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## Enfoques

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*Affective Transitions: Negotiating Meaning in a Complaint Letter  
Delivered to a Public University Truth Commission in Rio de Janeiro*

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On a rainy November morning in 2019 in Rio de Janeiro, a letter of complaint arrived from the former chair of a public university truth commission, the mandate of which was to investigate the human rights abuses suffered by the university community during Brazil's military regime (1964-1985)<sup>1</sup>. Employing highly affective language, the sender declared their profound regret for the way in which they had been removed from the university truth commission after serving on it for more than six years. In addition to being submitted to the new head of the commission, the eloquent yet accusatory letter was also received by the commission members and a group of memory activists who contribute to the commission's research and other activities. The assembled audience thus took this moment of impasse, as materialized in writing, as an opportunity to

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<sup>1</sup> For a concise narrative concerning the letter of complaint, see: <https://www.anthropology-news.org/index.php/2020/03/06/reading-complaints/>.

interrupt their routine activities, sit down, and openly discuss the affective meanings contained therein. Further, this conversation also prompted discussion concerning the nature of the commission's work under the increasingly authoritarian political circumstances they have faced since Jair Bolsonaro assumed the presidency in 2018.

This article focuses on my observations concerning the resilient and transformative labor of a group of ex-members of the Rio de Janeiro State Truth Commission (henceforth, CEV-Rio). The group, with whom I have been interacting since 2018, became part of the university truth commission in early 2019. As I explore below, it was also at the center of the aforementioned letter controversy. Drawing from Berlant's notion of "affective transition" (847), which refers to the moments that mediate perceptions of temporality, as well as the gaps that exist between sensed intensities and the multiple possible courses of action that individuals and collectives can take (Deleuze and Guattari 8; Leys 443), I argue that the members of this public university truth commission not only participate in the struggle for memory of and accountability for the human rights violations committed by the regime through educational and research initiatives, they also collectively negotiate the ethos and future of their organization and decipher their position in a context in which past and present state violence form a temporal continuum by engaging with their own internal fractures, conflicts, and discomforts.

Currently, the group must carry out these activities in less-than-ideal circumstances, embedded as they are in a political context that is diametrically hostile to institutions and initiatives that protect and invoke human rights (Sánchez-Garzoli). In particular, by focusing on this letter of impasse, I analyze how their negotiation of affective intensities allows them to craft meanings and continuously shape the organization's mission (Berlant 849). By tapping into their affective dimension, these activists resist, from a place of transitional justice, Bolsonaro's attempts to dismantle Brazilian democracy.

In this sense, affect theory helps us to move beyond the acknowledged limitations of transitional justice discourse, particularly, the problematic assumption of a social flux between two fixed periods of time (i.e., from a “barbaric” past to a “civilized” future) (Hinton; Rojas-Pérez; Dudai and Cohen). Affect theory foregrounds the development of practices that are shaped according to communities’ affective and material needs. Such an analytical move does not, of course, respond to all of the critiques that have been lodged against the entire framework of transitional justice, including the privileging of juridical and state-centered responses to social conflict. Rather, the present aim is to fill a particular gap by focusing on the affective realm of transitional justice practice to better understand how transformation happens within transitional justice initiatives.

In addition to expressing nostalgia for the military regime, Bolsonaro’s far-right administration is simultaneously attempting to reconstitute human rights institutions to fit a reactionary, religiously fundamentalist, and authoritarian social project. It is thus especially critical to analyze how institutions and organizations that reckon with past and present state violence engage with their affective dimensions to sustain their labor. What is then revealed is how memory activists attempt to reclaim, in what they see as an act of resistance, institutional spaces that ostensibly exist to protect human rights.

I begin below by presenting the historical background of truth commissions in Brazil in general, as well as a discussion of the limitations of transitional justice discourse, to argue that paying attention to the affective dimension of the work of truth commissions can be helpful to understand how they develop their forms, challenge linear notions of temporalities, and overcome internal and external challenges. Then, I discuss the history of transformation of the CEV-Rio to review how some of its members struggled to keep the commission’s work alive as they shifted toward a public university truth commission. Finally, I analyze a letter of complaint against the members of this

truth commission to shed light on how this object acted as a moment of transition between sensing affective states and possible courses of action taken by the commission members.

### **Transitional Anxieties**

After the creation of the National Truth Commission in 2012, a proliferation of commissions emerged in Brazil at the state, municipal, and university levels to investigate the human rights violations committed during the dictatorship (Hollanda and Israel 70; Schneider, *The Brazilian Truth Commission* 177). These commissions were officially sanctioned entities that, during their temporally limited mandates, investigated past patterns of violence within particular communities. In general, the overall aim of truth commissions has been the production of final reports that provide details about past violent episodes, so as to reveal who were their perpetrators and victims (Hayner 11-12). The incipient beginnings of Brazil's truth commissions can be traced back to 2009 and 2010. While in his second term, then-president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, from the center-left Workers Party, made the unprecedented, albeit delayed, move of signing a proposal for the Third National Plan of Human Rights. This mandated the creation of a National Truth Commission (*Comissão Nacional da Verdade* – CNV) (Bauer 229; Schneider, “Breaking the Silence” 198). This, in turn, signaled a step toward transforming the issue of memory of the dictatorship into a “matter of state” rather than a problem to be handled exclusively in the private realm.

As argued by Schneider (“Breaking the Silence” 199-203), after Brazil's 1985 transition to democracy, the families of the victims of state violence who were seeking accountability had to work with the Brazilian state in a private fashion in order to demand justice. This, of course, was extremely burdensome and the cause of much anxiety and pain, for these families had to bear the burden of proof before the state to establish that their kin had been victimized by state agents during the dictatorship. Though overall progress in combating impunity

was slow after the transition to democracy, it was not for a lack of trying. In fact, survivors of state violence, along with their family members, activists, scholars and certain state actors had engaged in recurring attempts to seek accountability for the human rights violations since the late 1960s (Teles and Quinalha 29).

Notably, the latter period coincided with the regime's most repressive period (Joffily 12-13), as well as the promulgation of the infamous Institutional Act Five. This highly authoritarian decree provided extensive powers to the country's governing military leader, had no expiration date, shut down congress, introduced explicit censorship of the media, and legitimized highly repressive measures against political dissidents (Skidmore 81-83). These included not only imprisonment and torture, but also disappearances and killings. The National Truth Commission found that 191 people were murdered by the armed forces during the regime, while another 210 were forcefully disappeared (in these cases, their remains were later found), and 33 individuals are still missing. Further, 1,803 people were tortured, though as some were tortured on more than one occasion, there was a total of 6,016 instances of documented torture (CNV 962).

However, the legacies of the dictatorship reach far past these chilling statistics. Beyond his own expressions of authoritarian nostalgia, many supporters of Bolsonaro have called for military intervention during political rallies (Onofre and Matosso). Further, Bolsonaro himself has evinced a visceral admiration for Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, the only indicted military officer from the regime, who was found guilty by a civilian court in São Paulo for using torture as a tactic against members of the Almeida Teles Family (Schneider, "Breaking the Silence" 201).<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that Bolsonaro's public nostalgic admiration for the dictatorship indeed exceeds the concept of "legacy," that is, an inheritance left

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<sup>2</sup> In 1972, the children of the Almeida Teles family, ages 4 and 5, were taken to the detention center and forced to watch as their parents, Maria Amélia Almeida de Teles and César Augusto Teles, were tortured. See <http://memoriasdaditadura.org.br/biografias-da-resistencia/maria-amelia-de-almeida-teles/>.

from a past that is settled. Instead, he deliberately steps into the field of political provocation, detonating chain reactions that exhaust constructive democratic energy. In this dynamic, memory activists who align with human rights causes remain engaged in a constant confrontation against Bolsonaro's attacks (Schneider, "Bolsonaro in Power"). For instance, in response to his attempt to officially celebrate the fifty-fifth anniversary of the 1964 coup that led to the civic-military regime, activists sought ways to stop him from commemorating such a divisive period of history. The matter reached the courts, and ultimately, the judge Ivani Silva da Luz barred Bolsonaro's commemoration, arguing that the glorification of dictatorship by a head of state was not conducive of constructive democratic processes ("Brazil: Bolsonaro's Coup"). In this sense, the Brazilian struggle for transitional justice is not merely charged with ideological undertones of "leftist memory activists" versus a far-right administration. Instead, the affective realm of memory becomes the arena where political projects are erected (Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect" 102; Weld 176).

More concretely, as mentioned by Teles and Safatle (10) and Teles and Quinalha (24), one consequence of the dictatorship that lingers in the present can be observed in the Brazilian prison system. As they argue, there is near-total impunity in Brazil concerning the widespread and longstanding use of torture in the prison system. In fact, the latter has been *increasing* since democratization, even though torture was specifically outlawed in Brazil in 1997.

As many state actors came to the realization that Brazil's transition to democracy was unfinished business (Hollanda and Israel 9), they also came to see that the lack of a coordinated state effort to seek accountability for the regime's human rights abuses was one of the missing links. Thus, by the early 2000s, and after the creation of two reparations programs and the Amnesty Commission, the state adopted the transitional justice discourse to articulate its efforts to reckon with the country's dictatorial past (Abrão and Torelly 443; Mezarobba 14).

The concept of “transitional justice” arose in the early 1990s when legal scholar Ruti Teitel coined the term to describe the mechanisms used by societies to transition from a tumultuous political period, such as dictatorial rule, into a liberal democratic form of government. In broad terms, transitional justice can be defined as the plethora of judicial and political initiatives taken by members of a society after a political regime change to reveal the truth about human rights violations committed during a conflict and seek justice for victims in order to ensure a democratic rule of law (Shaw and Waldorf; Teitel).

According to Hinton, anthropologists have often been suspicious of the transitional justice discourse, mainly because it presumes the existence of transcendental, normative and liberal values (such as rule of law, peace, and reconciliation) and lays the basis for them to be forcefully imposed in non-Western contexts (56). Further, the term “transition,” may evoke imaginations of a barbaric past or state of nature from which “civilized” societies can successfully emerge, if only, again, by adopting Western and liberal notions of law and justice (Rojas-Pérez 257). Questioning these assumptions from an anthropological perspective, Hinton cites Tsing’s concept of “frictions” and argues that scholars should investigate how international and global discourses of transitional justice are negotiated, engaged and struggled over within local settings (170).

Other analysts have also raised concerns about how the practice of transitional justice initiatives has been conceptualized by scholars in dichotomous terms: that is, as deriving either from top-down/state-centered efforts or bottom-up/grassroots initiatives. This not only occludes how “regular official services and bodies also play a key role in dealing with the past,” as has been the case with many mid-level civil servants and other state entities in Chile, Brazil, and elsewhere (Collins 20), but this understanding of transitional justice also creates a conceptual margin that (rather artificially) separates the state from civil society.

On a theoretical level, the idea that there are firm dichotomies such as public/private or state/civil society has increasingly been called into question (Skoggard and Waterston 110). Based on the perspective that reality (and any categorization scheme) is socially constructed and context-dependent, these divisions or categories are thus rendered porous and fluid, as well as perhaps fictitious (Bhattacharjee 337-343). On an empirical level, Hollanda and Israel (2-3) draw from Rosanvallon's notion of "hybrid forums" (295) to demonstrate how in Brazil the boundaries between the state and civil society became increasingly fluid in the wake of the approval, in 1988, of the country's post-authoritarian constitution. Hence, in some state truth commissions, members operated simultaneously both as civil servants and participants in civil society activist groups. In so doing, they invoked not only their interpersonal connections from both spheres, but also found legitimacy via their own, *personal* experiences with state terror.

Finally, another line of critique has focused on how transitional justice discourse has privileged legalistic means, such as prosecutions, of mediating social conflict (Nagy). Yet doing so, has served to raise expectations – often, with disappointing results – concerning what state actors can (or will do) to prevent the repetition of violence (Rojas-Pérez; Dudai and Cohen 232). Further, it simultaneously precludes grappling with the role played by feelings and emotions or even pre-discursive drives as communities process their experiences of violence (Smith). Detecting these limitations, scholars have recently begun to pay more attention to affectivity in their analyses of political violence in Latin America (Fotta et al.; Gomez-Barris; Rojas-Pérez). However, the links between state violence and affective states had in fact formed part of anthropological works since the 1980s (Taussig; Skoggard and Waterston 113). Although it has been emphasized that it is important to differentiate between affect and emotions (Leys 11; Massumi 25), following Skoggard and Waterston (110), this paper takes



a broad view of “affect,” understanding it as that realm of experience relating to feelings, emotions, and sensations.

Simultaneously, affect can also be seen as an experience of time, that is, as momentary gaps that exist between sensing and being provoked, feeling and giving meaning to or acting upon inner drives. These moments or gaps operate under a “not-yet” temporal logic, which Gregg and Seigworth contend, through their reading of Spinoza, opens a field of future possibilities (3). For Berlant, the notions of past collective trauma that are inscribed in historical novels are not only experienced in the continuous present by sentient individuals and collectives (848), but further, such meanings are negotiated in moments of temporal transition. These moments serve to unsettle and destabilize linear perceptions of time, thus providing what Benedetti would label as “a truce:” that is, a respite from the mundane activity of daily life that is over-coded with meaning (Berlant 847), which in turn allows for an exploration of how the experience of feeling *becomes* meaningful.

Though some have pointed to the relative difficulty of defining “affect” or approaching it ethnographically (Skoggard and Waterston 111; Rutherford 285), it is also important to note that, as proposed by Gregg and Seigworth, a lack of rigid meaning of what affect entails provides a degree of analytical freedom (3-4). This allows for the accommodation of creative interpretations of this concept as opposed to allowing potentially rigid, diagnostic frameworks to be imposed over fluid and ever-changing social phenomena (Roseberry 1022). Accordingly, what can be useful about employing affect theory through ethnography in the context of Latin America’s transitional justice discourses is that doing so enlarges our capacity to sympathetically draw near to and accompany actors on the ground (Skoggard and Waterston; Rutherford). This holds the promise of helping us to see how *they* experience affective relations as they process conflicting moments in their everyday lives.

### **Affective Transformation: Toward A Public University Truth Commission**

In November 2015, after two years and eight months of frantic work, the CEV-Rio concluded its activities by submitting its collection of retrieved documents to the Rio de Janeiro State Public Archive (Lisboa). The CEV-Rio was established as a temporary state organism, without judicial powers, whose duty was to investigate the circumstances in which state repression was carried out and to support the National Truth Commission's work (Relatório CEV-Rio 36). In response to the end of its activities, civil society groups advocating for memory and justice demanded a more permanent state organism to continue devising public policy regarding the legacies of the dictatorship. This is how a group of three ex-members of the CEV-Rio, composed of Elisa, Vanessa, and Marcos,<sup>3</sup> decided to continue its work despite its formal closing.

Arguing that the thirty-seventh recommendation of the CEV-Rio's final report established that it was necessary to create an entity that provided continuity with the commission's work, the group decided to create an organization that could foster public discussion and research concerning the ongoing legacies of the dictatorship (Relatório CEV-Rio 449). However, as mentioned to me during a 2018 meeting with Elisa and Marcos, what also prompted the group to continue its advocacy for memory and justice was their concern that important archival documents that had been collected by the CEV-Rio would deteriorate. As expressed by Marcos, they were worried about how these documents would be protected given that many public archives and museums existed in a permanent state of neglect. Indeed, such fears proved highly prescient. In September of that same year, the highly iconic National Museum of Rio de Janeiro burned to ashes, its fate sealed by austerity measures that slashed the budgets for proper fire protection and regular maintenance of the premises (Watts et al.).

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<sup>3</sup> All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Initially, with financial support from the Rio de Janeiro state government, the group founded the *Coordenadoria Estadual por Memória e Verdade do Rio de Janeiro* (State Coordination Center for Truth and Memory of Rio de Janeiro, henceforth the *Coordenadoria*) in 2016. Their specific goal was to aid in the digitalization of the CEV-Rio's collection of documents which were being stored in the Rio de Janeiro State Public Archive. In turn, they would seek to make the documents available through the digital platforms of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro while also staging activities such as public expositions, seminars, and commemorative events. However, in 2017, the state government abruptly withdrew its support from the organization and purged the members from their positions without the provision of just cause (PCB). Activists have claimed that this was a political move by members of the state legislature who sought to use the occasion of filling these now-vacant positions as an opportunity to repay political favors. However, the local government argued that the transformation of the project and firing of the group was due to a lack of state funding and the need to use public money for more pressing social needs (Neto).

Despite the lack of state support, the group was not paralyzed. Rather, its members established linkages with Pedro, a well-known Brazilian anthropologist who was based at a public university and who was the head of MEMOV, a research, memory and archival project focusing on social movements. Pedro would later become the new chair of the truth commission at his university. He would also find himself the principal target of a letter of complaint that expressed affective states experienced by the outgoing chair of the same truth commission. Originally, Marcos, Elisa, and Vanessa, who had been fired from the *Coordenadoria* project in 2017, presented Pedro with the idea of applying for federal grants from the Ministry of Education to form a research group at the Brazilian School of Advanced Studies at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (CBAE-UFRJ). This is how the *Núcleo de Memória* (Nucleus of Memory, henceforth *Núcleo*) was born. The project originally included the aforementioned ex-CEV

Rio's members. Subsequently, they would be joined by two additional researchers, Daniele and João, who had collaborated with Pedro on other projects.

As one of its more significant acts, the *Núcleo* organized a seminar on memory of the dictatorship in fall 2019. Invited speakers included renowned national and international scholars, activists, public prosecutors, and ex-politicians, many of whom contributed papers for an edited volume that the *Núcleo* is preparing for publication. Further, they also staged an exposition of a collection of the documents retrieved by the CEV-Rio as well as photographs that documented the CEV-Rio's work and challenges. The latter included an image of Bolsonaro, then a member of Brazil's federal congress, acting aggressively to prevent the CEV-Rio's members from entering military premises that were used as detention and torture centers (Mendonça). Despite these successes, ever since the government's adoption of austerity measures after the 2016 impeachment of then-president Dilma Rousseff, the group faced increased uncertainty and anxiety. Indeed, the budget for public education and memory projects has been severely and progressively cut (Alves). However, their feelings of precarity grew not only because they were in danger of losing their jobs and incomes, but also because they were confronting a political context that was increasingly hostile to their attempts to nurture and cultivate democratic spaces where the (collective) memory of the dictatorship could be discussed, analyzed, and promoted.

Indeed, Bolsonaro has repeatedly intimidated public entities that advocate for human rights. This has taken the form of declaring via Twitter that his administration plans to further reduce education spending (Gonçalves). He has also restructured the *Comissão Especial de Mortos e Desaparecidos Políticos* (*Special Commission of the Political Dead and Disappeared* - CEMDP) by dismissing its director and replacing four of its seven members with ex-military personnel and appointees from his conservative party. Additionally, he openly mocked the memory of the disappeared, such as the father of Felipe Santa Cruz, the current

president of the *Ordem de Advogados do Brasil* (OAB, *Order of Attorneys of Brazil* – an institution similar to the U.S. BAR Association). Shockingly, even for him, Bolsonaro went so far as to suggest that he knew the details of how Santa Cruz’s father had been killed (Mazui).

Despite this dire political scenario (or perhaps because of it), the *Núcleo’s* visible success prompted Leticia, a new director of the Forum of Culture and Science at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, to restructure the current truth commission of the university – the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro Memory and Truth Commission (henceforth the CMV). In turn, she would bring into the fold the *Núcleo’s* members while also dismissing the previous chair. Notably, Leticia’s father was imprisoned and disappeared by state agents during the dictatorship, and the letter of complaint would also express criticism of her role. During its six years of existence, the CMV was certainly successful in certain endeavors. For example, it was able to provide reparations to Jaime Santiago, a former student in the history department who was forced to drop out of the university when in 1971 he began to live clandestinely due to his opposition to the dictatorship (Queiroz 10). However, this commission had not performed an essential task that is constitutive of truth commissions. That is, it had yet to produce a final and all-encompassing report. Hence, part of the restructuring plan was to bring new energy to the CMV by placing the head of the *Núcleo* project – Pedro – as the new chair of the CMV.

As captured in the letter, this created a brief internal struggle through which affective states would be negotiated. Soon after the restructured commission began operating, the ex-chair sent a letter that expressed regret about what they deemed was the unjust way in which they had been removed from the commission. Acting as a moment of mediation between the affects raised by the letter and a future course of action for the restructured commission, this impasse offered an opportunity for those involved in the conflict to negotiate

both the meaning of the letter itself and the mission of the organization, and, in turn, the broader struggle for memory and justice in Brazil.

### **At the Cusp of a Mound of Papers: A Transitional Impasse**

On November 18, 2019, I received a text from Elisa inviting me to observe a rather impromptu yet official meeting of the CMV. She mentioned that this meeting would be a good opportunity for me to understand some of the internal issues that the CMV was facing. A few days prior to the meeting, participants in civil society memory groups such as the *Coletivo por Memória, Verdade e Justiça RJ* (Rio de Janeiro's Collective for Memory, Truth and Justice), as well as Pedro, the *Núcleo's* team, and incumbent members of the CMV received the aforementioned letter. Though eloquently written and cordial in its tone, the ex-chair's letter had nonetheless lodged direct accusations against Pedro and the new university administration that had decided to replace them.

"Cordiality" (*cordialidade*) is far from an alien concept in Brazil. As is often recalled, the eminent historian Buarque de Holanda discussed cordiality as a social handicap that impeded Brazil's development and modernization. For him, cordiality was a colonial inheritance that became implanted in Brazilian society through the reproduction of patriarchal family relations, as seen most vividly in the countryside, as well through institutions such as slavery, which were defined by an ethos of paternalistic relations between "masters" and "slaves." This hierarchical ethos, he noted, had percolated throughout Brazilian society and culture, thus blocking modernizing state projects. Though Buarque de Holanda's classical analysis of social and historical issues afflicting the country has been criticized for reducing complex social issues to general causes (Novais), as well as reflecting Eurocentric biases (Costa 838-839), it is nonetheless undeniable that cordiality is frequently invoked as a fundamental aspect of Brazilian culture. Usefully, for present purposes, it can be interpreted as an *affective* state that mediates social relations and hierarchies. Applying this cultural concept to the

present case, the cordiality expressed in the letter can be read as a mask that superficially occludes its indicting spirit, and simultaneously as a vehicle for delivering the sense of betrayal that the sender of the letter had felt.

As the letter wobbled in brief, nervous tremors between Pedro's mature hands, he greeted the new arrivals, moving slightly in his chair, which was positioned at one end of a large oval table. He was in the midst of ensuring that the attendees promptly took their seats so that they could call to order this already-late meeting. In his soft and rather low voice, Pedro welcomed and thanked everyone for coming to this extraordinary but nevertheless official gathering. Its purpose was to discuss both the contents inscribed in the trembling letter, as well as the CMV's upcoming events, given that the commemoration of International Human Rights Day, scheduled for December 13<sup>th</sup>, was fast approaching.

The letter had been typed on white, letter-sized paper and was signed and dated with blue ink on the back of the approximately five, stapled pages of "evidence" that comprised the message. In general, it relayed the sender's perspective concerning how Pedro had been named as chair. The strong wind that crashed into the open and tall, early-twentieth-century windows and wooden doors that enclosed the stylistically grandiose (if somewhat dilapidated) room where we were gathered was an appropriate preamble to the reading of the letter. Right before beginning, the murmur from the approximately fifteen attendees - chit-chatting about the devastating coup against Evo Morales in Bolivia and the joy over Lula's recent release from prison - began to wane as if it were slowly being swallowed by the large, almost empty space. Pedro began by explaining that he needed to read the letter out loud, and not just any version of the letter, but this particular printed one, as it was dated and hand-signed by its author.

The attendees briefly looked at each other and nodded expectantly. Simultaneously, Elisa was beginning to hurriedly distribute copies of the agenda

and a proposal for upcoming events (which included seminars, exhibits, and commemorations). Perhaps seeking to cut through the expectation, Leticia, the university administrator who had led the restructuring of the CMV, suddenly and jokingly exclaimed, “what a mound of paper, people!” We nodded, then smiled, before again falling silent.

As a way to ensure transparency, Pedro took the letter between his hands and proceeded to read it out loud, adding that the author had so requested it – along with asking that it become part of the collection of documents that the CMV commission would eventually archive. Employing language that permeates the field of “memory and justice” in Brazil, the letter utilized terms such as “amnesia,” “forgetting,” and “archive.” It yielded them to allege that Pedro had worked his way up to the position of chair by exploiting his connections with the university’s administration, thus prompting the ex-chair’s unwarranted dismissal. The author also appealed to their harrowing experience of living in exile during the dictatorship so as to persuade readers that this lived ordeal had qualified them to be the chair of the CMV for the previous six years.

As Pedro finished reading the message, the meeting’s attendees began to discuss its contents, focusing on the concerns expressed therein. At the center of this discussion was the longstanding trajectory not only of Pedro, but of the entire team of researchers who had been incorporated into the CMV. First, Elisa explained how, after working for the CEV-Rio and the aborted *Coordenadoria* project, she and her two other CEV-Rio colleagues had sought Pedro’s help to embark on new memory projects given that he had led research on social movements and archives. Subsequently, Leticia intervened to clarify that the decision to restructure the commission was not based on personal factors. Rather, it was a “natural” transition prompted by a new university administration that was deeply concerned with Bolsonaro’s attacks and his government’s undermining of educational institutions.



Further, after witnessing the success of the *Núcleo's* work, Leticia added, they believed that the team had demonstrated a capacity to productively engage with issues concerning memory of the dictatorship and its legacies in the present. While explaining in objective terms the reasons why the CMV needed to be restructured, Leticia nonetheless appealed to her experience as the daughter of a man who was violently disappeared during the dictatorship. In so doing, she resonated with the claims made by the sender in positioning herself as a morally apt individual who was legitimized based on personal experiences to make sound decisions about the future of the CMV during a critical political context. Here, the cultural role played by *cordialidade*, and the blurring of lines between the public and private, reappears (Holanda 16).

The externalization and materialization of deeply held inner ideas and feelings through this letter served to reify the sender's and Leticia's memories, actualizing in the sensorial realm certain nebulous, affective states (Bergson; Lara 24-25). In this manner, it is possible to see how these interlocutors attached themselves to notions of pain and made use of their *personal* experiences to validate their work and position within the *public* commission (Hollanda and Israel). Further, the reaction to the letter reflects the ways in which inert "things" that participate in social relations can provoke affective states (Latour; Bennet). This actant-letter is tied to its producer by the ideas expressed therein, as well as through the actual traces of blue ink threaded in the form of a signature. Though it is true that the letter could have triggered its material effects had it been sent only via email, Pedro's insistence on reading the signed, hard copy provided the situation with layers of meaning beyond those found in its contents and which seemingly include ideas of redemption, feelings of vengeance, resentment and/or a sense of impasse and a misunderstanding that needed to be clarified.

More importantly, the letter positioned the writer and recipients as two opposing bodies suspended in relation by this object's affective force (Canguilhem and Savage 8; Bennett). Crucially, this suspension had a temporal

dimension. That is, it acted as a transitional period between different temporalities. Not only did the actors involved in the impasse invoke their memories of state violence and their professional records to engage with the claims made in the letter, but in doing so, they compressed temporal experiences, bringing their pasts and futures to the fore so that they could be sensed in the continuous present (Berlant 846; Stanley 208).

Thus, the letter placed interlocutors, almost impossibly, into multiple temporal dimensions simultaneously: as a conversation that never really happened face-to-face between the sender and recipients, and as the interaction between the author and an imagined public that will someday have access to the archived letter. These conversations *were not actualized*, and yet they were nonetheless conceived in and through the letter at the moments when it was typed, sent, read, and sensed (Stanley 208).

Although the letter *indicted* by asserting a narrative in which its author described himself as the victim of supposed machinations carried out by a colleague who, in their view, confabulated with the incoming university administration, those who attended the meeting were not entirely persuaded by the arguments being offered. After discussing the motives behind the commission's restructuring, the attendees came to perceive the message as a rather unfortunate and unnecessary attack against a trusted member in the community of memory and human rights activists and scholars. One could interpret this reaction as taking sides with Pedro. However, this assumption would bypass the affective dimension of a group interaction that negotiated the different registers that accounted for what had transpired during the restructuring of the CMV. In this sense, the meeting was used as an arena to hear, to feel, to respond. Thus, their decision to reject the claims of the letter was not immediate, but rather took place during a process of reckoning, questioning, and interpreting. For instance, one of the attendees considered the letter to be a "low blow," while others gave the sender the benefit of the doubt and saw the

letter as a matter of a misunderstanding: the dismissal had coincided with a university break, and therefore, the sender's frustration was due to the fact that they were not promptly and properly informed about their dismissal.

As the meeting concluded after nearly two and a half hours of conversations, three conclusions percolated: the evidence did not support the accusation against the new commission chair; Pedro did not prompt the removal of the ex-chair of the commission, but instead it was the prerogative of the new university administration to make changes it deemed necessary; and a written response focusing on the truth commission's future projects was necessary. As one of the attendees mentioned, the idea was not to send a reply that scolded the sender. After all, meeting attendees concluded that they were all part of the same community of leftist activists, civil servants, and educators who were constantly being trampled on throughout Brazil by Bolsonaro's far-right administration. In that way, their larger affective sense of in-group solidarity overcame.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have traced a story of resilience and struggle experienced by a group of ex-members of the Rio de Janeiro State Truth Commission, who by carrying on with the work of the commission, transcended its temporal mandate. This kind of labor is embedded in a discourse of transitional justice where civil society and the state are located in the affective relations fostered between actors who have striven to create initiatives that can help communities to reckon with their lived experiences with the legacies of state violence.

As discussed, the concept of transitional justice was originally coined to articulate all the efforts involved in helping a society transition from a conflicted past into a peaceful existence. In Brazil, the term was adopted around fifteen years after the country "transitioned" to democracy, so as to articulate all the efforts in which the state had been engaging to make amends for its own violent past and consequently deepen, or bring to fruition, "democracy." Yet as also

noted, among the critiques of the transitional justice framework are that, in its universalist pretensions, it is insufficiently attuned to how concepts such as “transition” and “justice” are inevitably reshaped and made meaningful in diverse ways by communities that are attempting to recover from harrowing violence.

In this sense, the affective dimension of transitional justice needs to be accounted for and incorporated. By paying attention to affect – that is, to that realm of sensibilities, feelings, and emotions, as well as to those momentary gaps that mediate between sensing and thinking, or sensing and acting – we can shed light on what drives the search for accountability for past human rights violations. What do people feel? What motivates them to make decisions or act in particular ways? How do they draw on their experiences to choose a particular course of action and what mediates between sensing and acting? And what kinds of contradictions do they embody? These are all questions that can be addressed through the notion of affect, especially in transitional justice contexts where communities come together to mourn, to commemorate, to demand, and to stake claims for truth and justice.

Moments of conflicts such as those reviewed through the letter of complaint need not be seen as something negative. Instead, communities can take moments of impasse as opportunities to sit down and negotiate the meaning of their labor, desires, and even unintended actions. In this sense, conflicts and internal contradictions can be seen as affective transitional periods, where individuals and collectives hone their feelings and emotions and draw on their memories to craft conclusions. As this article reveals, paying attention to how these actors relate to each other through affect and experiences of time and how affective states are materialized in objects can be useful for understanding how historical and political processes unfold through fear, anxiety, and care. Given our current political context in which the affective notion of “being triggered” is exploited for political gains by authoritarian actors, understanding what

mediates our actions and thoughts should thus be understood as a critical task for the defense of democracy.

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