On Dec 10, 2006, General Augusto Pinochet, Chile’s notorious dictator from 1974 to 1990 and commander of the military until 1998, died. On the streets of Santiago, two counterposing groups assembled: Pinochet supporters on the one side who cheered his memory as the savior of the Chilean economy, and on the other, those who celebrated the real possibility that Chile would finally break through its culture of silence, liberate buried memories of Pinochet’s reign of violence and repression, and reinvent Chilean culture with human rights at its core.

The complex enterprise of retrieving the historical memory of the violent repression in Chile (as well as in Spain, Argentina, and many other countries struggling with the long process of “democratization” after decades of repressive dictatorships/regimes) has become an increasingly public discussion, a process that has been variously described as “ahistorical,” “poking in the wound,” or “reclaiming history.” These histories and issues were explored in the fall of 2006 in two presentations at UCLA that focused on the role of women documentary filmmakers in revealing traumatic memories and “giving language to state terrorism” in post-dictatorship Chile and Spain. Macarena Gómez-
Barris, Assistant Professor in the Departments of Sociology and American Studies and Ethnicity at USC, and Los Angeles filmmaker CM Hardt, each in their own way, discussed the challenges and possibilities of documentary films that present the project of remembering and denying historical events.

**Coming to Terms with The Past**

Invited to give a talk at the Center for the Study of Women, Macarena Gómez-Barris shared work from her forthcoming book, *Where Memory Dwells: Culture and Democracy in the Aftermath of Chile’s Dictatorship* (forthcoming, University of California Press). Her book proposes that culture and the arts play an important role in the struggle over historic memory, particularly for those whose identities have been shaped by political activism, state violence, and the resulting effects of social trauma. Her talk, “Enacting Traumatic Memory: Marilú Mallet’s ‘La Cueca Sola’,” explored how gender subjectivity is expressed in terms of both trauma and memory in the work of three Chilean documentary filmmakers: Marilú Mallet, Patricio Guzman, and Silvio Caiozzi.

Each of these filmmakers got their start in film during the Unidad Popular government of Socialist President Salvador Allende (1970-1973), which supported film production and documented the huge changes taking place in Chile under Allende’s leadership. The vibrant cultural movement that developed during that period laid the groundwork for dynamic cultural expression in the Chilean exile communities that formed after Pinochet’s violent coup in 1973.

Gómez-Barris defines trauma in her work as “the moment of rupture of state terrorism, where the practices of torture, sexual torture, disappearance, and forced exile produce a breach,” and the work of victims and survivors as “finding ways to integrate rupture into the ongoing practice of everyday life.” In her talk, Gómez-Barris discussed the importance of documentaries that attempt to “interrupt, constitute, and imagine gendered subjectivities and possibilities,” even while they at times also reproduce static gender roles.

*Chile, Obstinate Memory* (1997) by Patricio Guzman was the first film Gómez-Barris discussed. In it, the filmmaker is seen returning to Chile from exile to screen his epic film of Allende’s Chile, *Battle of Chile*, to audiences of diverse ages and occupations, capturing on film their reactions—tears, shame, contempt, silence, rage, fear—to this still repressed history. The second film Gómez-Barris analyzed was Silvio Caiozzi’s *Fernando Ha Vuelto* (*Fernando Returns*, 1998), which documents the process of uncovering the skeleton of disappeared leftist Fernando Olivares and follows his family’s journey to identify his body and bury his bones.

These documentaries include the dramatic testimony of female former-prisoners and family members that had largely been ignored until the release of the films. For example, in an unforgettable scene Fernando’s almost-mute mother, who has been ill since his disappearance twenty years before, tells her heartbreaking story in sounds only her caregiver can understand. Gómez-Barris contends that “one of the central assumptions and pitfalls of these films is making female subjectivity synonymous with victimization,” and that Guzman’s subjects “narrativize for the camera their suffering without linking their stories to their social activism.... without giving them the power of enunciation about
what living with this violence looks like.”

Gómez-Barris argues that the military state’s efforts to enforce a code of silence and force women back into traditional roles was accomplished by stifling social movements where women were becoming leaders, policing women’s bodies, and by making Pinochet’s wife a spokesperson for the military state. “Power’s work here [was] to invoke the triangle of patriarchy, nation, and heterosexual family bonds and values within a regularized context of disappearance, torture, and political disappearance, especially targeted at male revolutionary subjects.”

Yet women were the first to take to the streets to resist Pinochet’s brutality and protest the disappearance of thousands of their family members, posing a highly visible contradiction to his role for women in “a country of brothers” (his favorite slogan). Gómez-Barris focuses on Marilú Mallet as a filmmaker who has taken a more personal approach to reclaiming the past, particularly visible in *La Cueca Sola* (2004). The title itself is taken from an act of cultural resistance on the part of Chilean women, who transformed the nation’s traditional dance of courtship, *la cueca*, into a version women dance alone (*la cueca sola*), leaving the viewer to imagine the missing partner and by extension the thousands of disappeared. Throughout the film the five featured women move between their own memories of torture and/or loss, their diverse healing processes, and their current involvements in the rebuilding of Chile. While Gómez-Barris defined Mallet’s broader project as “thread[ing] the histories and ongoing organizing of a multiply defined, decentered revolution,” these words also seem to describe her own pursuit.

Illustrating the gendered approach to reclaiming personal experience that Gómez-Barris explores, schoolteacher Monique Hermosilla, who had been imprisoned, recounts her story in *La Cueca Sola*. One day, six years after her release from prison into exile in Belgium, she “just fell down” and couldn’t get up. She had never told anyone about her experiences of torture, recognizing that many Chileans “didn’t believe the stories of abuse until Pinochet was arrested.” Therapy became central to her physical and emotional “rebuilding.” The very day of Pinochet’s arrest in 1998, she began to gather with other...
female former-prisoners who together eventually filed a suit against the government for illegal captivity and torture. As Gómez-Barris stated, the women in La Cuesta Sola and others like them “attenuate the space between living/dead, visible/invisible, forgetting/remembering.... The gendered body of survivors of concentration camps and torture, and understanding their complex lives and personal and social struggles, is a route to a reconstructed present.”

**Poking in the Wound**

In the fall of 2006, UCLA’s Department of Spanish and Portuguese presented “Images Against Amnesia: A Window into Memory - Documentaries on the Historical Memory of Spain,” which included Death In El Valle by Los Angeles filmmaker CM Hardt. In 1992, almost twenty years after Spanish dictator Francisco Franco’s death and the beginning of Spain’s transition to democracy, Hardt traveled to Spain to find out how her grandfather had died in the small mountain village of El Valle in 1949. As uneducated about the Spanish Civil War and Franco’s 36-year reign of terror as most of her Spanish cousins, she became one of the first documentary filmmakers to search out hidden stories of Franco’s Spain, and in the process expose the trauma, silences, and fear that still confront and at times take center stage in such efforts.

Soon after Hardt’s arrival in El Valle, her grandmother reveals that her grandfather was killed, not by the lung hemorrhage listed on his death certificate, but by Franco’s Civil Guard. He had been secretly housing militants who were active in the guerrilla war against Franco, and Hardt’s promise to her grandmother that she will make a film that “tells the world what really happened in Spain” drives the passionate search that is the core of her film.

Stepping back, Hardt’s family can be seen as a metaphor for Spain, struggling mightily for twenty years to forgive and forget despite intensifying efforts, including Hardt’s, to reclaim its history of violent repression. Illustrating Gómez-Barris’s concept of “reversing the dissolution of the self that occurs in conditions of crises” is Hardt’s grandmother, the quiet but determined heroine, who gradually and painfully responds to her granddaughter’s search by talking about what happened in 1949 for the first time and standing behind Hardt despite growing opposition from the rest of the family. Hardt’s uncles become furious with her, and her 97 year-old great-grandmother asserts that her son’s death was a natural one, pleading, “Oh good God, leave me alone!” Later, however, Hardt’s great-grandmother admits that she was the one who identified her son’s tortured body. In additional footage not included in the film, Hardt’s young cousins (who, like Hardt, grew up in the United States) tell her, “It’s not going to change anything – it’s something very ugly,” and “This isn’t history!”

At times the film plays like a small-town drama. Villagers and family members refuse to talk with Hardt, or whisper long-held opinions about who turned her grandfather in to the Civil Guard. The story develops as she meets one of the guerillas
The passion that drove her to participate in the clandestine war on Franco’s regime: “The rich have everything. A poor person, a laborer, may be very intelligent but can’t get ahead. I am with the workers and people of the pueblo. I am not with the rich.” This and her husband’s crime were enough to warrant two years of prison in Franco’s Spain. While including these scenes would have strengthened the film’s dynamics, the reality of her grandmother’s gradual shift over the fifteen years since the filming began (according to Hardt, she is now speaking publicly about the film and her involvement in the resistance to Franco) demonstrates an entirely different promise that this kind of film holds out, a journey that continues long after the film itself has been completed.

It was not until the late 1990s that numbers of filmmakers began to investigate the suppressed history of Franco’s dictatorship. A collective of filmmakers formed to organize “Images Against Amnesia,” a series which began touring throughout Spain in 2005 and more recently in Europe and North America with stops at venues like UCLA. Touring the films is itself an act of intervention in the 70-year suppression of Spain’s traumatic memory and strengthens current efforts to reclaim and learn from the past. In 2001, five years after Hardt’s film was completed, the Spanish government finally granted political recognition to the guerrillas who, like the men who hid in her grandparents’ home, continued to resist Franco’s regime long after the Civil War ended.

**Pandora’s Box**

As I watched these films, the silences I have confronted in my own work came back to haunt me. In interviews for my film and writing projects...
As I watched these films, the silences I have confronted in my own work came back to haunt me....

By now, these silences have become messages to me, reminders that the silences are about something very specific, ideas that have been almost disallowed, and reminders of what we lose when we allow our fear to determine the stories we tell. When I tell friends and others about the ongoing refusal of potential interviewees to speak about their pasts, they are as surprised as CM Hardt was in Spain that people are still afraid to talk about things now seemingly so far in the past. Rarely a matter of death in this country, the anti-radical sentiment and accompanying fear has become so deeply entrenched in our culture and individual psyches that most of us can hardly recognize it.

I admire the determination of the filmmakers - Spanish, Chilean, and others - who are exposing the impact of repression and silence on individuals and cultures. We in the U.S. have told histories of activism and repression but have rarely explored the profound effect the long history of American anti-radicalism has had on generations of activist individuals and on our culture as a whole.

Our stories are not unconnected. The long reach of the various “red scares” of the twentieth-century U.S., including Joseph McCarthy’s reign in the 1950s, are part of the backdrop to American involvement in the Pinochet coup that overthrew President Allende and started Chile on its reign of terror. The films examined give clues to possible methods of exploring the impacts of these complex stories and struggles, that might be, as Gómez-Barris puts it, “route[s] to a reconstructed present.”

Judy Branfman is a CSW Research Scholar whose work often takes place at the intersection of public history, grassroots activism, and the arts. She is writing, and working on a documentary film, about the Los Angeles 1920s free speech and labor movements and her great-aunt’s precedent-setting free-speech case. She has received numerous awards from national and local foundations (including a CSW Tillie Olsen Travel Grant) and has taught at UCLA, Franconia College, and Leslie College.

Sources
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Chile, Obstinate Memory, [http://www.frif.com/new97/chile__ob.html](http://www.frif.com/new97/chile__ob.html)
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