling that accounts for the subjectivities of his narration itself.

Attuned to the power dynamics and at-times contentious history of Anglophone scholars writing life histories of Latin American activists, I asked Palmar if he wanted to co-author the book with me.[29] He declined. Having already written

[26]Comissão Estadual da Verdade do Paraná Teresa Urban (CEV-PR), *Relatório da Comissão Estadual da Verdade do Paraná* (São Paulo: TikiBooks, 2017).

[27]I draw on the work of oral historians such as Verusca Calabria who, in her study of psychiatric hospitals in the UK's National Health Service, champions self-reflexivity as a pillar of qualitative research. Verusca Calabria, 'Self-Reflexivity in Oral History Research: The Role of Positionality and Emotions', in Peter Bray (ed.), *Voices of Illness: Negotiating Meaning and Identity* (Leiden: Brill/Rodopi, 2019), pp. 271–92.

[28]Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991), p. 55.

[29]In part to avoid the questions of authorial voice raised in the debates in the early 2000s about the testimony of Rigoberta Menchú, an indigenous Guatemalan woman, some scholars have collaborated with activists through an adapted approach of 'testimonial biography', in which the scholar serves primarily as a co-author; for example, Rosa Isolde Reuque Paillalef and Florencia E. Mallon, *When a Flower Is Reborn: The Life and Times of a Mapuche Feminist* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), and Manuel Llamojha Mitma and Jaymie Patricia Heilman, *Now Peru Is Mine: The Life and Times of a Campesino Activist* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

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his own memoir and keen to be the subject of a professional biography, Palmar was content to cede authorial voice to me. His disinterest in co-authoring, however, did not fully resolve my concerns. So for the larger book project, Palmar and I agreed on the following process: when I finished a chapter, I would translate it into Portuguese and share it with him, and he offered comments or corrections. He read every section of the book, including all the text that I include in this article. Toward the end of our interviews, when I asked Palmar why he had agreed to our collaboration, he said that 'I was already used to talking, it's not like you got me when my mouth was shut. I had been making this speech for a long time. And it's always good to talk because in talking you remember, too. Rescuing my memory, little by little I build a story.'[30]

All of my interviews, with Palmar and the others, took place digitally, most often using the WhatsApp audio function, but also with video calls on various platforms. The timing of my research was problematic (the Covid-19 pandemic precluded travel to Brazil) but also fortuitous, as the global lockdown made people relatively more available and willing to talk. In a previous era, this methodology would have been impossible, but in the early 2020s – and even set against a backdrop of a global pandemic – a distanced oral history project was feasible.

Structure: Memory Scripts of Victims and Perpetrators

To highlight the contested nature of memory in the aftermath of violence, I have selected four memories from Aluízio Palmar's life history. The first two memories relate primarily to Palmar and the last two are 'perpetrator memories' which still track closely to Palmar's search for the disappeared militants but from the perspective of those who committed human rights abuses: an anonymous officer who led Palmar on a wild goose chase in 2001, and a low-ranking soldier who, in 2009, admitted to having taken part in the 1974 disappearances.

My choice to give space to perpetrator memories is intended to reflect the realities of post-dictatorship societies like Brazil, where discovering the truth about human rights violations often depends on those who had committed the crimes. The reliance on perpetrator testimony produces what Leigh Payne describes as a 'contentious coexistence', in which the unsettling accounts from human rights abusers must be weighed as part of a 'democratic debate over past state violence'.[31] Across post-conflict societies, but especially in places like Brazil where there have been no trials or forms of legal accountability, the ability to know what happened in a country's violent past often relies on perpetrator memory. Sometimes there are other forms of proof – archival documents, bystander testimony, forensic evidence – but discovering the truth about human rights violations often depends on those who had been involved in the crimes. In this article, as in society, the memories of victims and perpetrators must be understood as part of a mutually constructed, and often contentious, debate about truth, justice and accountability.

[30] Aluízio Palmar, interview with author, 16 Sept. 2020.

[31] Leigh A. Payne, *Unsettling Accounts: Neither Truth nor Reconciliation in Confessions of State Violence* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 3.

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Palmar Memory I: The Generation of '68

Aluízio Palmar was born in 1943 in São Fidélis, a town in the northern interior of Rio de Janeiro state, where his parents ran a small dry goods store.[32] When Palmar was 16, his family moved to the coast and lived in a suburb of Niterói, the bustling port city across the Guanabara Bay from Rio de Janeiro. Going to high school in Niterói, and working a series of odd jobs in Rio de Janeiro, Palmar's adolescence in the early 1960s took place against the backdrop of a changing Brazil. Under the presidency of the leftist reformer João Goulart, Palmar – like many of his generation – was active in student politics and eventually became a youth member of the Partido Comunista Brasileiro (PCB). It was as a member of the PCB that Palmar witnessed Brazil's military stage a coup that overthrew Goulart late in the night of 31 March 1964, and instituted a military regime that stayed in power for 21 years.

In the early years of Brazil's dictatorship, Palmar's life had several phases. After the coup, he fled inland and stayed with family members until the initial wave of persecutions waned. Returning to Niterói, he became active again in the student movement and the PCB, the latter clandestinely to evade the authorities that continued to track alleged communists. By 1967, while a student at the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF), Palmar and scores of other leftists began to think that more confrontational methods were required to overthrow the increasingly authoritarian state.[33] Influenced by revolutionary texts from Brazilian authors such as Caio Prado Júnior and foreign Marxists like Régis Debray, Palmar became convinced that only an armed struggle could bring down the dictatorship.[34] With others in Niterói, Palmar formed a dissident group that broke from the PCB and formed the Movimento Revolucionário 8 de Outubro – MR-8, named in honour of the date, 8 October 1967, when Che Guevara was murdered in Bolivia. The MR-8 was one of three dozen Brazilian groups that took up arms in the late 1960s. After withdrawing from university and going underground, Palmar moved to western Paraná, where, with the help of an older Paraguayan militant who had spent time in Cuba, he established a small guerrilla training group in the Iguaçu National Park.[35] Of the various armed cadres that emerged during this time, the MR-8 was one of the few to actually conduct exercises for a so-called '*foco*' (guerrilla insurgency) in the countryside. (Most groups operated primarily in cities.) As evident in our interviews, and as documented by the interrogation logs that were compiled when the group was captured by security forces in the middle of 1969, Palmar and a handful of other MR-8 members used the Paraná borderland as a training ground between March 1968 and February 1969.[36]

While Palmar was embedded in the dense Atlantic rainforest along the Brazil–Argentina border, the opposition movement back in Rio de Janeiro staged its most

[32]Aluízio Palmar, interview with author, 19 May 2020.

[33]Aluízio Palmar, interview with author, 2 June 2020.

[34]Caio Prado Júnior, *A revolução brasileira* (São Paulo: Ed. Brasiliense, 1966) and Régis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

[35]Aluízio Palmar, interview with author, 9 June 2020.

[36]Military documentation include a training diary kept by Palmar during his time in the Iguaçu National Park. Memo no. 147-E2/69, 18 April 1969, Arquivo Público, Paraná, coleção Delegacia de Ordem Política e Social, pasta 'Aluízio F. Palmar'.

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important action to date. Throughout the early months of 1968, the military regime had increased the scale of arbitrary arrests, most often against students. The targeting of youth movements, in turn, spurred more students to take action, not only against military rule generally, but also against the various policies that impacted daily life. On 28 March, at a demonstration to demand that university restaurants offer more affordable meals, police shot and killed Edson Luís de Lima Souto, an 18-year-old student who had recently moved to Rio from the northern state of Pará. Edson was one of the first students killed by the dictatorship, and his death sparked a new wave of protests. This culminated three months later, on 26 June, with the March of the 100,000 – one of the largest demonstrations in Brazilian history.

Palmar was not among the 100,000 protesters in Rio de Janeiro. In our interviews, he emphasised that except for a quick return to Niterói in early 1969 to visit his father, after arriving in western Paraná in March 1968 he did not leave the region until being captured by the military the following year. Yet decades afterwards, when speaking about the history of 1968, he placed himself not in the forests of western Paraná – part of a small band of ultimately unsuccessful rebels – but in the middle of the demonstration, allegedly taking part in arguably the most emblematic day in Brazil's fight for democracy. In 2018, as part of the 50th anniversary of 1968, he was invited to speak at the Universidade Estadual de Ponta Grossa. Across Brazil on that day, commemorations of 1968 took place with the 2018 presidential elections on the near-horizon – the firebrand Jair Bolsonaro was already starting to top polls, and it was unclear if former president Lula would be allowed to run. In this context, the legacy of 1968, and the blending of past and present, was almost palpable. The day before his speech, he promoted the event on his Facebook page and he also wrote a short post about his participation in the famous protest in Rio de Janeiro:

> On that 26 June 1968, I crossed the Guanabara Bay with a group of classmates from the UFF and some high school students. We were nervous … At that time the dictatorship was using extreme violence, even killing protestors. Knowing that we could be victims of a massacre, we went [to Rio], carrying pamphlets we had printed the day before on our homemade mimeographs. We got off the ferry at the Praça XV and went to the front of the Legislative Assembly, where we joined the crowd … In a few minutes, we were surprised by the strength of the momentum that swelled the march in another direction. Suddenly, the streets of Rio de Janeiro were overtaken by the massive political demonstration that would come to be known as the 'March of the 100,000'. The dictatorship suffered a great defeat [that day].[37]

Why did Palmar claim to have been somewhere he was not? And what can these sorts of misrepresentations reflect about larger themes of identity and historical memory? I sat with this information for over a year, putting off what I knew I needed to do, which was letting Palmar know about the discrepancy. This case helped push me to fully embrace a methodology that, until that point, I had tiptoed

[37] Aluízio Palmar, Facebook page, 27 June 2018.

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around when it related to the more delicate aspects of Palmar's memories. It was easy to have a close relationship with my research subject when the exchanges focused primarily on the stories that he provided me, but it would be tricker to point out parallel or even discordant aspects that I discovered through my research.

When I told Palmar about my findings, I chose to convey this information in a carefully worded email rather than in our usual WhatsApp or Zoom conversations. So it is possible that his initial reaction was different to the measured reply he sent later that night. In my email, I used the words '*discrepância*' (discrepancy) and '*discordância*' (something at odds with), which I hoped would provide a softer landing. Palmar, in his reply, used the word '*contradições*' (contradictions), which he explained were part of a 'mental confusion' that he sometimes exhibited. In this case, he claimed to have mixed up the dates of two events.[38] Rather than describing the 1968 protest against military rule, he told me that he had mistakenly drawn from his memory of a rally in 1964, two weeks prior to the coup, when he had taken the ferry with his classmates across the bay to attend the so-called Comício da Central (Rally at Central Station) addressed by President João Goulart, in which he outlined a series of reforms that sparked a conservative backlash and precipitated the military coup two weeks later. All evidence suggests that Palmar had indeed taken part in the 1964 rally, yet it appears that, despite what he claimed on social media, he had not participated in the 1968 protest.

This memory is the overlapping result of several potential forces, including the passage of time and the fact that all memories are liable to slippage. Fifty years after the event in question, Palmar projected details from his earlier political work (taking the ferry from Niterói, protesting with other students, the mimeograph printer) onto what it might have been like if he had attended in person. The stories and images of that day in Rio de Janeiro have become so ubiquitous that Palmar could conjure the sights and feel of the protest. Because this moment became elevated as a collective memory in leftist folklore, it became a potent and invokable narrative, even for those who had not been there.

But there are other considerations as well, namely, a desire to place oneself at an important historical moment. Given the purpose of his Facebook post – to promote his appearance at an event for the 50th anniversary of 1968 – we can also understand Palmar's memory as a legacy of his political trajectory. The MR-8's campaign of armed struggle, like that of the various revolutionary groups in Brazil, did not achieve its goal of overthrowing the dictatorship. In the end, it could even be argued that the insurgent campaigns did more harm than good, given that the regime used the existence of a small number of armed groups as justification to then unleash a disproportionate amount of violence. As such, putting himself among the protestors in 1968 can also be read as an attempt to stake a personal claim to a highly symbolic moment.

Another possible explanation relates to questions of identity, belonging and trauma. In our interviews, Palmar often referred to himself as part of the generation of '68, and it is even the name of a WhatsApp group ('Amigos e Amigas de 68') of former activists and militants in which he is an active participant. The name conjures a connection to the global youth counterculture of the 1960s – evoking

[38]Aluízio Palmar, WhatsApp message to author, 27 Oct. 2021.

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student protests in Paris and Budapest – and it implies a shared trajectory: in the aftermath of 1968, when Brazil's dictatorship became even more authoritarian, many activists went into exile, often settling in Europe, where they maintained bonds of solidarity on foreign soil. Palmar took a different path. As we will see, after two years in prison, he settled in Chile but almost immediately returned to clandestine organising, a choice that eventually led him to live in rural Argentina with a fake name and under constant threat of arrest. As a result, his decade in exile was defined by isolation, loneliness and political disillusionment, making him resentful toward others who spent their exile in Europe. Palmar told me that he enjoys being in the 'Amigos e Amigas de 68' WhatsApp group, but when people on the thread discuss exile, he gets frustrated: 'They always talk about their time in exile, in Germany, in Switzerland, Sweden, in Paris, Rome. I think to myself, and I tell them, "Fucking hell, while you all were living it up in exile I was god knows where."'[39]

In this context, Palmar's memory of having participated in the 1968 march in Rio de Janeiro can also be seen as an effort to connect with a foundational moment for his generation. Scholars of trauma and memory have traced similar examples of identity formation. Dominick LaCapra, for example, writes that 'Traumatic experience has dimensions that may threaten or even shatter identity and may not be "captured" by history, recorded in written archives, or contained by conscious recall … in an apparent paradox, the extremely disconcerting or traumatic may also be affirmed or embraced as the foundation of identity.'[40] As such, and when filtered through Palmar's narratives of trauma, his memories of 1968 reflect a desire to be included in the hinge moment of what propelled many, but not all, of his generation along a common next step in their experience of Brazil's dictatorship.

Palmar Memory 2: Torture

Palmar was arrested on 4 April 1969, and he spent nearly two years being shuffled between various military prisons in Paraná and Rio de Janeiro.[41] During this time, particularly in the first year after his capture, he was severely tortured – physical beatings, simulated drowning, long periods of isolation, mock executions and the infamous 'parrot's perch' (*pau de arara*), in which a prisoner is hung upside down with an iron bar wedged behind their knees.

As a human rights activist in the twenty-first century, Palmar does not shy away from discussing his experience as a torture victim: an entire chapter of his memoir details his treatment in prison, it is a frequent reference in his presentations and interviews, and he spoke at length about it during his testimony to the Paraná State Truth Commission.[42] In a certain sense, the story of his torture is the heart

[39]Aluízio Palmar, interview with author, 15 July 2020.

[40]Dominick LaCapra, 'Trauma, History, Memory, Identity: What Remains?', *History and Theory*, 55: 3 (2016), p. 391.

[41]Palmar, *Onde foi*, p. 193.

[42]*Ibid.*, pp. 193–9, 'Nos cárceres da ditadura'; Aluízio Palmar, testimony to CEV-PR, Cascavel, 20 March 2014, reproduced in Carla Luciana Silva and Alfredo A. Batista (eds.), *Combatentes: tempos de falar. Depoimentos da Audiência Pública da Comissão Estadual da Verdade do Paraná* (Cascavel: EDUNIOESTE, 2016), pp. 111–21): https://documentosrevelados.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/combatentes-completo.pdf.

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of his memory script, serving as the ultimate proof of his suffering at the hands of the military and, as a result, his legitimacy in contemporary struggles for justice.

Some memories remain harder to disentangle than others. In our interviews, Palmar told me that in the early weeks of his imprisonment, he never revealed who he was. Because he was carrying falsified documents at the moment of his arrest, the police did not initially know his real identity. Palmar said that each time he was sent to a new prison, he provided a new story, whether giving a series of fake names or saying that he was a university student doing research for a class project.[43] It is possible that he did tell different stories each time he was shuffled to a different detention centre. Yet archival documents show that the police identified him on the first evening of torture. Records from the dictatorship's Departamento de Ordem Política e Social (DOPS) suggest that at 8pm on 4 April – only a few hours after his arrest – local police in Cascavel reported 'the arrest in that city, of the individual Aluízio Ferreira Palmar, in whose possession was found a great quantity of subversive material'.[44] In the prisoner report filed the next morning, the Cascavel police again stated that the person in their custody was Aluízio Palmar.[45] Initially, the police did not know that their detainee was part of the MR-8 armed group, stating more generally that the prisoner 'is deeply connected to leftist and revolutionary groups'. In the coming weeks, however, the interrogation reports provided a growing body of information on Palmar's role in the armed insurgency. These torture sessions helped the military to begin mapping out the guerrilla activities along the border, and when more MR-8 members were arrested a month later, the subsequent interrogations allowed the regime to dismantle the remaining cadres.

So, does this evidence suggest that Palmar broke under torture and divulged his real name? Although it is tempting to go down this path – searching for a knowable, singular, 'truth' – the question distracts us from a deeper analysis. Rather than comparing which source is more reliable (an archival document or an interview decades later) the historian's challenge is to examine the stories that emerge from each type of source and how this relates to memory formation. In this case, it is also possible that the statements of both Palmar and the police were valid: the authorities might have known who Palmar was, and Palmar might not have known that *they* knew who he was, in which case nobody was mistaken. But even with that nuance, we still veer towards a trap of saying who is right and who is wrong.

As I had with Aluízio's memory discrepancies about the 1968 protest, in later interviews I circled back to his initial arrest, and I asked him about how his full name appeared in military documents so soon after his capture. He replied by telling me that when he was arrested, along with the fake identity card, he was also carrying his real documents – a detail that he had not included in our initial conversations or in any other memory platform that I had come across. There is no way

[43]Aluízio Palmar, interviews with author, 9 and 23 June 2020.

[44]Prison report, 9 May 1969, Quartel General da Quinta Região, Arquivo Público do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, coleção DOPS, série 'Pontuário', pasta RJ, fichário 34160.

[45]Secretaria de Segurança Pública, 7a Subdivisão Policial – Cascavel, note no. 271/69, 5 April 1969, from Núcleo de Pesquisa e Documentação sobre o Oeste do Paraná (CEPEDAL), Universidade Estadual do Oeste do Paraná, Marechal Cândido Rondon, 'Palmar' collection.

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to definitively know whether Palmar was indeed carrying his real documents when arrested or if he had given his name to his torturers. But we can examine the content of his memory script to understand how his initial story to me – of giving different names – relates to his experience of imprisonment and torture.

Applying trauma as a filter helps make sense of Palmar's memories from prison. The trauma here relates to the physical abuse that military agents would soon inflict on him, and it can also be understood as the emotional turmoil that came with the failure of his political project. His guerrilla activities had not brought down the dictatorship, and now he had been captured. Refusing to give his real name was a chance to extend his militancy, to remain a clandestine revolutionary a little longer. In the vortex of traumatic memories that took shape during his imprisonment and afterwards, the details of how the military learned of his identity carried important political and emotional weight. In discussing his time as a political prisoner, Palmar often mentioned how naive he had been. When I asked if the MR-8 ever discussed what to do if arrested, he said that

> nobody had undergone training in going to prison, or in resisting, or in how to behave during an interrogation. Nobody was prepared. We all went from living in our parents' house to being guerrilla fighters. We went from college, from school, straight to the armed struggle … Our training was mostly intellectual, it wasn't practical … Nobody was prepared for any of it. We were amateurs.[46]

Here, Palmar's self-narration reflects the process through which a narrative takes shape. While his torture was deeply individual, the resulting trauma was also a shared experience with others who had been repressed – many of whom also remembered their activism in terms of naivety and youthfulness. In the aftermath of their torture, whether back in their jail cells or decades later after their release from prison, torture victims like Palmar shared their experiences and endeavoured to transform their memories of suffering into acts of perseverance. Giving voice to the painful and atomised memories of their time in prison allowed Palmar and others to build a more cohesive narrative about a shared history, to make meaning out of horrific moments.

Palmar's memories of torture allow us to identify the formation of memory between two moments: the first corresponds to when an event took place, and the second to each time the person shares this memory. In this example, we can trace the formation of Palmar's memory between his being tortured in 1969 and the various moments in which he articulated that memory, repeatedly drawing on the traumas of his past as a performance of both pain and resistance. For Palmar, the space between these two timestamps was defined in large part by his activism and the telling of his own life story. Between these poles, memory can continue to form, shaped not only by a new context, but also by the culmination of all previous contexts – and for Palmar, by the shadows of dictatorship that hover above.

[46] Aluízio Palmar, interview with author, 23 June 2020.

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Gathering Evidence in a Time of Transition

Following his arrest, Palmar spent two years in various detention centres under the auspices of the National Security Law.[47] He gained his freedom in 1971 as part of a prisoner exchange, after which he lived in exile first in Chile and then Argentina as a member of another revolutionary group, the Vanguarda Popular Revolucionária (VPR), which resulted in a sequence of increasingly isolated and tenuous postings along the Brazil–Argentina border.[48] He did not return to Brazil until 1979, after nearly a decade on foreign soil. In the early 1980s, as the military regime oversaw a negotiated transition of power back to civilian rule, Palmar started to take part in local politics, including as a founding editor of *Nosso Tempo*, an opposition newspaper in the city of Foz do Iguaçu. He also became involved in the local branch of the Partido Democrático Trabalhista (PDT), and in the early 1990s he left the newspaper and went to work in the mayor's office, first as the city's Head of Communications and then as the Secretary for the Environment.

Palmar's new position in civil society mirrored broader changes in Brazil during the 1990s. Although amnesty remained the law of the land – meaning that no perpetrators could be held liable for human rights abuses – Brazilians found new ways to reckon with the country's recent history of authoritarian rule. In 1992, for example, Brazil's most popular television station, Globo, ran a *telenovela* (soap opera) called *Anos Rebeldes* ('Rebel Years'), about a fictional group of high school students in the 1960s; some of the characters, like Aluízio Palmar in real life, joined the armed underground only to eventually get imprisoned and tortured by the military regime. The show's depictions of censorship and torture suggested that Brazil was starting to more directly confront its recent past. And in the realm of national politics, the mass demonstrations in 1992 demanding the impeachment of President Fernando Collor de Mello, coupled with the 1994 election of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (a former sociology professor who lived in exile during the dictatorship) reflected a population eager for more accountability from its leaders. It remained to be seen what might result from these changing cultural and political winds, but for human rights activists and victims' groups, these were promising developments. Palmar was not yet ready to confront the traumas within his own life history, but he did start looking into the disappearance of a group of his former comrades.

Palmar's new job in city government placed him within political and information networks that spurred his search for the six disappeared militants. For Palmar, this interest was deeply personal, as he had almost been part of the disappeared group: while passing through Buenos Aires in 1974, he was invited to join the group sneaking back into Brazil, but in a twist that saved his life, he declined the offer.[49] Motivated by a mix of survivor's guilt and militant curiosity, he always kept an ear out for rumours about what had happened in 1974.[50] Within radical circles it was widely assumed that Onofre Pinto – a leader of the VPR revolutionary group –

[47]Decreto-Lei no. 898, 29 Sept. 1969: https://www2.camara.leg.br/legin/fed/declei/1960-1969/decreto-lei-898-29-setembro-1969-377568-publicacaooriginal-1-pe.html.

[48]Aluízio Palmar, interviews with author, 9, 15 and 23 July 2020.

[49]Palmar, *Onde foi*, pp. 215–18.

[50]*Ibid.*, p. 15.

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and a few others had been lured back to their deaths in Brazil. It was unknown exactly how many people died or where the murders took place, but it was believed that the plan had been orchestrated by a double agent named Alberi Vieira dos Santos.[51] Palmar harboured these suspicions for many years.

It was only in 1992 that details about the disappearances came to light. In an interview with *Veja*, Brazil's leading magazine, a former Army officer named Marival Dias Chaves – allegedly seeking to clear his conscious – provided details on numerous cases of murder and espionage staged by the dictatorship.[52] The *Veja* material did not mention anything directly related to the disappearance of Onofre Pinto's group, but its publication led several human rights organisations to get in touch with Chaves in hopes that he could shed light on other cases. One such group was Tortura Nunca Mais, a coalition based in Rio de Janeiro, whose president wrote to Chaves asking for potential information about the 1974 disappearances. In response, Chaves confirmed that Alberi – who had died back in the late 1970s – had indeed been a double agent who lured the militants back to Brazil by claiming that he was organising a resistance base along the Paraná border.[53] Chaves also gave the names of five militants whom he knew to have been part of the group: Onofre Pinto, José Lavéchia, the brothers Daniel and Joel José de Carvalho, and Enrique Ruggia, a 17-year-old Argentine student. These were five of the six militants disappeared in 1974; the sixth, whom Chaves seemed unaware of, was a man named Victor Carlos Ramos. For family members of the disappeared, and activists involved with the search, this was revelatory, if still insufficient, news.

Perpetrator Memory I: Mystery Caller

By the turn of the century, Palmar was not sure what might come from his long-standing interest in the case of the disappearances. He had retired from his work in the mayor's office and was preparing for a more relaxing next stage of life.[54] But in the June of 2000, a newspaper article changed his plans. He did not write the article. Rather, he was interviewed by a journalist from the *Folha do Paraná* for a report on Operation Condor – the secret intelligence and security system shared by military dictatorships across the Southern Cone.[55] As part of the report, the journalist quoted Palmar about the disappearance of Onofre Pinto, Enrique Ruggia and the others. There was no indication that Palmar was actively investigating the case, but someone who read the article evidently wanted to nudge him back onto the chase.

[51]The military's tactic of using double agents to entrap dissidents had precedent: the year before the disappearance of Onofre Pinto's group, a former political prisoner turned mole/double agent named José Anselmo dos Santos – known as Cabo ('Corporal') Anselmo – set a fatal ambush in the state of Recife, resulting in the death of six militants in what became known as the São Bento massacre. For more see Luiz Felipe Campos, *O massacre da Granja São Bento* (Recife: Cepe, 2017).

[52]'Autópsia da sombra', *Veja*, 18 Nov. 1992, pp. 20–32.

[53]Letter from Marival Dias Chaves to Cecília Coimbra, president of the Grupo Tortura Nunca Mais, 7 Jan. 1993, as reproduced in Palmar, *Onde foi*, pp. 57–60.

[54]Aluízio Palmar, interview with author, 5 Aug. 2020.

[55]'Como Operação agiu no PR', *Folha do Paraná*, 3 June 2000.

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As chronicled over several pages in his memoir, and as Palmar told me in our interviews, somebody called his home a few days after the article's publication.[56] Palmar was out at the time, but his wife, Eunice, picked up, and the caller said that he had information to share about Operation Condor. The caller did not leave his name or a return number. The same thing happened for several days, until finally Palmar was home when the mystery call came in. The man identified himself only as a former officer in the Army and stated that he knew where the bodies were buried. He said that he was currently passing through Curitiba, the state capital of Paraná, and that Palmar should come to meet him. Foz do Iguaçu is a nine-hour drive away, but Palmar was able to arrange for a friend and former militant named José Carlos Mendes, who lived in Curitiba, to go in his place. José met the man, who claimed that he 'was having a crisis of conscious', and thus wanted the truth to be known. Before hurriedly leaving, he gave José a hand-drawn map of where Onofre Pinto and the militants were allegedly buried. The map, which José sent to Palmar by fax, pointed to an old airstrip outside the town of Nova Aurora in western Paraná, less than 200 kilometres from Foz do Iguaçu. Palmar felt a cautious but hopeful anticipation at the possibility of finally bringing closure to the militants' families.

The next morning, he got in contact with a politician named Nilmário Miranda, who was the head of the Comissão Especial sobre Mortos e Desaparecidos Políticos (CEMDP), a body within the Ministry of Justice that helped coordinate forensic searches.[57] With Miranda's help, the logistics of a search began taking shape. The following year, in May 2001, a team of geologists from the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais and forensic scientists from Argentina spent two days using ground-penetrating radar to identify subsoil anomalies.[58] In tandem with the map drawn by the mystery Army officer, the scientists noted two potential areas where human remains might be buried. The next step was coordinating an excavation, which took place three months later. In our interview, Palmar said that the dig became 'like a circus, with two or three television stations … and vendors selling popcorn, candyfloss, sandwiches, everything … The whole town came out to watch.'[59] Photos published in a local newspaper show dozens of people standing around a roped-off area while several men wield shovels in a waist-high trench.[60] But, the spectacle was for nothing.

After two full days of careful excavation, no human remains – or clues of any kind – were found. Palmar told me that he and others could not help but cry from frustration.[61] But in the years to come, as he more fully embraced the life of a memory activist, he saw the false lead as a form of personal reawakening. In the opening section of his memoir, which he wrote only a few years after the failed excavation, Palmar commented that 'the frustrations at Nova Aurora gave me more

[56]Details of the call from Palmar, *Onde foi*, pp. 66–9, and Aluízio Palmar, interview with author, 12 Aug. 2020.

[57]The CEMDP was established by Lei no. 9140, 4 Dec. 1995: https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/leis/l9140.htm.

[58]Palmar, *Onde foi*, p. 74.

[59]Aluízio Palmar, interview with author, 12 Aug. 2020.

[60]'Expedição retoma hoje busca de ossadas', *Folha de Londrina/Folha do Paraná*, 4 Aug. 2001, p. 7.

[61]Aluízio Palmar, interview with author, 12 Aug. 2020.

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courage to continue the search. Sometimes, I think that this fixation was driven by a curiosity to know what my own death would have been like.'[62] At this moment in 2001, Palmar had just been led on a wild goose chase by someone who seemed eager not only to keep the truth buried, but to embarrass him. Yet as part of what would soon grow into his memory script, Palmar sought to find purpose in a moment of great frustration. This resolve drove his activism in the decades to come.

Perpetrator Memory II: Otávio Rainolfo

For the next few years, Palmar travelled across the western Paraná border chasing down leads.[63] It was also during this period that Palmar's one-man investigation gained some official authority: in November 2002, he was given research credentials by the CEMDP, allowing him to spend several months in the archives of the police precinct in Foz do Iguaçu.[64] Paired with his visits along the border, his archival searches helped him gather more information about Alberi and the operations of the military's security systems in the 1970s. Nevertheless, these details, however useful for understanding the mechanisms of repression at the time, did not contain any concrete evidence about what happened to Onofre Pinto's group.

A breakthrough finally took place in July 2004, when a former Army officer named Otávio Rainolfo admitted to having been the driver in the operation that killed the six militants. Before describing how Palmar claimed to have discovered Rainolfo, it is useful first to summarise the story of how the murders are purported to have happened.

This version of events, uncovered by Palmar's search and eventually adopted as the official one by Brazil's Truth Commission, is as follows.[65] On 11 July 1974, the double agent Alberi travelled with the six militants from Buenos Aires to the Brazil–Argentina border. By the next day, they had crossed into Brazil, where they spent the night on a small farm, which the militants were led to believe was a base for the armed movement that would help topple Brazil's dictatorship. At dusk the next day, 13 July, five of the six militants – Onofre Pinto stayed at the farm – were driven into the Iguaçu National Park for a planned meeting with other would-be rebels. After driving for about 10 kilometres on an old road through the Park, the car stopped, and the militants were told they now had to walk to the meeting point. The five militants walked alongside Alberi and Rainolfo, the driver. After walking for 50 metres, the group reached a clearing. All of a sudden, bright lights flashed and gunfire broke out. Alberi and Rainolfo, seemingly aware of the planned ambush, threw themselves to the ground and took cover behind a fallen tree trunk. The five militants were shot to death. Onofre Pinto would later be killed back at the farm.

While there is no doubt that Palmar's investigation uncovered this story, what is debatable is precisely *how* he discovered it. In his book, Palmar writes that he tracked down Alberi's nephew, who claimed to have seen Alberi and the militants

[62]Palmar, *Onde foi*, p. 16.

[63]*Ibid.*, pp. 122–6.

[64]*Ibid.*, p. 82.

[65]CEV-PR, *Relatório da Comissão Estadual*, vol. 1, § 3.3.1, 'Massacre de Medianeira: Parque Nacional do Iguaçu – estrada do Colono'.

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being taken to the family's farm, presumably before being driven elsewhere to their deaths. Palmar wanted to find out if Alberi was accompanied by anyone, and the nephew replied that there was also a driver, whose name was Otávio Rainolfo. In his telling, Palmar remembered having seen Rainolfo's name mentioned in many of the police archives, and he was eager to locate this person who might well have participated in the murder of the six militants.[66] As luck would have it, Rainolfo happened to still live in Foz do Iguaçu, only a short drive from Palmar. In his memoir, Palmar writes that he was able to find Rainolfo's address 'with the help of some friends'.[67]

Palmar's recounting of this story raises several questions. First, how did Alberi's nephew know the name of the driver whom he claimed to have seen briefly during a secret military operation 30 years earlier? And second, who were the friends that found Rainolfo and why was the alleged perpetrator willing to share the details with them? The first is perhaps unknowable, and the second leads us to informed conjectures.

The blurriness of how Palmar found Rainolfo revolves primarily around a businessman friend who helped secure Rainolfo's cooperation and, eventually, his testimony to the Truth Commission. The man in question was César Cabral, one of Palmar's oldest friends. Cabral had been a militant in the MR-8, joining Palmar in the Iguaçu National Park for guerrilla training sessions in 1968, before he, too, was arrested by the dictatorship. Cabral eventually settled in Foz do Iguaçu and set up a lucrative import–export company based across the border in Paraguay – he was also Palmar's brother-in-law, each having married a sister from the same family. More importantly, at least for the history of how Cabral became a person with considerable resources and influence, much of his wealth came from contraband smuggling. Along the border, it is a public secret that Cabral was heavily involved in the illegal tobacco sector, working closely with Paraguayan tobacco firm TABESA alongside Horacio Manuel Cartes – later president of Paraguay – to move product throughout the Southern Cone and overseas.[68] Cabral died of cancer in 2014, so I could not interview him about his role in the search for the disappeared militants. But Palmar spoke candidly with me about his old friend, and we even spent the bulk of one interview discussing Cabral and their complex relationship over the years.[69] What remained unclear, however, is the sequence of events that led Rainolfo to divulge his memories about the 1974 disappearances.

I was curious as to how exactly Rainolfo ended up divulging his memories about the 1974 disappearances. Compared to the relatively short version in Palmar's book, which made only a passing gesture to 'two friends', I was given a lengthier story in our interviews. Palmar told me that one night, at some point after having allegedly discovered Rainolfo's name, he was out having a beer with Cabral, whom he told of his ongoing search: 'I said that I had a lead, of the only person who witnessed it …

[66]Palmar, *Onde foi*, p. 145. (In earlier editions of his memoir, Palmar refers to this driver as Otávio Camargo, using a fake surname; from the 5th edition, published in 2018, after Rainolfo had passed away and once the case had started to receive more public attention, he used Rainolfo's real surname.)

[67]*Ibid*., p. 146.

[68]TABESA was the subject of several investigations into the importation of counterfeit cigarettes, including the operation code-named 'Heart of Stone' run by the US Drug Enforcement Administration.

[69]Aluízio Palmar, interview with author, 2 Sept. 2021.

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but that I didn't know who he was. César asks for the name, and he laughs and says, don't worry my friend, [that guy] works for me.'[70] In a twist that reflects the plausible overlap between contraband and policing in a border region, the story then goes that because Rainolfo was a henchman of sorts for Cabral, it was not difficult to get him to admit to what had happened in 1974. In his book and in our interviews, Palmar explained that Rainolfo refused to speak with him directly, only ever sharing details with Cabral and a policeman named Adão Almeida, who was close friends with both Palmar and Cabral. Almeida's memory of these events makes matters even more complicated: in my interview with him, Almeida claimed that *he* was the one who broke the case, saying that he discovered Rainolfo's identity in military documents from the era and that Rainolfo confessed everything to him.[71] In a swirl of competing memories about how a perpetrator's testimony came to light, all parties involved seemed intent on staking their own claim to have solved the 1974 murders.

The murky details surrounding Rainolfo's testimony were perhaps prescient: his story did not lead to, and has not led to, any concrete evidence. Rainolfo's confession set in motion another excavation, and he showed forensic investigators the spot in the Iguaçu National Park where he remembered the ambush taking place.[72] In May 2005, nearly a year after Rainolfo testified to César Cabral and Adão Almeida, an official government excavation took place inside the Park. For nearly a week, a forensic team investigated the area. As in Nova Aurora, the search again came up empty. For Palmar, not finding the bodies was far more deflating the second time: 'It was so frustrating. Such tremendous frustration. One day I finished a whole thing of whisky, I drank a litre of whisky. It was so frustrating not finding anything there.'[73] Particularly after securing the statement of somebody who claimed to have taken part in the disappearances, the inability to locate the bodies was devastating. However, Palmar did not give up entirely. Five years later, in 2010, he convinced the Brazilian government to stage a second excavation within the National Park – Rainolfo had since changed his testimony and stated that the bodies were actually 8 km away from the place he had indicated previously.[74] Again, nothing was found.

Here is where we must venture into the world of informed hypotheses. Perhaps Rainolfo could not remember the precise location, within a massive National Park, where the ambush happened? Or maybe the bodies had been scattered by animals and the elements in this dense stretch of Atlantic rainforest? To this day, a definitive answer remains elusive.

Regardless of whether Rainolfo was telling the truth, what is clear is that his ability to make his statement, to declare that he had been an accomplice to the disappearances, was the result of a prevailing culture of impunity that was codified in the dictatorship's 1979 Amnesty Law, which shielded all state agents from prosecution. As with Marival Chaves in the early 1990s, Rainolfo could come forward because he

[70]Aluízio Palmar, interview with author, 12 Aug. 2020.
[71]Adão Almeida, interview with author, 15 Sept. 2020.
[72]Palmar, *Onde foi*, pp. 235–8.
[73]Aluízio Palmar, interview with author, 12 Aug. 2020.
[74]*Ibid.*

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knew that there were no legal consequences for doing so. In a context of impunity, where perpetrators could freely share details of past crimes, people like Rainolfo felt untouchable. A paradox of testimony in post-dictatorship societies is that the search for truth often requires perpetrators to willingly reveal their memories of human rights abuses. Because of a lack of evidence that has hindered most cases, perpetrators serve as gatekeepers of truth. For any sense of justice to be achieved for the six disappeared militants, Rainolfo needed to come forward. Yet the reliance on his testimony was part of the exact problem that Palmar and other activists were trying to confront.

Rainolfo's testimony, however inconclusive, did lead Palmar to begin formulating his memory script. The second excavation in the National Park took place in August 2004. After its failure, Palmar wrote a seven-page report for the government's CEMDP.[75] After submitting the report, Palmar began writing more about the case, and the more he wrote the more he found himself writing about his own story. This text became his memoir, published the following year. Palmar told me that he was surprised by the process:

> It was like breaking a silence that had been there for decades … Writing broke that silence, about [all the things] I never spoke about at home, that I never wrote about in the newspaper, that I never mentioned in all my years living in Foz do Iguaçu, more than 30 years, no? I broke all that silence by writing. I say that I went in search of the disappeared and I ended up finding myself.[76]

And it was the 2005 publication of his book that launched Palmar, at the age of 62, as a full-time memory activist.

Epilogue: A Clash of Victim and Perpetrator Memories

In December 2019, almost exactly 40 years after torturing Palmar in the Army precinct in Foz do Iguaçu, a retired lieutenant named Mário Espedito Ostrovski brought legal charges against his former captive. Even though Palmar had been tortured by numerous officers in the four detention centres where he was held between 1969 and 1971, Ostrovski always stood out in his memories. As Palmar told me in our very first interview, Ostrovski tortured him physically and psychologically: at one point during their interrogation sessions, the lieutenant mentioned Palmar's pregnant wife and said 'he'd go and arrest [her], that he'd make her lose the baby we were expecting'.[77] Ostrovski taunted Palmar and accused him of making his child a political subversive, even before birth: 'He told me that ideology is passed down through blood.'

Ostrovski's human rights abuses had already been well documented, including in the 1985 report on torture titled *Brasil*: *Nunca Mais* ('Brazil: Never Again') and also in the proceedings of the Truth Commission.[78] In the aftermath of the hearings of the Truth Commission, when Ostrovski was named by several people as a

[75] Aluízio Palmar, interview with author, 19 Aug. 2020.
[76] *Ibid.*
[77] Aluízio Palmar, interview with author, 19 Dec. 2019.
[78] Another political prisoner, Izabel Fávero, testified that torture by Ostrovski resulted in her losing a pregnancy while in prison. Fávero, testimony to the Paraná State Truth Commission, 27 April 2013,

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perpetrator of human rights violations, protestors engaged in a political action common in Latin America known as an *escrache*: to expose Ostrovski – who had been living in relative anonymity, having switched careers to become a lawyer – the crowd marched to his law office and held a noisy rally to 'out' him as a torturer. Palmar did not take part in the protest, but he did publicise the event on Facebook. And it was precisely Palmar's act of sharing the protest on Facebook that Ostrovski cited in his claim for legal and financial restitution.

But if the *escrache* and the Facebook post happened in 2013, why did Ostrovski wait six years to pursue a lawsuit? Simply put, President Bolsonaro's election in 2018 made the long-standing culture of impunity even more brazen. Having staked his political rise to an unabashed nostalgia for military rule – including explicit sympathy for torture – Bolsonaro made former officers like Ostrovski feel emboldened to push back against Brazil's gradually expanding culture of human rights. However, if Palmar's memory activism had been a cause of the lawsuit, it also helped protect him. Having built a large network of allies during his two decades of grassroots campaigning, Palmar was able to mobilise a global solidarity campaign. Several dozen articles were written in Brazil and internationally, and the publicity seemed to work: by June of the following year, Ostrovski dropped the lawsuit. Bigger challenges remained – e.g. Bolsonaro's attacks on the rule of law, Brazil's ongoing culture of impunity for crimes of the dictatorship, the unfolding Covid crisis – but at least for a brief moment, Aluízio and his allies celebrated.

In post-conflict societies, memory scripts are not rote or banal in the sense of a memorised narrative just for the sake of performance or repetition. Rather, they are the learned practices of human rights activists working against a dominant culture of impunity. The grassroots nature of their advocacy, and the fact that many activists are themselves former victims of state violence, has meant that their chosen form of storytelling often revolves around the repetition of key details from their past. Most of these individuals are not 'famous' in a general sense (most Brazilians, for example, would likely have never heard of Aluízio Palmar), meaning that the onus often falls on them to promote their life histories into more established narratives. Tracing when and why a person shares their memories thus becomes a powerful exercise not only for writing a biography, but for analysing how people make sense of their place in history.

As this article has shown, the process of sharing one's memories is built on layers of psychological and physical scars, and it requires an individual to work through their own trauma under a public spotlight. The practised, repetitive and performative elements of a memory script have the potential to elevate a person's prominence and that of their search for truth and justice, but it also leaves them emotionally vulnerable – and, as exemplified by the Ostrovski lawsuit, liable to unsettling backlash. The concept of memory script offers a way to analyse the meanings of traumatic memory in the shadow of dictatorship, and to explore the personal and political reasons for why somebody chooses to publicise some of their most intimate experiences. Looking closely at the life history of people like

CEV-PR, *Relatório da Comissão Estadual*, vol. 1, p. 379; Paulo Evaristo Arns *et al.* (eds.), *Brasil: Nunca Mais* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1985).

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Aluízio Palmar helps situate the actions and memories of human rights activists working in the shadows of dictatorship, and it brings important insight into the process and platforms of memory itself.

Across the pendular swings of twenty-first century Latin American politics – from the rise of neoliberal blocs to the Pink Tide, and through the right-wing populist wave that has not yet crested – the question of memory remains vitally important. How does one narrate a country's past amidst ever-shifting political contexts? What are the mechanisms through which certain stories take root in a collective imaginary? And which groups or individuals become elevated as 'legitimate' tellers of memory? A memory script analysis of Aluízio Palmar will help shed light on the implications of how people disseminate their life histories: his self-narrated life histories are snapshots in time (reflections of when he articulated a given memory) and they are also living documents, subject to changes in his own life as well as those in society more broadly. Aluízio Palmar's memory script is just one of the unnumerable constellations of memory that converge to shape, challenge and produce our understanding of the past. A close reading of how, and why, people share their memories will offer a useful framework for navigating the memory battles that will inevitably continue to shape Latin America.

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Guiones de memoria e historia de vida a la sombra de la dictadura brasileña

Este artículo propone el concepto de 'guion de memoria' para analizar cómo, después de la violencia política, activistas trabajando sobre la memoria narran sus vidas de una manera que es practicada, repetitiva y performativa. A través de la historia autorreflexiva de vida de Aluízio Palmar, un militante brasileño de derechos humanos y ex prisionero político que sufrió intensas torturas bajo el gobierno militar, este enfoque busca dilucidar los contornos personales y políticos de la decisión de alguien de transformar sus experiencias en una narrativa pública. Una lectura detallada de las diversas plataformas de recuerdos compartidos de Palmar revela la compleja reflexión moral del propio trauma de un activista.

Palabras clave: memoria; historia de vida; Brasil; dictadura; trauma

Roteiros de memória e história de vida à sombra da ditadura brasileira

Este artigo propõe o conceito de 'roteiro de memória' para analisar como, após período de violência política, os ativistas da memória narram suas vidas de uma forma praticada, repetitiva e performativa. Através de uma história de vida autorreflexiva de Aluízio Palmar, um ativista brasileiro de direitos humanos e ex-prisioneiro político que sofreu

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intensa tortura sob o regime militar, esta abordagem procura elucidar os contornos pessoais e políticos da decisão de alguém de transformar suas experiências numa narrativa pública. Uma leitura atenta das várias plataformas de partilha de memórias de Palmar revela o complexo cálculo moral do próprio trauma de um ativista.

Palavras-chave: memória; história de vida; Brasil; ditadura; trauma

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