

Confessing Evil:

A Performative Approach to Perpetrators= Confessions and Chilean Memory Politics

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*You apply the current like this: to the breasts, the nipples, you put two electrodes up here, see, and two in the vagina. And then you turn up the machine and they get an electric shock. ... If you give them shocks to the head, or the face, or any part of the body, it leaves marks. If you beat the person, if you flog any part of them with a rubber hose filled with steel, you're going to leave marks. But if you give them a bath first, get them nice and wet, and you use the hose with other things that are more important which means you stick a wet cloth on them and zap them two or three times, there won't be anything to show. People will just laugh at you [if you say you were tortured].<sup>1</sup>*

Oswaldo Romo Mena, alias Guatón (Big Fat) Romo, scandalized a Chilean and international audience with this confession broadcast on the Miami-based cable television station Univisión in 1995. Romo had served as a civilian member of DINA, General Augusto Pinochet's secret police, during the early years of the dictatorship (1973-75). He became well-known as one of the most brutal torturers within the clandestine torture centers run by DINA.

Scholars have analyzed testimonials by victims of authoritarian state violence, but Romo's televised account reflects a new genre: authoritarian state perpetrators' confessions. The lack of attention to perpetrators' confessions is not entirely surprising. Most perpetrators have remained silent about their pasts. When they do confess, they tend to repeat the same denials used during the authoritarian regimes. But increasingly in Latin America and in other parts of the world, perpetrators have broken the code of silence and told their stories about authoritarian regime violence. Recognizing the potential value that these confessions could have for *Anunca más* memory politics (or remembering to not repeat the past), the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) institutionalized a process by which perpetrators could receive amnesty in exchange for truthful confessions of political crimes committed during the apartheid era. The TRC has become a model for future truth commissions around the world, yet no systematic analysis to date explores the political impact of perpetrators' confessions.<sup>2</sup> Latin America, albeit without the unique amnesty arrangement offered in South Africa, provides insights into the type of confessions that perpetrators make, how different social groups respond to them, and the meaning of these confessions and the responses to them on political change and stability.

How do Chileans react, for example, when Romo not only admits to using violence, but glorifies it, and even appears to have derived pleasure from it? Romo's account offers a unique study of perpetrators' confessions. He, like most perpetrators, never apologizes for his past crimes. Indeed, he does not recognize his acts as wrongdoing at all. His *Aconfession* therefore involves typical strategies used by perpetrators to diffuse responsibility: remaining silent about some events, denying others, justifying his acts as part of a *Awar* context, and *Aforgetting* details. What distinguishes Romo's confession from all others, however, is the perverse and sadistic pleasure he exudes, both through his words and body, in harming others.

To analyze the impact of this, and other confessions, discursive analysis proves too limited.

What perpetrators say provides only part of the analysis. The unspoken cues that perpetrators use to describe and explain themselves and their actions proves equally important in shaping political memory. Moreover, where the confession is made shapes both what is said and how it is interpreted. The political context in which the confession is made further influences the content of the text and responses to it. How individuals and groups respond to the confession, moreover, influence its political impact. Observers rarely passively watch perpetrators= confessions. Instead, they become active participants in generating political meaning from them. This project, therefore, involves a performative analysis that considers the interaction of timing, staging, acting, perpetrators= confessional scripts, and audience responses to produce political meaning.

In particular, this project analyzes the impact of Romo=s confession on *Anunca más* memory politics in Chile. It questions whether perpetrators= confessions alone **B** particularly the type made by Romo **B** can have a positive impact on four components of that memory project: truth, acknowledgment, justice, and collective memory. Certainly perpetrators= confessions have the potential to provide new truths about the past. They could determine the location of the disappeared or explain the cause of death. These confessions could, moreover, acknowledge, or confirm victims= accounts, by accounting for the past violence and condemning it. Perpetrators= accounts could establish the facts necessary to investigate, prosecute, and bring justice for past crimes. They could also advance restorative and symbolic forms of justice through truth, acknowledgment, and acts of contrition. By having perpetrators from within the repressive apparatus admit to its atrocities, confessions can advance *A*collective memory,*@* or a common national understanding of human rights violations and a commitment to avoid repeating them. How could anyone deny the violence of the past when those from within the repressive apparatus admit to it?

On their own, perpetrators= confessions do not achieve these lofty goals. Sometimes they may even work against them by hiding the truth, resurrecting the authoritarian regime=s denials and justifications that blame, rather than acknowledge, victims for past violence, and escaping justice through amnesty laws. Romo=s text represents one of those confessions that would have a negative impact on memory politics. But by analyzing the interactions within the entire performance, this sadistic confession provides a more realistic notion of how and when perpetrators confessions can positively influence memory politics.

### **The Performance**

The most significant of Osvaldo Romo=s public performances occurred with the 1995 broadcast of his Univisión interview with Mercedes Soler. But that was not his only public appearance. Romo had visibility within the left movement in Chile prior to the 1973 coup. Some remembered him as a leader of a well-known slumdweller= movement that catalyzed the Lo Hermida land invasion. He even appeared in newspaper photographs marching alongside Socialist President Salvador Allende (1970-73) at a funeral for one of the fallen in that invasion. He had been an activist in the Socialist Party and even run as a candidate for the party in local elections. Romo left the Socialist Party to join the splinter USOPO

(Unión Socialista Popular B Popular Socialist Union) where he became part of the loyal opposition to Socialist President Salvador Allende demanding more radical distribution of rights and income.

Some recognized Romo as one of the most brutal guards within the clandestine detention center run by the dictatorship's military intelligence unit DINA (Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional B Center for National Intelligence). His rapid and dramatic ideological shift led his former comrades to suspect that Romo had worked for the right-wing prior to the coup as an *agent provocateur* or infiltrator. Romo had converted to Socialism after an earlier flirtation with right-wing politics and various run-ins with the law. This background, and his zealous pursuit of subversives after the coup, fueled suspicions about his past.<sup>3</sup> Romo's own story obscures, rather than clarifies, his background. He insists on some occasions that he collaborated only after the coup, when he understood Chile's historic situation better. Prisoners within the detention centers, however, remember Romo boasting about his successful infiltration of their movement.

His insider knowledge of MIR (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria B Movement of the Revolutionary Left) made Romo a key member of DINA's repressive apparatus. One journalist referred to Romo as the personification of terror in 1974 and 1975 and the best known man in DINA.<sup>4</sup> His victims referred to him as perhaps one of the cruelest and bloodthirsty torturers and proud of his cruelty.<sup>5</sup> Romo formed part of Halcón (Falcon), a special unit within DINA to infiltrate MIR, kidnap its members, interrogate them (with torture), and eliminate them. Because he picked prisoners up in their homes, or at arranged meeting points on the street, and took them to the clandestine torture centers, survivors remember him. His particular specialization in torturing women, with their blindfolds removed or by telling them his name, further exposed him to survivors' charges. The Rettig Commission, Chile's truth commission, included nearly 80 accusations of rape and other forms of torture by Romo during his years in DINA (1973-75).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Romo's penchant for taking war booty, meant that the relatives of detainees B some of whom never appeared alive again B identified him as a DINA agent. In some cases, Romo blackmailed relatives for money and goods even after DINA had murdered their family members.

Romo went into exile in Brazil in 1975 and remained there until his extradition back to Chile in 1992. Some evidence links Romo to Operation Condor, the South American terror network that allied authoritarian regimes in their pursuit of subversives throughout the region. Rumors place Romo as a death squad organizer in Brazil. Others assume that DINA needed to rid itself of Romo because of his visibility in human rights violations. DINA's head, General Manuel Contreras, however, denies that Romo pertained to DINA. In his version Romo merely acted as a civilian informant, not a paid agent. The denial fails to explain why the Chilean Armed Forces would pay a mere informant's legal expenses and support his family in Brazil.

Romo confessed to his past in DINA only after he inhabited a holding cell in the Santiago Penitentiary and while awaiting trial for a number of criminal charges. Chilean journalist Nancy Guzmán convinced Romo to speak with her, and over six months she extracted his confession. On the last day

of their interview, April 11, 1995, Guzman brought with her to the prison a cameraman and a television journalist from Univisión. They filmed a ninety-minute interview with Romo, asking many of the questions he had already gone over with Guzmán. From this interview, *Primer Impacto* produced a ten-minute program shown on U.S. television on May 18, 1995, and later rebroadcast to Spanish-speaking audiences throughout North and South America and parts of Europe. An even shorter version appeared on Chilean television. Each broadcast provoked public outcry.

### *The Text*

As the opening quote in this paper demonstrates, Romo's confession provides graphic detail about the use of torture. In his extended interview with Guzman, he summarizes DINA's different torture techniques and how detainees responded to them. Romo's confession provides information from within the repressive apparatus that confirms victims' accounts of the systematic use of torture

Romo's confession, however, denies these acts as wrongdoing. Instead of regret or remorse, Romo believes that DINA had not gone far enough and continues to have a role to play in contemporary Chile:

I would do the same and maybe worse... I wouldn't leave jack alive. Lock 'em all up. That was a mistake on DINA's part. I argued with my general 'til the very end: 'Don't let these people live. Don't let them go.' Just look at the consequences.

Romo adopts the military regime's version of a 'just war' against Communist subversive. To heighten his own heroism in that war, he depicts the enemy as fierce, and noble, opponents:

After they are detained, information has to be gotten out of them. They don't give it up easily or right away. They are indoctrinated to not give up anything. So at times those who had that job laid hands on them because the MIRistas were really obstinate. You'd say to them, 'You might as well speak because they're going to get the information out of you anyway.' But you've got to recognize that these guys were brave and they bore it until the very end.<sup>7</sup>

Romo admires MIR leaders, like Miguel Enriquez, who he describes as dying 'like a man, on the front line. He didn't hide behind anyone's skirts. He was really intelligent that guy. He was a doctor.'<sup>8</sup> Only a better, more adept, force like DINA could defeat the intrepid MIR. Thus, Romo uses his esteem for MIR to enhance his own heroism in the 'war.'

In the process, Romo justifies violence. He resurrects the regime's discourse regarding the communist threat and saving the country from civil war.<sup>9</sup> As Romo states:

In Chile, before the military pronouncement, there was nothing, you'd stand in line for days and those who stood in line were the poor because the rich did not stand in line, neither did the

government that called itself Socialist. When the military arrived, that ended and those who worked ate. There was plenty of everything. Disorder by the unions ended....Yes, here the political parties and the unions run by Ael pije@ (the rich kid) from La Moneda [government palace] drove the country to ruin.<sup>10</sup>

He further echoes the regime's justification that Chileans had called on the armed forces to step in and restore order. Romo describes the support within Chile for the military regime:

People arrived wanting to give us information about what they had seen Fulano do here or there. That their neighbor was strange, and that they had seen him dig a hole in the patio to bury books and arms. There were a lot of people that wanted us to kill all the Marxists, but DINA's task wasn't to kill them. It was intelligence, to check all the information and then go and find the bandits. Yes, they were bandits. Just because they went to University doesn't make them saints.@

It is in this context of a Ajust war@ that Romo admits that he fought bravely and had to kill the enemy. He describes shooting MIR leader, Dagoberto Perez: AI fired and so did everybody else. That's war for you, that was what the Dirty War was like. It was me first, me second, and me third.@

While Romo admires dead MIR leaders, he holds survivors in disdain. Although Romo recognizes that torture works (AEveryone talks under torture@), he nonetheless questions the masculinity of MIR men who spoke under torture. Speaking about Chico Videla, he states: AHis woman could bear it all without saying a word. She didn't speak, she tricked us, she screwed us around, and nothing. But when we got Chico we said AChico Santiago,@ and he shat it all out and sang like a canary. Can't you see that they are all a bunch of faggots?@<sup>11</sup>

AFaggot,@ in Romo's lexicon, describes any male on the left who survived the dictatorship. In addition to those who informed or collaborated to save their lives, he includes those who left the country: AThey're faggots; they pulled out when things got ugly. They went to cry over there in exile and they left the poor people who they had created to fight. When they knew from the beginning they would be defeated. ... [N]o one beats the Chilean army.@<sup>12</sup> He also includes those who stayed quiet during the dictatorship and retaliated after the military took power:

Do you know what bothers me? It's that they are all faggots in this country. One day they are with you, but when things get ugly, they throw you aside. My General Contreras and the rest of us in DINA fulfilled the duty that they had ordered. DINA had to end Marxism and we did it. Some remained. We should have silenced them at the time, but they escaped us. .... If we'd gotten them then, they'd be quiet now, do you get it?<sup>13</sup>

Paradoxically Romo's Afaggots@ outsmarted the omnipotent DINA and lived to jail the former repressive apparatus. Romo's former enemies, he acknowledges: Aare now free and I'm here behind

bars. For saving the country from chaos and from the shameful ones and the petit bourgeoisie who thought a proletarian revolution would be fun.<sup>@14</sup> He blames his imprisonment not on his commanding officers, who ordered him to commit atrocities and then turned him into a scapegoat for all DINA's atrocities, but on the regime's nemeses: "Aylwin, Correa, and all of them, have put me in prison. I am the only political prisoner in Chile, I am the only political prisoner. Those who put me in prison are the ones who drove this country to ruin and now they are back."<sup>@15</sup> He believes the democratic governments has trumped up charges against him: "What is happening is that they want to fuck me and they want to fuck me because Aylwin hasn't been able to get any of the others and they have me in prison, but I'm going to get out and then they'll see."<sup>@16</sup>

He matches his gendered language about male survivors with similar references questioning the femininity of female survivors:

If they got really wild **B** they were more obstinate, tougher, and resisted more than the men. If you gave the men a combo, they'd quiet down, right? But the women, you had to grab them anywhere you could, because they would resist and bite you or kick you, and all those things. Our work wasn't an everyday thing, it wasn't easy at all. You had to use a lot of psychology to deal with [female] extremists, yes, and you forget that they were extremists who went around armed and if they got you they'd put a bullet in you. They were not saints.<sup>17</sup>

He further minimizes the impact of torture on women, who, for biological reasons, could endure torture more easily than men:

Look at what women put up with to have a kid...a man has never had a kid....So that says it all. If a woman is capable of having a 30 centimeter baby without a Cesarean, a woman can take anything, because women don't give up or give in, they just won't give up. They're not that weak. Women are stronger.

Romo uses a narrative strategy that attempts to distinguish MIR women from other women. They are not women, but subversives. By rejecting their traditional roles in the home, they deserve harsh treatment. As he describes them: "they are more evil than men, they get involved in politics without thinking about their family. Later they cry for their papa, their kids, but they don't understand the situation they got into."<sup>@18</sup> He refers to Miguel Enriquez's partner, Carmen Castillo, as "irresponsible because she was pregnant and ran around making trouble."<sup>@19</sup> Simultaneously Romo claims that the military respected women more than the MIR. Regarding Carmen Castillo, for example, Romo stated: "If we had been really terrible we could have killed her, and she deserved it. But we respected her because she was pregnant, big and fat. Do you realize how irresponsible the MIR guys were to put their pregnant women in combat?"<sup>@20</sup> He also claims to have saved Erika Hennings's life. Romo insists that he had her name removed from the list since her only involvement in MIR was her marriage to disappeared prisoner Alfonso Chanfreau and that she had a young child.



Erika Hennings does not acknowledge that Romo saved her, but rather charged him with torturing her with the telephone. Romo responded to this charge by stating: "That lady is lying, because at that time I was only in charge of locating the home of MIR leaders. I only drove her to places when the bosses asked for her."<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, along with glorifying and justifying violence, Romo also denies it. He claims, for example, "I didn't torture," suggesting that others did that job.<sup>22</sup> At other times he blames torture charges on MIR revenge: "I didn't torture. Those who say this are upset because they were defeated, defeated in the war. ... I am innocent, I never did any harm to anyone. I didn't steal from anyone."<sup>23</sup> But he also plays semantic games with the word "torture" to diminish his own responsibility. On one occasion he remarked: "I don't believe that applying [electrical] current is torture."<sup>24</sup> On another he states:

A slap isn't torture and at times one has to slap people because they get so furious and they have a hysterical attack. I, for example, had to hit some prisoners when they were coming in to apply electricity, but this was to save their lives.<sup>25</sup>

Romo alters his status within DINA to fit his denials. Just as he denies having sufficient responsibility to have hurt Hennings, he claims at other moments that he was a DINA analyst who did not engage in interrogation or torture.<sup>26</sup> Counter-insurgency units, and not intelligence units, conducted interrogations. At other times, he elevates his position to deny responsibility for MIR militants: "That was my work, I didn't hunt down students...our concern were the big guys. My role only involved the Central Committee and the Political Commission."<sup>27</sup> Or he claims: "No. I never applied it [torture], I only trained people to apply it. It concerned me that they did a job well."<sup>28</sup> But in sharp contrast to his denial, Romo also judges torture to be a natural and legitimate form of political control in any regime: "In every part of the world it exists: in Scotland Yard, the FBI, the CIA, the whole world tortures. The KGB tortures. ... All of the intelligence services in the world use torture."<sup>29</sup>

He also denies that the regime "disappeared" people. He calls this an "international Marxist conspiracy."<sup>30</sup> Yet in his television interview (and later in the longer book interview), he gets physically excited imagining how the regime could have hidden bodies: "When you don't have cemeteries, you don't have anything [any evidence], you just have to throw them into the sea. You gotta feed the fish." But he goes on to say that you would have to first destroy the bladder and the groin "because if it's in the water, when the bladder bursts, the body will rise, of course, it will rise because it's going to float. And so that it will stay underwater you have to use some sort of chemical so it won't rise any more." He also suggests that you need to destroy any possibility of identifying the corpses, by cutting off their fingers and toes with a bolt cutter. He warns against using the sea since bodies may wash to shore: "The Chilean sea isn't a good one for throwing corpses into. The sea off Chile is full of currents; it's a violent sea." And he proposes using volcanoes instead: "You know, you just fly along in a helicopter, open the door, and out they all go. Who's going to look for them at the bottom of a volcano? No one!"

Contradictions also emerge in Romo's access to knowledge. He denies any knowledge of how women disappeared from the torture centers: "I don't know because I saw them healthy. Look, I went home in the afternoon and the next day I'd ask, 'Where is Fulana?'" They told me that she had been transported. I don't know." But clearly he does know and he wants his interviewer to know he knows. Thus, he told Guzmán that he could not tell her where the prisoners were taken on the death transports, but he suggested that she think of German names. This statement confirmed rumors that linked disappearances with the German community, Colonia Dignidad.<sup>31</sup> Romo subsequently testified in trials that Colonia Dignidad was used to detain people who were to later disappear, although the German community's lawyer dismissed Romo as mentally disturbed.<sup>32</sup>

In that partial disclosure Romo reveals his desire for power. He wants the interviewer to know that he has information, even though his revealing that information could put Romo and his colleagues in jeopardy. Throughout his interview Romo reveals more information than he should. He discloses information that could be used against him in a court of law and that would harm the commanding officers and the institution to which he claims loyalty. Romo pays lip service to loyalty and morality, but his confession really amounts to his power and the pleasure he derived from using that power over others. One cannot help but sense revenge in Romo's confession. He lacked the discipline, ideological commitment, and courage to remain true to the left. Rather than admit that, he shifted loyalties to DINA, an organization that provided him with power over those to whom he had felt inferior:

I'm going to say one thing. I have a conviction, a very clear conviction, what I did in life, as a man, on earth, I did it well. If some people didn't like it, they are the ones that Big Fat Romo, Slum Romo, defeated. He caused the MIR to fall. This is clear. They don't accept having lost even one battle when they had every opportunity to win: money, arms, networks, people, everything.<sup>33</sup>

His contradictions demonstrate his lust for power over rationality. To every denial, he offers an admission that can hurt him legally. He claims to have never tortured and then reveals his role in torture. He claims, "Oh, I didn't kill anyone," but then discloses his involvement in murder. His narrative structure simultaneously involves denying any event that might harm his legal case while failing to resist the temptation to win recognition for his heroic struggle against subversion. One statement that sums up his confusion is: "If you say that I disappeared prisoners, no, then I'm innocent. But I also did bad things...destroying whole families."<sup>34</sup>

The only exception to these contradictions is Romo's adamant and consistent denial of rape. Luz Arce, a Socialist Party militant who turned DINA agent under torture and worked closely with Romo, overheard him worrying about rape charges while still working in the torture center: "We're going to have to kill these women because we've all slept with them."<sup>35</sup> This information suggests that Romo recognized that rape lacked defense even within the military regime's relative freedom of violence. But Romo's own defense against rape charges show his inability to distinguish rape from the

immorality of an extra-marital affair: "These are false [charges], I did not take advantage of any woman. Why would I when I have my own and I am a family man and I have my principles. Look, I am a father of three women; I'm not going to get involved with prisoners."<sup>36</sup> He attempts to deflect his guilt by describing the women prisoners' lack of sexual appeal:

Who would rape these women who were disgusting, dirty, urine-covered, with blood running down their legs, and filthy [llen as de mugre]? You don't know what you're asking because these women were living in a place that didn't have a bathroom, where they couldn't wash, where they did everything, everything, that is they urinated and shat in pots, yes like paint pots. In other places they took care of their needs on the floor where they slept, so you can imagine the smell that they had. Yes, you see there was no toilet paper for them to clean themselves. Do you think that anyone would get close enough to risk getting infected by some disease?<sup>37</sup>

Women detainees, he suggests, might have misinterpreted his acts. Because he had to grab them where he could, while they were kicking and fighting back, they may have interpreted this as sexual assault. He further claims false charges. Luz Arce, he explains, apologized to him for having accused him of rape.<sup>38</sup> But in Luz Arce's version, Romo apologized to her. He further suggests that these charges must be false since so many women detainees have sought him out to locate their relatives.

Rape fell outside his duties. One does not hunt down MIR leaders by raping women prisoners. One does not defeat the MIR by raping women prisoners. Romo accepts and even relishes his image as a torturer or murderer, because he can spin those roles into a heroic narrative about his life. Rape lacks heroism, prompting Romo to strenuously deny the accusation, and even threaten those who might bring charges: "Rape never happened. I invite... I defy the women who were DINA prisoners to come forward: who was raped by me? Not one!"<sup>39</sup>

### *The Actor*

Romo's physical appearance and movement is as relevant to his confessional performance as his text. Romo looked and acted the part of a torturer: from his physical size and features, to his grooming, clothes, speech patterns and body language. While other perpetrators have dissimulated their violence with an every-man, or even refined, image, Romo was a dead ringer for a psychopathic torturer.<sup>40</sup>

His nickname, "Big Fat" Romo, could be viewed as a term of endearment in striking contrast with Romo's menacing size. A small round head sits on an almost imperceptible neck; both are too small for his meaty and slumping shoulders. Ballooning arms connect to huge clubbish hands with long fat fingers. One foot drags behind him when he walks. One of his eyes wanders. His face is covered with deep gouges. His skin is greasy. He has combed his oily hair in a Roman style to cover baldness, the least of his physical deficits. He appears in a dirty tee-shirt. While extremely large, the shirt still

clings to lumps of flesh on his torso. An odor emanates from him; one senses it from the television screen, even without reading ex-detainees' or Guzmán's accounts of his stench.<sup>41</sup>

When he moves, his body becomes an instrument of torture. He acts out different forms of torture with his arms and hands, applying imaginary electrodes to his nipples, wetting down absent women's bodies, cranking up electricity, and jolting in response to the power surge. His face alternates between expressions. At times it shows the deranged pleasure he derives from torture. At others it seethes with anger that erupts into violent movements. When he is not using his hands to show how he would snap off fingers with a bolt cutter or pierce internal organs to sink a detainee's dead body, he massages them. His body movements become a physical manifestation of his sadism.

His speech patterns intensify the sense of horror. A speech impediment, poor schooling, and nearly two decades in Brazil produce a garbled Spanish with barely discernible words. He uses insiders' terms for certain instruments of torture, unknown to non-specialists, but still understood in their depravity and their implicit threats. His language is coarse, crude, provocative. He knows it since he moves his head to one side to look at you and dare you to challenge him.

Romo, unlike most perpetrators, cannot easily remake his image. But his appearance on the sensationalist *Primer Impacto* program certainly discouraged that effort. When he appears in newspaper photographs or in a prior interview with Carmen Castillo for French television, he does not look as bad. With Carmen Castillo, he holds his head up, his hands still, and wears a freshly cleaned and pressed white shirt. The camera dissimulates his obesity and poor posture by approaching him at long range, reducing his power along with his size. That film, moreover, includes not one perverse or sadistic utterance. Castillo let ex-prisoner and ex-DINA collaborator, Marcia Merino (Flaca Alejandra), describe that aspect of Romo. She refers to him as a "natural born torturer... perverse."<sup>42</sup> Castillo's portrayal resembled Romo's courtroom appearances.

Similarly, Romo has a less depraved look in his courtroom appearances. He sported clean clothes, a new hair cut, and goatee. Rather than dragging his leg behind him, he arrived and departed in a wheelchair. He looked less frightening, perhaps due to the venue, or to his deteriorating health. Rumors circulated that he nearly died due to complications resulting from diabetes and high blood pressure, that he is practically blind, and that his leg may require amputation.<sup>43</sup>

Romo seems to have produced for Univisión the kind of image that the program wanted, consistent with his image as a sadistic torturer. The television performance plays on that image. When Mercedes Soler, visibly revolted by Romo, asks him whether he would like the following inscription on his tombstone, "Here lies the executioner, the torturer, the murderer," Romo replies: "That could be, that could be, I accept it, the torturer, yes. For me that is a good thing." But he has a limit to how far he will go with this negative image: "But they could never say that I was shameless, a man who has personally taken advantage of women. Not one. What can be said is that I fulfilled a role and I did it well. I have a clear conscience and clear beliefs. I believe in what I did and I would do it again."<sup>44</sup>

Romo hopes to develop an image of himself as a professional intelligence agent. He has little in his own background upon which to build his credentials, however, so he simply reinvents his past. He describes himself as *Aa studious guy,* who studied Political Science at the University of Chile. He refers to himself as *Aa Political Science professor.*<sup>45</sup> In one of his archetypal grandiose statements he says people could call him *ARomo from the Slums* or *ARomo the torturer,* but he would always be *ARomo who knows the history of Chile like the back of my hand.* He claims to have been trained in intelligence at the School of the Americas in Panama. He further contends that DINA sent him to South Africa as a consultant and later to Brazil as an instructor in a large corporation.<sup>46</sup> And because of his expertise in intelligence, he boasts that the military could not have defeated MIR without his help.<sup>47</sup>

Romo also hopes to be viewed as a loyal soldier, despite his lack of military training, and a patriot, despite the eighteen years he spent in Brazil. His conversion to the right-wing cause provides the foundation for these claims:

No, look, I understand that you do not know what happened here in Chile because you were very young. But there was anarchy here. Perhaps the MIR guys had good ideas but they were impossible. You know that the army here is really strong. Here a Prussian discipline exists and nobody is going to permit that there's a revolution, unless Pinochet does it to change the country. Here only the military can have revolution. But in any event a civil war was worse, there would have been even more deaths.

Here *Ael Chicho,* this is what we called Salvador Allende, began to defraud half the country. The people believed in him, but he was telling pure lies. ...He was a rich kid (*pije*), we say this because he liked the best and the country ate pure rubbish and had to stand in lines for everything.

I saw this all before the military pronouncement, because the military would not take power, they only did so when the people screamed for them to step in. This is why I decided in the end to cooperate with national reconstruction.<sup>48</sup>

Romo engages in image-making. He confronts insurmountable obstacles in terms of his physical size, although different stages have produced different images of him, emphasizing or diminishing his image as a sadistic torturer. His background could pose an obstacle, but he has circumvented it by inventing stories about his past. The image of the dedicated cold warrior is consistent with his narrative text.

### *The Timing*

The content of Romo's confession reflected no doubt its timing. At the time of the televised

interview, few other Chilean perpetrators had told their stories.<sup>49</sup> Romo did not know, therefore, how his confession might affect the Chilean public. Romo, moreover, probably trusted the 1978 amnesty law to protect him from prosecution for torture and killing since he was one of the first perpetrators to await trial in jail.

Timing not only shaped the content of Romo's confession, but also his desire to speak out. Romo had observed Argentine Navy Officer Adolfo Scilingo internationally famous disclosure about dropping live prisoners to their death in the ocean and may have hoped to become the Chilean Scilingo, earning profit and fame from his story. Univisión and Romo dispute the agreement on payment. Romo's belief that he would be paid may partially explain the difference between the embellishment and lurid details in his interview with Mercedes Soler, compared to his sober interview with Carmen Castillo.

Reactions to the interview also hinged on its timing. Romo's broadcast occurred during the Supreme Court's deliberations on DINA's role in the assassination of former Chilean Foreign Minister and Defense Minister Orlando Letelier in Washington, D.C. in 1976. Minister of Interior, Carlos Figueroa, blamed Romo's interview on "certain groups interested in generating an insecure climate" to influence the Supreme Court's decision. Conspiracy theories abounded, but Romo's interview made no reference to Letelier, his commanding officers facing a prison sentence for the murder, or international espionage and murder. No commentators could find any clear pay off for the timing of the interview either. Coincidence, rather than strategic calculation, seemed to explain the relationship of the interview to the Supreme Court's decision. The coincidence made the Chilean public, in some cases for the first time, aware of DINA's activities and the controversy surrounding the military's immunity from prosecution.

Chilean courts began questioning that same immunity. The Supreme Court indicted General Manuel Contreras and Brigadier Pedro Espinoza, the top two DINA commanders, for the Letelier murder, and sent them to jail for seven and six years respectively. Lower courts prosecuted top ranking military officers and sent them to jail. Extradition requests from foreign governments demanded trials for human rights. Most famously, the British government detained General Pinochet in London while the House of Lords deliberated on Spanish judge Baltazar Garzón's extradition request. Only determination of his mental health prevented Pinochet from standing trial in Spain and later in Chile. The flurry of court activity, however, began after Romo's televised confession. It is doubtful that he would have made the same confession later given the subsequent legal challenges to the amnesty law.

Although the military house of cards began to crumble around Romo, he did not abandon ship. As late as 2000, when he already shared a prison block with some of his commanding officers, he commented: "I am a Pinochet-man and I will die a Pinochet-man."<sup>50</sup> While his loyalties did not change, his discourse did. His hubris gone, he kept his threats, provocations, bravado, and sadism to himself. Romo's new style did not only reflect choice; the media cared a lot less about Romo once his commanding officers, previously untouchable, became publicly branded perpetrators.

## *The Stage*

This would be the first and last time that a torturer would speak in front of cameras to explain, without a trace of shame, a small part of what women, men and children had suffered in the dictatorship's torture centers in Chile,<sup>51</sup> writes Guzmán about Univisión's broadcast of Romo's interview. Unlike the phenomenon in Argentina following Scilingo's confession, Chilean perpetrators tended to avoid television interviews.<sup>52</sup> Those who did use the television medium, notably Manuel Contreras, provided very different performances than Romo's. Contreras simply denied, and blamed the left, the CIA, and the FBI for the various charges of murder and disappearances lodged against him. The television offered a public stage for perpetrators, but few used it, and no one used it to glorify the regime's violence like Romo.

Not surprisingly, given the consensual silence around the past that had permeated Chilean society, the interview did not originate on Chilean television. The Miami correspondent for *Las Últimas Noticias*, Mauricio Montaldo, summarized the Univisión program in a report on "Torture on Television," creating a sensation in Chile.

Heated political conflict erupted over the staging of the interview behind prison walls in Santiago. Who allowed foreign journalists into Chile's prisons? Who granted foreign journalists access to one of Chile's notorious torturers? The outrage over process seemed misplaced, since foreign journalists from Holland and France had already entered the prison on at least two occasions, taped interviews with Romo, and broadcast them on television and in video form abroad.

The content of the interview and Univisión's global networks seemed more at issue than access to the prison. Nonetheless, groups within Chilean society called for the resignation of the Director of Gendarmerie for irresponsibly granting access to the foreign television station. Guzmán characterizes the controversy as a right-wing manoeuvre to oust Director Claudio Martínez, a Socialist Party militant. If the right-wing could replace Martínez with a more favorable director in charge of prison politics, they could guarantee better protections and services for the former DINA commanders and other military officials facing imprisonment. Eventually, but only after Contreras and Espinoza inaugurated a new high security prison (Punta Peuco), they received their wish and the government asked for Martínez's resignation. The staging of the interview in the prison thus seemed to offer political opportunities for mobilized groups to press for reform.

But not many groups took advantage of this opportunity. The Chilean government could have used Romo's imprisonment to show the world that Chile took violations of human rights seriously and locked up perpetrators like Romo. But the broadcast produced the opposite effect. Univisión received numerous calls from its United States audience scandalized over Romo's impunity from prosecution. Did the audiences ignore that he was in prison? This is possible since he is never shown behind bars or in prison garb and the interviewer only mentions the jail in passing.

The armed forces, moreover, tried to prevent the interview rather than exploit it. Romo had initially refused to meet with Guzmán, stating that as a military man, I have express orders from the high command not to speak or give interviews.<sup>53</sup> Guzmán's effort to convince him to turn against those who had abandoned him in jail and scapegoated him with the crimes of the dirty war did not appeal to Romo. The promise of a broadcast in the United States did, however. Romo claimed that he did not give interviews to Chileans because they weren't serious.<sup>54</sup> He listed for Guzmán the numerous Chilean journalists who had attempted to interview him but who he had sent away. Exposure in the United States, in contrast, offered him the freedom to tell his story the way he wanted:

Look, I'm going to give you the best interview and even if the shit hits the fan, I don't care, because you say that they are going to show it in the United States and there the people are going to understand. It's not like here where one says something and everyone yells.<sup>55</sup>

His only hesitation involved the impact on the autobiography he had begun writing. Guzmán assured him that the broadcast on global television would only boost interest and sales. Convinced and enthusiastic about the opportunity, Romo gave his word that he would meet with the Univisión journalists when they arrived in Santiago.

But on the day of the filming, Romo got cold feet and refused to give the interview. He recounted a visit the day before from an armed forces representative who dissuaded him. Because he depended on the army to cover his legal expenses, his basic needs, and those of his family, he could not participate in the program. His doctor, he added, had warned against the interview's affect on his blood pressure. Guzmán ultimately convinced Romo, reminding him that he had given his word. Romo succumbed:

Okay. When I give my word, I come through. And I gave it to you. So come what may, I'll do the interview. ... My interview is going to make you famous. Do you think the gringos will like what I have to say? Either way, you tell me if it is good or not.<sup>56</sup>

Romo produced what he may have imagined as a self-promotional piece. It was his fifteen minutes of fame. Perhaps he believed that his interview would present him as a hero in the dirty war: the man who defeated MIR. That image, if it existed at all in the 90 minutes of videotaped material, must have been swept off the editing room floor. What remained was Romo the psychopath, the unrepentant murderer, torturer, and rapist who deserved to be locked up in his prison for life.

Surprisingly little controversy emerged over the nature of the program and the appropriateness of Romo's performance for such a broadcast. From a political perspective, Univisión sent an odd pair to conduct the interview. Guzmán describes cameraman Raul Hernández as the son of an Army official during the Cuban dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. His father had fled Cuba just days after the end of the dictatorship and only after he murdered one of the leaders of the new popular army. Hernández,



Guzmán contends, considered himself an Admirer of Pinochet who fought against revolution just like his father. He did not understand who we were going to interview, but neither did he want to know, writes Guzmán.<sup>57</sup> The Cuban-American journalist Mercedes Soler also came from a staunchly anti-Castro background and viewed the disappeared as sympathizers of the Cuban Revolution and Fidel Castro.

What is perhaps the most interesting and understudied dynamic of this television stage is the blending of an intensely political issue with a crime and scandal television program. *Primer Impacto* is not a typical venue for perpetrators of state terrorism. It is neither a political talk show nor news program. Instead it promotes sensationalist stories: deformities, bizarre illnesses or disease, accidents, and heinous crimes. Romo fell into the heinous crime dimension. The filming in the near dark with a hand held camera slanting the image, the eerie music, and the sexualized imagery, all gave it the quality of typical programs of the infotainment variety.

Strangely, although Romo's past and his current situation hinge on Chile's recent political history, the program expunges most of that history. It begins with Romo walking into a room, dragging his foot and rubbing his hands. He immediately begins talking about applying torture to women without any context about the dictatorship or its clandestine torture centers. Context comes in the form of silhouetted scenes of an execution, photos of dead men in suits, slides of a building that could be a concentration camp, barracks, or a morgue. These images could be from any where and any time. An unidentified woman appears twice, without commentary, to speak about how Romo touched (not assaulted) her and psychologically abused her. She does not accuse him of torture or rape. Her voice is childish, soft, and sweet. She represents innocence in the face of evil.

Politics remain outside the broadcast. The program never mentions Allende or Pinochet, the military coup or dictatorship, the war against subversion or the clandestine torture centers, the dead or the disappeared, the transition from authoritarian rule and the formation of a truth commission, the trials and imprisonment of perpetrators. The program convinces the reader to despise and fear Romo, the madman, without any context for understanding how he nearly got away with using torture and then boasting about it. The program seems to suggest that one need not know anything about Chile's past to understand the violence: Romo personifies it for the viewer. The program is oriented around the perverse confessions of the psychopaths among us, not on understanding authoritarian regimes and their impact.

The politics of the confession became an issue around Nancy Guzmán's subsequent book. The Latin American Institute of Mental Health and Human Rights considered her book insufficiently attentive to those directly affected by torture. Provoking traumatic memories, without respect or solidarity with the victims, reproduces the violence. The article claims, There is no right to inflict these aggressions, what unfortunately tends to occur in a society that often acts clumsily and ignorantly on these issues.<sup>58</sup> Indirectly the article accuses Guzmán of allowing Romo to control memory over the past. Romo succeeds in frightening, covering up, and bragging about past events, the article contends,

without intervention from Guzmán. The article even accuses Guzmán of advising, stimulating, and calmly provoking the feared person so that he continues speaking, and through his speech he tells his story, gives up information about his crimes, and puts them in evidence.<sup>59</sup> Although the article recognizes the benefits of such an interview style, it challenges the author to make a deeper political analysis from the interview material.

Specifically, the Latin American Institute of Mental Health and Human Rights asserts that Romo must be prevented from continuing to harm individuals. Guzmán's book provides commentary from his former victims, who, have already suffered a lot to have to continue being assaulted by the harmful words of this former agent.<sup>60</sup> But even for those who were not his victims: At times a unique phenomenon occurs: the reader is taken over by a strange force that emanates from the interview, as if we were his victims.<sup>61</sup> The psychologists who authored this review suggest that the visceral reaction to the interview, the outrage and nausea, invade the readers and make it impossible for them to think through the implications. The reader becomes the victim of Romo's power over them. We are still too affected, too diseased.<sup>62</sup>

The human rights community was not alone in criticizing Guzmán for her insensitivity. Unnamed Romo supporters seemed to share this view. Guzmán received telephone threats aimed at silencing her and intimidating her from continuing to expose the past.<sup>63</sup>

Other interviews with Romo have not faced this kind of criticism. Carmen Castillo's film, *La Flaca Alejandra*, focuses primarily on one of Romo's victims and a fellow collaborator. Whether consciously or not, Castillo's interview makes Romo nearly invisible, nearly inaudible. Center stage goes to the victim, not the torturer. Romo looks and acts respectfully toward his former enemy. He does not mention torture; he denies involvement in the murder of Castillo's partner, Miguel Enríquez. And he offers testimony that could be used against his superior in the DINA, Miguel Krassnoff. In Castillo's version, the survivors have harnessed Romo's power.

Anticipating a profound impact on viewers, Chilevisión reproduced a sanitized version of the Univisión program in June 1995. Hernán Soto describes the difference in the programs: The version for the Chilean channel suppressed the most lurid parts, the particularly crude ones, to avoid offending victims' memories or harm the feelings of the television audience.<sup>64</sup> The Chilean magazine *Punto Final* reproduced the full interview in print, but because of the uproar over the broadcast, no other print media did so.<sup>65</sup> The failure to reproduce the program in its entirety, or more widely, generated criticisms of the media, with one observer referring to the absence of coverage as a reduced and censored scandal.<sup>66</sup>

After the broadcast, but perhaps more significantly after new charges surfaced against him, Romo retracted his Univisión confession. He claimed that the journalists had distorted his words and meaning. His personally conflictive situation, he stated, required him to produce an effective and high impact statement. Journalist Vivian Lavín hinted at the military's coercion behind the retraction,

since Col. Enrique Ibarra helped him prepare it and remained with Romo while a military judge and a court secretary notarized it.<sup>67</sup>

The international, and later local, television screen became Romo's first stage, but not his last. Romo appeared in countless trials subsequent to his television confession. Romo changed his demeanor **B** both acting and appearance **B** to fit this new stage. The Chilean press, however, provided little information about Romo's performance in these subsequent trials, focusing instead on his former victims' reactions to encountering him in court. As a result, his past and his television confession remained influential on audience perceptions of him.

### *The Audience*

Based on his statements about the interview, and the interview content itself, Romo must have anticipated a U.S. audience **B** rather than a Chilean one **B** for his televised confession. He had limited experience with U.S. audiences, however, and may have interpreted U.S. government intervention against the Allende government as an indication of a more favorable response to his past than what he might receive in Chile. The Cuban-American television production team no doubt further reassured him. He may have mistakenly believed that Univisión would highlight his role as a cold warrior, rather than portray him as a psychopathic torturer, rapist, and murderer. Shown three times in one day in the United States, and transmitted to nearly all Latin American and some European countries, the outrage from around the world became audible in Chile. An open letter to the Chilean government in 2000 referred to the 1995 program and its portrayal of **A**one of the most sadistic torturers@ from the Chilean regime. The letter, calling for Romo's trial and imprisonment, included signatures from non-governmental organizations throughout Europe.<sup>68</sup> Phone calls to the U.S. station expressed shock at Romo's words and actions, and condemned his immunity from prosecution. Univisión, delighted at the audience response, gave special recognition to Mercedes Soler.

Romo had avoided Chilean media outlets because he anticipated a backlash. With regard to the Army, he knew he had broken a code of silence about military actions. Neither Romo, nor others involved in the production, anticipated, however, the military's use of the interview to criticize the democratic government. According to Guzmán, the armed forces interpreted the interview as a strategy by the democratic government to erode its pact with the military. They considered it the means by which the government could re-open the possibility of trials for past human rights violations. The military and the former military government dissociated themselves from Romo. Pinochet's ex-Minister, Onofre Jarpa, dismissed Romo's declarations: **A**He is crazy. If you go to an insane asylum you're going to hear people speak like this.@<sup>69</sup>

Members of the democratic government, in turn, interpreted the interview as a military manoeuvre. They believed the military tried to use Romo's confession to threaten Chilean society. The interview hinted that individuals like Romo remained willing and able to unleash a new wave of violent retribution if the judiciary opened up the Pandora's box of human rights trials. The democratic

government attempted to diminish the impact of Romo's interview. Secretary General of the Government, José Joaquín Brunner, remarked that "his declarations do not merit serious commentary. They are the utterances of a sick and deranged person without moral values."<sup>70</sup> The Minister of the Interior Soledad Alvear initiated a case against Romo for "justifying violence" and "threatening and obstructing justice."

Both the military and the democratic government, Guzmán notes, hoped to silence Romo. Neither wanted to expose the "dark and obscene side" of Chilean history that had remained successfully "hidden to avoid tarnishing the image of the democratic transition."<sup>71</sup> She referred to their finger pointing at each other as a "comedy of errors."<sup>72</sup>

Despite widely diverging views about Romo's interview, few Chileans found comic relief from it. The interview shocked those willfully or innocently ignorant of the military regime's violations into recognition of the "enormous brutality that had gone without punishment" in the country.<sup>73</sup> Channel 11 received a flood of telephone calls from its audience after broadcasting the interview. A call from a woman who identified herself as the wife of an Army General became emblematic of the type of responses the station received. She stated: "It embarrasses me to find out that the Army used these types of delinquents to commit perversions."<sup>74</sup> Romo's complete absence of guilt or shame particularly disturbed this audience. In contrast, other Chileans dismissed the interview as a perverse fiction, without basis in reality. Denial emerged as a response to a confession that dramatically departed from their beliefs about the military regime. They interpreted the infotainment nature of the broadcast as evidence of the unreliability of the evidence and blamed the program on sinister political motivations within and outside Chile.

Romo's audience also included those directly affected by his acts before he made his public confession. Despite a common experience with Romo's brutality, this group also diverged in its response to the television interview. At least four different responses emerged among the directly affected, although many individuals felt all four of these intense, and contradictory, emotions. Some felt a sense of relief that someone from within the repressive apparatus finally publicly admitted to atrocities they had experienced within the clandestine torture centers. Romo's confession, therefore, confirmed victims' testimonies to the Rettig Commission. They could not be accused of making up stories, when the torturer and murderer admitted to his acts. This audience considered Romo's confession critical to exposing the military regime's human rights violations and pressuring the democratic government to begin prosecutions for them. A previously mobilized community — e.g., the Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos (AFDD) and the Agrupación de Familiares de Ejecutados Políticos (AFEP) — used Romo's confession and its aftermath to continue to push for justice. Mireya García, Secretary General of AFDD, referred to Romo as "the total perversity of a human being. His declarations about what prisoners had suffered and what he had done to disappear the remains of the disappeared prisoners remain engraved in anyone with a minimal sense of humanity."<sup>75</sup>

Romo's confession, however, also engendered political paralysis. Traumatic memories

inhibited, rather than stimulated, mobilization. To hear Romo justify his acts and derive sadistic pleasure from them put some victims back in the clandestine centers and under the control of their torturer. They felt impotent, rather than empowered. They viewed the torturer as retaining control over them and that any action by them would bring more, rather than less, pain to themselves and to others close to them. The amnesty law protecting the members of the repressive apparatus heightened their feelings of powerlessness in the face of the military regime's immunity from prosecution. A survivor of Romo's torture living in Mexico wrote a letter to the editor of a Chilean newspaper, describing Romo as a **A**loyal bloodthirsty dog, sadistic to prisoners.<sup>76</sup> After he listed Romo's abuses in the clandestine torture center, he says: **I** was detained by him, and I am only alive today to tell all of this because of an inexplicable miracle.<sup>76</sup> He finishes the letter by condemning the culture of impunity in Chile.<sup>76</sup> The wounds have not healed and continue to affect the possibility of collective political action to challenge perpetrators.

Frustration describes another emotion that Romo's interview evoked in the directly affected. This emotion resulted from the complexities surrounding the interview. On one hand, Romo's interview provided enough information to prosecute him. For a community aimed at ending impunity, this should seem like a positive step forward. On the other hand, for some of his victims, Romo had become the scapegoat for the military regime. While hardly innocent, his civilian status, ambiguous position within DINA, humble origins, and flaunting of the military's code of silence, made Romo appear more guilty than the others. As Luz Arce explains, Romo is not innocent, but he did not act alone and should not take blame alone. He was a mere instrument used by the military regime:

First I must confess that it is difficult for me to kick someone when they're down. This doesn't mean that Romo Mena should be absolved, which will certainly happen since everything seems to indicate that all of the cases of disappeared prisoners will be amnestied. When I think of Romo Mena today I remember that in 1974 he would take to hell and back those his boss, Miguel Krassnoff Martchenko ordered him to [torture]. And today he is the only one in the hands of justice. It is difficult for me to understand how Romo is responsible and none of the others are.<sup>77</sup>

Guzmán shares this view, contending that Romo no doubt possessed pathologies that **A** might have led him to become aggressive, beat up women and children -- a bully, but nothing more.<sup>78</sup> The regime's repressive apparatus stimulated and rewarded these characteristics; it encouraged him to act with particular brutality. Once he openly admitted to what he did, this same apparatus dismissed his words as the rantings of a lunatic. DINA, Guzmán contends, created that lunatic who wanted to please his superiors and scare his adversaries.<sup>79</sup> In Guzmán's view, Romo's simple words **I** did my job...and I did it well<sup>80</sup> **B** explains DINA's responsibility for Romo's atrocities.

Audience response evolved along with the timing and staging of Romo's confessional performance. The bravado and perversity he expressed during his televised confession disappeared from his courtroom presentations and audience response transformed accordingly. Some of those

directly affected felt a sense of justice from the courtroom experience. When Romo had to defend his actions against their accusations, they experienced a form of power reversal. They now had power over the individual who had once held their life in his hands. This reversal meant that former victims saw Romo in a different light. Some expressed surprise at his height; they had always thought of him as much taller than he turns out to be.<sup>80</sup> Others delighted in his physical deterioration as a form of symbolic justice. Alejandra Holzapel Picarte, for example, had spent years attempting to overcome her torture by Romo and others:

I spent eight very bitter years [in exile] in which I tried to forget. But each day, Big Fat Romo and the rest of the torturers came into my head. I created a process by myself: each day I repeated, >I have to be capable of having a sexual relationship again. I have to be able to get pregnant.= ... I gave myself goals. We all had to find a way to move on.@

Seeing Romo in a physically weakened state accelerated the process of putting the past behind her. She said, **A**I=am happy to have been able to say: >How good it is to see you alone and sick. All of the damage you did to us has returned to you and I hope that you live and suffer for many years.=...The only thing that I can hope for is that Romo is a prisoner for a very long time.@<sup>81</sup> Holzapel had an opportunity to express her emotions directly to Romo. When Romo accidentally urinated on the judge=s chair while he was signing legal papers, Holzapel=s anger erupted:

In that moment I unleashed all of my hatred [towards him]. >You filthy pig, you=are still the same **B** as nauseating as before. You=ve gone and pissed on the judge=s chair!...Get out of here, you swine!=<sup>82</sup>

The courtroom stage, moreover, provided a support system for those directly affected, but little support for their former victimizers. Pandemonium erupted among audiences when Romo appeared in court.<sup>83</sup> *Funas*, or popular protest groups, of sixty to eighty people assembled outside the courtrooms with their signature chants. Holzapel contrasted her own sense of solidarity from the funa=s **A**olé, oleé, olé, olaaaá@ with Romo=s isolation. **A**Romo must have felt at his worst, contemptible, evil. All of this must have come down on him [at that moment], because he was alone.@<sup>84</sup>

## MEMORY POLITICS

Romo confessional performance demonstrates the complex interaction between text, acting, staging, timing, and audience. The sadistic text is reinforced by how it is performed, by whom, where and when. A shift in the timing and the staging produces a different performance with a different audience response. These components, moreover, create a complicated, even contradictory, analysis of the role that confessional performances play in memory politics, particularly with relationship to the struggle for truth, acknowledgment, justice, and collective memory.

### *Truth*

Romo's confession, like nearly all perpetrators' accounts, exposed truth about the authoritarian regime. He described in great detail the kinds of torture techniques DINA used, including the grill, the parrots perch, the wet and dry submarine, and driving a truck over prisoners legs.<sup>85</sup> He listed victims and collaborators. He admitted to his own possible killing of Dagoberto Perez and to rounding up various MIR members and taking them to torture camps. He even provided information about his superiors' responsibilities in particular acts of violence. He named DINA commanders Miguel Krassnof and Marcelo Morén Brito in the torture of Alfonso Chanfreau, for example.<sup>86</sup> He also confirmed Krassnof's involvement in the murder of Miguel Enríquez. Romo warned Guzmán about Krassnof: He is really bad and could be dangerous to you if he knows you are speaking to me. I'm telling you, I know him and I know what he is capable of doing.<sup>87</sup>

Despite these great strides towards providing specific information and testimony about particular acts, Romo issued so many contradictions and lies that his testimony lacked credibility. He would say that he never killed anyone, and then confess to a killing. He would deny torture, but reject as a form of torture electrical shocks during interrogation. He denied raping women prisoners, despite countless testimonies to the contrary. He claimed that his job limited him to investigations of the top MIR echelon, but survivors from different ranks identified him as their torturer. In contrast, he would claim that his position was too low level to know anything about disappeared people. And he would hint at particular places like Colonia Dignidad where prisoners disappeared and invent possible devices for disappearing people.

Different individuals and groups interpreted his contradictions and lies to reinforce their own political needs. The government and the military simply discounted Romo as an unreliable informant about the past. The human rights community, in contrast, continued to demand details from Romo to use in subsequent investigations and trials. Bystanders remained divided about Romo, some became persuaded that only someone who committed such atrocities would admit to them, while others believed the opposite: that if he committed them, he would probably remain silent.

### *Acknowledgement*

Romo acknowledged victims' accounts about the clandestine concentration camps. He identified their existence, their location, and their conditions. The picture that he portrayed of the killing, torture, unsanitary and diseased conditions, and the psychological terror, matched victims' accounts.

But while Romo corroborated victims' accounts from within the torture center, seemingly acknowledging their stories, he simultaneously undermined these same individuals' dignity. Romo accused survivors of having collaborated, informed, or fled to save their skins. Evidence suggests that Romo made a similar kind of pact to collaborate to avoid death, although he has never formulated his experience in that way. Romo recognized that torture forces individuals to speak, but when they did speak under torture, he ridiculed them for betraying their comrades. When they left the country to avoid imprisonment, torture, and death, he derided them for selling out their people. In this way, Romo's confession did not acknowledge victims' accounts, but rather blamed them for their weakness, a weakness that he exploited.

Through his consistent justification of the dirty war, its strategies and its techniques, Romo further eroded victims' accounts of the past. Rather than a military repressive apparatus out of control, Romo's account portrayed the military as an efficient mechanism for surgically removing from society the top command structure. He contradicted this narration of the past, however, when he cast blame for his own imprisonment on those who got away from DINA. Since none of the individuals who imprisoned Romo held top positions in MIR, Romo's blame indicates either that DINA had a much wider repressive apparatus (not just a surgical strike on MIR's command structure) or that the military proved less efficient than he would like to believe.

Romo himself might have provided the strongest acknowledgment. He represented the repressive apparatus and its capacity to do evil. But even in Romo's powerful symbolic presence, the military regime spun an alternative narrative: the regime did not commit atrocities, but renegades within it. People like Romo did. In other words, the system was flawless, even if some of its soldiers did not.

### *Justice*

Romo allegedly joked to the judge in his trial for the murder of Alfonso Chanfreau: "Madame Judge, why so much work when they're going to get me out of this thing anyway?"<sup>88</sup> They did not; Romo was charged, sentenced, and jailed for kidnapping, torture, and disappearance.

Romo's miscalculation about his legal vulnerability resulted from changes in the interpretation of the 1978 amnesty law and the court system. The military had passed that law to protect individuals from political crimes committed between 1973 and 1978. It had further tried human rights courses in military, rather than civil, courts. And by stacking the Supreme Court with pro-Pinochet judges, the armed forces felt even more secure about legal protections. But the democratic government questioned the application of the amnesty law to cases of disappeared people. In the absence of a



body, the date of the crime could not be determined. Thus, these cases fell outside the 1973-78 protection. In addition, the democratic government shifted the jurisdiction from military courts to civilian courts. And the Supreme Court showed surprising independence from the military in hearing its cases. But these changes evolved over time.

Romo, for example, was charged, tried and sentenced for the detention and disappearance of Ester Lagos Nilson, the MIR press secretary under President Allende. Before he had served his sentence, however, the Supreme Court, annulled the sentence and sent it to military courts. Not surprisingly the military courts absolved him of any crime. His release from jail in October 2000 outraged many Chileans, prompting rallies and protest letters from around the world. The Romo case appeared to confirm a commonly held view in the human rights community that trials constituted mere charades of justice. Such a situation threatened to unleash vigilante-style justice. The son of one of Romo's dead victims, hinted at violent reprisals:

The fact that he [Romo] is free clearly justifies justice by our own hands. They're going to do him a favor by detaining him and giving him a life sentence. If he is free, he is condemned.<sup>89</sup>

Romo faced some reprisals, particularly death threats from fellow prisoners and confrontations, sometimes violent, during his court appearances. In March 2000, for example, Romo asked to be moved from the hospital within the Colina II prison where he had received death threats from four former MIR militants condemned in Brazil but serving their sentence in Chile.

Romo returned to prison shortly after this brief reprieve and continued to face investigations, trials, and sentencing. He eventually ended up in the Punta Peuco prison, a new detention facility designed to hold the high security perpetrators from the old regime. His case became a landmark for challenging the amnesty law and putting perpetrators in jail.<sup>90</sup>

### *Collective Memory*

Nancy Guzmán viewed her book as a document directed at the nation's memory, a memory of humanity that protested the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet and that has remained loyal to the desires for justice.<sup>91</sup> She hoped that the Romo interview might make it a little more difficult for torturers to walk the streets with their heads held high. They are the owners of farms, executives in security agencies and transnational corporations, the less fortunate work as security guards, telephone company contractors, public functionaries in right-wing municipalities, owners of liquor stores or subsidized schools, in private offices and public services, they are our neighbors, they sit beside us in restaurants. ...In addition, the majority of those torturers have their old age protected with Armed Forces retirement benefits.<sup>92</sup> She wanted to make it harder for perpetrators to hide the traces of their past. She wanted the book to contribute to Chilean memory politics: to remember and not repeat the past.

But to serve that purpose, Romo would have to mean something to the Chilean people. And although the television interview had a profound impact on Chilean audiences, most Chileans today do not remember who Romo is. Certain events can trigger that memory **B** when a new article or book comes out mentioning him, another trial puts his name back in the press, or foreign researchers probe responses to his declarations. But outside the community of those directly affected by the repressive apparatus, Romo has not become a household name, like Scilingo or Astiz in Argentina.

Chilean collective memory robbed Romo of his fame as a perpetrator. That perpetrators have not captured the airwaves and become celebrities on talk show circuits suggest both that the public does not want to hear from them and that they do not dare risk public exposure for fear of prosecutions. Due to both international pressures to try perpetrators and local mobilization and legal activism, Chilean perpetrators have lost their sense of immunity. The only one who remains protected is former dictator Augusto Pinochet, whose mental state prevents him from standing trial.

Chilean memory politics seems somewhat immune to perpetrators= confessions, trials, and imprisonment. The fault lines of memory remain entrenched. The human rights community celebrates partial victories and laments the limitations the legal system imposes. There are others who consider the members of the armed forces falsely accused patriots who defended the country against Communist subversion. They might accept that not all of them were perfect, and that in an unconventional war unconventional methods must be used. They might even consider Romo, and a few others like him, punishable because he crossed a line. Romo, to them, constitutes an exception, an aberration, and not an emblem of the military regime=s security tactics.<sup>93</sup> In their view the opposition to the military regime made a symbol out of him for their ideological cause.

In such a divided country, confessions play a small role in collective memory since they can be manipulated easily by either side. In this particular case, the lack of investigative seriousness in presenting the Romo confession added to its manipulation. Without adding political context, the confession consisted of a Afreak show@ that could be dismissed or manipulated toward particular ends.

It did, however, offer some Chileans a glimpse into the past that they had been spared. It countered the regime=s own positive propaganda about its capacity to fight subversion effectively, end threats to the country, and put the country on the road to economic prosperity. Romo=s confession tarnished that image by suggesting that the regime proved less discriminate in its victims and tactics than it had led Chilean society to believe. The subsequent trials further reinforced the image of a state security apparatus run amok.

## CONCLUSION

Romo=s account offers one of the least likely scenarios for advancing Anunca más@ memory politics from perpetrators= confessions. His text and his acting resurrected the military regime=s culture

of fear and justification of violence. Indeed, his confession could be viewed as a paean to the regime, excusing its atrocities and even blaming victims for them. This message could stifle mobilization by showing that perpetrators lurk in the shadows of the democratic government, waiting for their moment to resume control. It further motivates desire on the part of the government and military to further clamp down on discussions about the past since they produce polarizing memories, rather than reconciliation or collective memory.

Perpetrators= confessions, thus, reveal the legacy of authoritarian rule and how old versions of the past continue to permeate the democratic present. They further demonstrate how discussions about the past deepen, rather than ameliorate, polarization. This could threaten political stability by intensifying political tensions and violence, and by reducing confidence in democracies=ability to bring justice and protect citizens from violence.

But conflict over confessions may also fortify democracies. It can open political debate about the past to opinions previously suppressed. And it can pressure democratic governments to adopt political and legal reforms that may protect against future atrocities.

Even the unlikely scenario of Romo=s confession presents this possibility. Although some of Romo=s audience reacted by withdrawing or calling for silence, others mobilized around the confession, using it to promote legal remedies. Moreover, the aftermath of Romo=s confession, provoked by the confession itself, and local and international legal transformations, provided a political moment in which human rights groups could challenge perpetrators= Atruth@ and confirm victims accounts in new ways through the judiciary. The human rights and legal communities, in other words, engaged Romo=s confession and A spoke truth to power.@ While they never entirely succeeded in creating one collective memory around the past, they made it more difficult for the other memory pole B supported by the military and extreme right-wing B to deny the regime=s systematic use of violence.

Rather than consider perpetrators= confessions as A truth@ and a struggle to reassert the military regime=s claims, they must be viewed as political opportunities to challenge those claims anew and keep the memory of the violent past alive to prevent its return.

## NOTES

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1. Romo interview with Mercedes Soler, *Primer Impacto*, Univisión, April 11, 1995. Translated and subtitled by Catherine Jagoe.
  2. For a forthcoming project that does that, see Leigh A. Payne, *Unsettling Accounts: Confessions of Perpetrators of State Violence and Memory Politics*.
  3. Most accounts attribute Romo's position in DINA to his link to Julio Rada. Rada had arrested Romo in the late 1960's for petty crimes. He subsequently formed part of an investigation into a death at Lo Hermida land invasion, along with Romo. When he became the new director of criminal investigations under the Pinochet government, he allegedly pulled Romo out of a line of MIR detainees and convinced him that he could save his life by collaborating.
  4. Nancy Guzmán, *Romo: Confesiones de una torturador*, Santiago, Chile: Planeta, 95.
  5. Gladys Díaz, '¿Dónde están hoy los dinos de ayer?' @ *Gente Gris de Mirada Torva*, <http://www.sech.cl/grimaldi/grises.htm>. Reprinted from the magazine *Análisis*, October 1991.
  6. 'Justicia militar absolvió al "Guatón Romo": En libertad,' @ *La Cuarta*, 7 October 2000.
  7. Guzmán, *Romo*, 145.
  8. Guzmán, *Romo*, 146.
  9. Matias Durán refers to this as 'Atypical justifications from the right-wing.' @ Durán, 'Las confesiones.'
  10. Guzmán, *Romo*, 155.
  11. Guzmán, *Romo*, 112.
  12. Guzmán, *Romo*, 151-52.
  13. Guzmán, *Romo*, 151.
  14. Guzmán, *Romo*, 154.
  15. Guzmán, *Romo*, 161.
  16. Guzmán, *Romo*, 172.

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17. Guzmán, *Romo*, 156-57.
  18. Guzmán, *Romo*, 160.
  19. Guzmán, *Romo*, 146.
  20. Guzmán, *Romo*, 146.
  21. AConfronting Villa Grimaldi Torturers: The Court Encounters Between Torture Victims and DINA Agents,@*Santiago Times*, Global News Wire, 23 August 2001.
  22. Guzmán, *Romo*, 145.
  23. Guzmán, *Romo*, 155.
  24. Guzmán, *Romo*, 209.
  25. Guzmán, *Romo*, 109.
  26. Jorge Escalante, ARomo describió nexo de la DINA con Colonia Dignidad@*La Nacion*, 7 August 2001.
  27. Romo quoted in Patricia Bravo, ACara a cara con el Guatón Romo,@*Punto Final*, December 2001.
  28. Guzmán, *Romo*, 220.
  29. Guzmán, *Romo*, 191.
  30. Guzmán, *Romo*, 202-03.
  31. Guzmán, *Romo*, 161.
  32. AFormer DINA agent incriminates Colonia Dignidad,@ *Global News Wire*; CHIP news, 10 August 2001.
  33. Guzmán, *Romo*, 210.
  34. Guzmán, *Romo*, 153.
  35. Luz Arce. *El Infierno*. Santiago: Planeta, 1993, 169.
  36. Guzmán, *Romo*, 156.

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37. Guzmán, *Romo*, 172.

38. Guzmán, *Romo*, 174.

39. Guzmán, *Romo*, 72.

40. Romo demonstrates the power of a performative analysis. I had read his interview and the scandals it generated prior to seeing it. His words appalled me, but not any more than other perpetrators= confessions, until I saw them performed. I traveled to Miami to watch the *Primer Impacto* video in the cutting room of Univisión's offices. The staff present in the room, and those who came in to work, soon gathered around my screen to watch Romo. They were riveted and appalled. Their commentary reflected my own physical repulsion at seeing this man exude pleasure at performing acts of violence and an inability to turn away. I left the Univisión offices feeling nauseous, an emotion that overcomes me every time I witness this performance.

41. Guzmán referred to his smell no less than four times in her book. For some examples, see pages 23, 24, 65, 227. Nearly every interview with his victims mention his smell. Gladys Díaz describes it as the smell of grease and perspiration despite having bathed himself in Flaño cologne. @ Gladys Díaz, *¿Dónde están hoy los dinos de ayer?* @ *Gente Gris de Mirada Torva*, <http://www.sech.cl/grimaldi/grises.htm>. Reprinted from the magazine *Análisis*, October 1991.

42. Carmen Castillo and Guy Girard. 1994. *La Flaca Alejandra: vidas y muertes de una mujer Chilena*. France: Institut Nacional de L=audiovisuel (INA), Channel 4.

43. E.O.G., *¿Diabetes no perdona al >Guatón Romo,=* @ *La Nación*, 11 September 2000.

44. Guzmán, *Romo*, 74.

45. Guzmán, *Romo*, 222.

46. Guzmán, *Romo*, 66. Many of Romo's claims are pure invention. He bragged to Guzmán, for example, about having written a popular music song (about the disappointment of having a daughter) for which he had no apparent authorship.

47. Guzmán, *Romo*, 68.

48. Guzmán, *Romo*, 69-70.

49. Two of the testimonies to the Rettig Commission, came from Romo's fellow collaborators who described their torture and rape by Romo. Marcia Alejandra Merino Vega (La Flaca Alejandra) and Luz Arce, both leaders on the left, became paid DINA agents, like Romo, but only after severe torture. See Marcia Alejandra Merino Vega, *Mi Verdad: AMás allá del horror, yo acuso...* @ Santiago:

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A.T.G., 1993, 31-32 and Arce, *El Infierno*, 125-26.

50. AJusticia militar absolvió al «Guatón Romo». En libertad,@*La Cuarta*, 7 October 2000.

51. Guzmán, *Romo*, 182-82.

52. Maybe say something here about Townley's appearance on television B how it was supposed to be broadcast on state-run television, the government delayed it, and it appeared a few weeks later.

53. Guzmán, *Romo*, 40.

54. Guzmán, *Romo*, 175.

55. Guzmán, *Romo*, 175.

56. Guzmán, *Romo*, 181.

57. Guzmán, *Romo*, 179.

58. AConfesiones de Romo: locura del verdugo o locura de la sociedad?@*Rocinante*, 2 March 2001, 24.

59. AConfesiones,@24.

60. AConfesiones,@24.

61. AConfesiones,@24-5.

62. AConfesiones,@25.

63. The threats told her they knew where she lived and what car she drove along with other threats. Guzmán, *Romo*, 231.

64. Hernán Soto, editor. *Voces de Muerte II*. Santiago, Chile: LOM, 1998, 70.

65. *Punto Final*, no. 344, 11-24 June, 1995.

66. This is written as Areducido y censurable escandalo@ Roberto Contreras, AExijo ser un héroe (o el silencio de inocentes),@[www.yaloleimos.cl/memoria/romo.htm](http://www.yaloleimos.cl/memoria/romo.htm)

67. Guzmán denies that she ever offered Romo money. Soto, *Voces*, 71.

68. These included NGOs from Belgium, England, France, Germany, Spain, and Sweden. See ACarta

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abiera a los gobernanantes chilenos, 8 October 2000, signed by Colectivo Chileno Europeo contra la impunidad (CCECI). [Http://www.noticias.na/11sept/3u\\_romo\\_9okt00.htm](http://www.noticias.na/11sept/3u_romo_9okt00.htm)

69. *La Tercera*, 21 May 1995, reprinted in Guzmán, *Romo*, 26.

70. *El Mercurio*, 23 May 1995, reprinted in Guzmán, *Romo*, 26.

71. Guzmán, *Romo*, 181.

72. Guzmán, *Romo*, 229.

73. Guzmán, *Romo*, 229.

74. Guzmán, *Romo*, 230.

75. Agrupaciones de derechos humanos rechazan libertad de Osvaldo Romo, *El Metropolitano*, 8 October 2000.

76. Juan Salinas, Osvaldo Guatón Romo: un traidor, torturador y asesino, en libertad, *El Siglo*, 13-19 October 2000.

77. Arce, *El Infierno*, 141-42. In this section, Arce also recounts Romo apologizing to her (not clear what he is apologizing about) and she accepts his apology. In Romo's book, she apologizes to him for having falsely accused him of raping her.

78. Nancy Guzmán in Willy Haltenhoff, Me dio mucho miedo ver libre a Romo, *La Nación*, 13 November 2000.

79. Guzmán, *Romo*, 27.

80. Arce, *El Infierno*, 142 and also Willy Haltenhoff, Me dio mucho miedo ver libre a Romo, *La Nación*, 13 November 2000.

81. Alejandra Holzapfel Picarte in Patricia Bravo, Cara a cara con el Guatón Romo, *Punto Final*, December 2001.

82. Alejandra Holzapfel Picarte in Patricia Bravo, Cara a cara con el Guatón Romo, *Punto Final*, December 2001.

83. Careo, *Las Ultimas Noticias*, 28 July 2001.

84. Alejandra Holzapfel Picarte in Patricia Bravo, Cara a cara con el Guatón Romo, *Punto Final*,



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December 2001.

85. Guzmán, *Romo*, 165-69.

86. AFuncionamiento de estructura operativa,@*La Nación*, 7 August 2001.

87. Guzmán, *Romo*, 173.

88. ALa impunidad es ante todo un problema político,@  
<http://www.angelfire.com/ri/amintiri/opinion24.html>.

89. @Hacen dibujos para que Romo vuelva a canasta,@*La Cuarta*, 14 October, 2000.

90. Robert Quinn, AWill the Rule of Law End? Challenging Grants of Amnesty for the Human Rights Violations of a Prior Regime: Chile's New Model,@*Fordham Law Review*, February 1994, n.252 p.68.

91. Guzmán, *Romo*, 17.

92. Guzmán, *Romo*, 16-17.

93. AConfesiones,@25.

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