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Quando Vienen Matando: On Prepositional Shifts and the Struggle of Testimonial Subjects for Agency

ALICIA PARTNOY

AS I WRITE THESE LINES, BACK IN ARGENTINA A MYRIAD OF COMMEMORATIVE EVENTS MARK THE THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE GENOCIDAL military coup that destroyed our movement for social change in the 1970s. An outpour of testimonial texts is reaching the presses. The words of public intellectuals pepper interviews and newspaper articles dealing with the currency of the testimonial first person. Beatriz Sarlo's new book *Tiempo pasado. Cultura de la memoria y giro subjetivo. Una discusión* contributes to this debate. Sarlo recognizes the value of the testimonial first person for legal purposes, to set records straight while other documentation is not available (24) and to secure justice. She admits that personal narratives can be a source for historians (25). Sarlo argues, however, that excessive trust is placed on victims and survivors as producers of historical truth (62, 63). Her intervention has been called polemical by journalists in the country and abroad. Arturo Jiménez, from the Mexican newspaper *La jornada*, has seen it as a call to "go beyond the overwhelming predominance of the testimonial account of the repression by the military dictatorship and to engage with more strength in theoretical reflections to be able to understand what has happened" (my trans.). What concerns me about these words and Sarlo's statements is the belief that survivors are unfit for theoretical reflection unless they undergo traditional academic training and do not refer directly to their experience.

The debate appeals to journalists and scholars in the humanities alike. Both professions stake much on the search for the truth.¹ The difficulties of understanding what testimonial texts and producers try to accomplish and their *modus operandi* stem from academia's excessive preoccupation with the truth. The desire to construct a discourse of solidarity that empowers the victims by moving others to act to stop genocides and achieve justice is often an unseen force behind testimonial texts. More attention should be paid to relations woven within and around them, on what Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress call the semiotic plane (262). When Sarlo in her chapter "La imaginación sale de visita" (53–58) aptly conjures Hannah Arendt's call to "train the

ALICIA PARTNOY is associate professor of Spanish and chair of the Modern Languages and Literatures Department at Loyola Marymount University. Her book *La Escuelita*, about her experiences as a political prisoner in a secret detention camp in Argentina, will be published in her country this fall, coincidentally on the twentieth anniversary of its publication in English as *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival* (Cleis, 1986, 1998). She is also the author of *Volando bajito / Little Low Flying* (Red Hen, 2005) and the president of Proyecto VOS—Voices of Survivors, an organization that invites survivors of human rights abuses to lecture at universities in the United States.

imagination to go visiting,” she incorporates the survivor and scholar into the semiotic plane. Arendt’s image alludes to the need to cultivate an “enlarged mentality,” which implies not “know[ing] what goes on in the mind of all others” but “think[ing] for oneself . . . disregarding what we usually call self-interest, which, according to Kant, is not enlightened or capable of enlightenment but is in fact limiting” (Arendt 43). The challenge that Sarlo and many scholars in the United States and Latin America seem to share involves the ability to train their imagination to go visiting without tying it to the leash of truth. In my view, that leash is a limit imposed by self-interest: the preservation of academia as the only realm where knowledge can be produced.

Sarlo’s findings and the way they circulate in the public sphere nurture a view of the testimonial author as, to borrow Sylvia Molloy’s words, “on the one hand, the native informant, on the other, the native spoken for” (190). In her article “Latin America in the U.S. Imaginary: Postcolonialism, Translation, and the Magic Realist Imperative,” Molloy describes in these terms her status as a Latin American student in the French academy of the 1960s. She might or might not have been “exoticized” and “othered” more than the testimonial author of today in the Americas. In any case, to illustrate her reflections, Molloy resorts to the first-person narrative. Paradoxically, Sarlo employs the same rhetorical device when she explains to the reviewer Andrea Schulte-Brockhoffe the genesis of her new book. The reading of many first-person narratives dealing with political repression, states the author, made her realize that her original book project, “a collective autobiography of the sixties and seventies” (my trans.), had a faulty working premise: an excessive trust in the first-person narrative—this time, her own. Using the first-person narrative, which maximizes her impact on the mass media, Sarlo discloses her sacrifice of this rhetorical device for the sake of historical

truth. Such sacrifice, she argues, legitimizes her scholarship.

It is not surprising, then, that the only book by a Latin American genocide survivor that Sarlo values is Pilar Calveiro’s *Poder y desaparición; los campos de concentración en Argentina* (95–97, 110–123). As Sarlo states in *Tiempo pasado*, Calveiro’s academic training legitimizes her findings: Calveiro can be trusted once she sheds her authority as a survivor to embrace that of a doctoral-dissertation producer (122). Her strategy may result from a number of circumstances, but not all doctoral-dissertation producers—and I speak from my own experience—are forced to become alienated from their personal histories to embark on intellectual analysis.

Tiempo pasado came to my attention thanks to Nora Strejilevich, an Argentine scholar and survivor who lives in the United States. Strejilevich’s new book *El arte de no olvidar* is based on her dissertation on testimonial texts. However, the author does not avoid first-person narrative while engaging in textual analysis and theoretical reflection. She discusses the creative process leading to her testimonial novel *Una sola muerte numerosa* (*A Single Numberless Death*), which will finally be published in Argentina this year.

While it is high time that survivors’ writings were available in print at the site of the crimes, the validation of our voices today is often coupled with a view of testimonial subjects as native informants crying to be “spoken for.” If public intellectuals there persist in drastically dividing those who write testimonial accounts from those who produce theoretical reflections on them, little will be heard in academia of what survivors have to say.

In the United States for the past thirty years, the crimes against humanity committed by dictatorships in Latin America have been at the center of many college courses. Survivors and their words have become the object of intense scrutiny. The interest in human rights organizations like Mothers of

Plaza de Mayo has generated a high number of proposals to interview members; to write fiction and poetry, paint murals, and produce documentaries based on their experiences; and to research their struggle and their history. These activities have contributed to the dissemination of information about human rights violations and in many instances have empowered survivors as they build solidarity around their causes. More often than not, however, the needs and agendas of scholars prevail over those of the testimonial subject. That situation is tolerable in moments of tremendous crisis, when assassinations, disappearances, and torture are taking place. Then, in their desperation to build a discourse of solidarity, survivors make many concessions. Even when they realize that they are seen as native informants and that their agency is wrested from them, if what is at stake is to stop the killings, they might yield to the interests of the scholar, the creative writer, the artist. *Sin embargo*, when their dignity is threatened, survivors resort to an endless array of strategies to preserve their integrity. To listen to and respect survivors' contributions to the debate does not always mean to understand their words; sometimes it is a matter of watching their actions, of analyzing their interventions at a semiotic level.

Cuando vienen matando uno debe recurrir a todo para parar el estropicio. Negocia alianzas, calla con frecuencia, grita más de lo que le da la garganta. Se tira al piso y finge estar muerto, acusa dolor donde no duele (como por ejemplo el Mingo, en la tortura gritaba cuando le picaneaban los pies, no las encías). Las encías, siempre proteger las encías. Pero cuando después de la derrota pasan años, veinte, treinta, cuarenta y viene algo que huele ligeramente a aquello que llamábamos revolución, cuando nadie ya teme buscar huesos, palabras perdidas, homen/ajejar al vencido, entonces hay que decirlo todo todo todo, sin miedo, sin arrepentimientos, con la certeza de que no hay redención posible.

Doris Sommer illuminates important aspects of this problematic in *Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas*. If scholars in any corner of the Americas characterize the testimonial subject as an object, their understanding will appear murky. Countless instances of what Alberto Moreiras calls "expropriation" will take place. Moreiras uses the term to analyze the relation between hispanism and the Hispanic object today and defines it as a situation in which "the gaze does not fully capture the object and the object does not exhaustively resist its partial appropriation" (205). Testimonial subjects, as objects, apparently pose little resistance to their appropriation by hispanism or the epistemic apparatus of any other discipline in academia. That tension can be a source of much intellectual pleasure for scholars, and it can continue providing material to enhance their careers. The risk here is one of feeding some kind of Latin American genocide industry, not unlike the Holocaust industry that Norman G. Finkelstein analyzes in his controversial book.

Scholars who value the testimonial subject's input might have their own voices devalued in the traditional academic world, yet they contribute to its transformation by fostering a culturally diverse environment for research and teaching. Feminist scholars like Stacey Schlauf have already alerted us that "[c]hanging what we teach, means changing how we teach" and that "the processes through which we communicate knowledge are as important as content" (178–79). Furthermore, the processes for seeking knowledge, the spaces for intellectual reflection on these matters, need to evolve. We can choose to continue training our students' imagination and our own to go visiting. And, as many college professors already do, we can embrace Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of *conocimiento* as "coming to know the other / not coming to take her" (45).

These approaches will complicate our praxis and introduce variables into our way

of doing scholarship. One example of the complications created by this paradigm is the recent experience Juana Suárez had when writing her article “Prácticas de solidaridad: Los documentales de Marta Rodríguez.” Before its publication, she invited the Colombian filmmaker to read the draft and comment on it. Marta Rodríguez objected that Suárez used the term “subaltern” when discussing her documentaries. For Rodríguez, to label as subalterns the workers, peasants, and indigenous leaders with whom she had maintained a nonhierarchical relationship while making her films was to imply that they were inferior to her. Suárez explained the different implications of the term in the United States academy, but its meaning was not negotiable for Rodríguez. Finally, the scholar decided to substantially modify her text to incorporate the discussion and the concerns of the testimonial subject (65–67). It would have been much easier for Suárez to publish her findings without Rodríguez’s input, but that route would have defeated the ultimate goal of the essay; it would have gone against the first words in its title, “Prácticas de solidaridad.”

Domna Stanton must have had similar situations in mind when, in her column titled “Human Rights and the Humanities,” she highlighted the developments since the 1970s that have led us to increasingly reject “an imperial humanitarian voice speaking and acting ‘for’ oppressed others in favor of speaking ‘with’ them as agents in their own right” (3). Today “speaking with” is still largely understood not as jointly addressing the audience but as reporting unilaterally the results of that conversation. As long as the act of speaking with does not disclose in the final results what words and concepts were contributed to the debate by the other, the prepositional shift may be moot. When considering the contributions of testimonial subjects who have survived the repression, a shift from *speaking* to *listening* might prove useful. If we listen, we will realize that, contrary to Sarlo’s belief

(64–84), many texts do not resist ideological analysis but beg for it; they do not claim to deliver the truth but just want to be included in the conversation.

Yet we can only “speak without” those who have not survived. The Mexican author and intellectual Rosario Castellanos can lead us in that quest. More than thirty years ago, she wrote in “El retorno” (“The Return”):

So, then, [they] do not ask me
to live for them.
To see the world they do not see, to body
forth a destiny left incomplete.

If I need justification
for existing, for doing
and, above all, for not erasing myself
(which would be logical based on the evidence)
I will have to obtain it some other way.

Así pues, no me piden
que yo viva por ellos,
que mire el mundo que no ven, que lleve
adelante un destino que no alcanzó a
cumplirse.

Si necesito justificaciones
para estar, para hacer
y, sobre todo, para no borrarirme
(que sería lo lógico siguiendo las premisas)
habrá que conseguirlas de otro modo.

NOTE

1. For an appreciation of the scope of this discussion in the United States, see *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*. The volume, edited by Arturo Arias, illuminates many aspects of a debate largely centered on the credibility of the Nobel Prize laureate and survivor Rigoberta Menchú. I have discussed in greater detail the clash between *testimonio* and the academic world in my essay “On Being Shorter: How Our Testimonial Texts Defy the Academy.”

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