



Digital Commons@

Loyola Marymount University
LMU Loyola Law School

Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty
Works

Modern Languages and Literatures

Spring 2004

The Blindfold's Eyes: My Journey from Torture to Truth by Sister Dianna Ortiz with Patricia Davis (Review)

Alicia Partnoy

Loyola Marymount University, apartnoy@lmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/modernlang_fac



Part of the [Modern Languages Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Partnoy, Alicia. "The Blindfold's Eyes: My Journey from Torture to Truth (review)." *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 4.1 (2004): 110-112. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/scs.2004.0014>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages and Literatures at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu.

from it. Art historians will delight, as always, in Hamburger's eye for unusual, compelling images and hitherto neglected themes. Theologians and contemplatives may be startled into remembrance of a tradition that the modern Church has been, by and large, too timid to own. And, in an age infatuated by the claims of theory, it behooves us all to remember that in the Middle Ages, St. John the Divine personified not only the *imago Dei* but also "the ultimate exemplar of theoretical sophistication" (xxii).

BARBARA NEWMAN
Northwestern University

The Blindfold's Eyes: My Journey from Torture to Truth. By Sister Dianna Ortiz with Patricia Davis. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002. 484 pp. \$ 25.00.

"If you live to tell about this, if you somehow manage to survive, no one will believe you" (39). Is it because of these words, uttered by one of her torturers in a Guatemalan secret prison, that Sister Dianna Ortiz resorted to killing her past, losing any recollection of her previous life? After a day of excruciating torments that followed her blindfolded descent into an underworld of terror, she struggles to reconstruct the memories of her past, and to recover her sanity, while fighting for justice. Her case is emblematic of the risks that await those who opt to "walk with the poor." She is an Ursuline nun who has the certainty that her torturers and rapists were led by a fellow countryman, an American who goes by the name of Alejandro. The author draws strength to fight back from her outrage, and from a sense of duty toward the thousands of Guatemalans victimized by the deadly collaboration of the U.S. forces and the local army. "I am answerable for what my country has done and is doing . . . I have a responsibility to be vigilant and to speak out" (x), Ortiz explains.

The Blindfold's Eyes is a ground breaking book that succeeds in drawing from two seemingly opposite literary traditions: the Latin American *testimonio* and the North American memoir. At times the author is embarked on an individual quest, and like many memoirists, finds herself abandoned by all she deemed worthy of trust—her parents, her congregation, her God. Portrayed in a deeply reflective way, with vivid imagery, those moments alternate with episodes in which it is solidarity, rather than her own determination and unflinching spirit, that rescues the protagonist from destruction. She finds salvation only by recovering her sense of belonging to a community, be it the Liberation Theology movement, or that of survivors at the Kovler Center for torture victims in Chicago. Although the unveiling of truths seems to be at the center of this work, the real force that propels it is the rebuilding of a discourse of solidarity where all participants, including God, contribute to Sister Dianna's survival. At the end of her journey, she forgives God when she realizes that He "was working a quiet miracle all along, healing (her) through other people" (475).

Although a fixation with the truth value or the literariness of the testimonial text has prevailed in scholarly discussions, I maintain that the main feature of *testimonios* is the construction of a discourse of solidarity. In that sense, *The*

Blindfold's Eyes fits within the Latin American tradition. *Testimonio* has been inscribed and sanctioned as a literary mode in Latin America since the 1970's. In an essay published in *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*, John Beverly, an authority in the field, defines it as "a novel or novella-length narrative . . . told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts" (Georg Gubelberger, ed. [Durham: Duke University Press], 1996). Beverly points out that these texts do not evolve around a hero; rather, the narrator represents a social class or group. The form is inspired by the work of the Christian base communities (*comunidades cristianas de base*). They seek to empower the marginalized, validating their experiences, and using their stories to raise social consciousness. *Testimonio* has been further impacted by a closely related movement—Liberation Pedagogy, led by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. For Freire, literacy is fundamental to liberating the poor from oppression. His approach—which Latin American governments, with their centuries-long reliance on a more compliant church, have found very threatening—is echoed by Sister Ortiz in her correspondence to her spiritual director. The young nun reports about her literacy work with the K'anjobal-speaking children of Guatemala. She writes, "Today I think more about what I can learn from the children and the people of San Miguel, and less of what I think I can teach them or offer them. They open my eyes to the riches that they have to offer in spite of their youth, in spite of their circumstances!" (19). Pictures of the children in a Christmas procession and in the company of a buoyant Dianna Ortiz in 1988 contrast with those taken while reconstructing the events of her abduction in Guatemala five years later (209–210).

In *The Blindfold's Eyes*, letters act as a clever device to highlight the traumatic consequences of torture. Confronted with the erasure of her past, the victim needs to rely on any sources that document it. Photos, frequent quotes from newspaper articles and television programs, and excerpts from official documents, are but a few of the other ancillary materials that validate the story of the survivor. The book also quotes scholarly analysis by experts like Angela delli Sante, author of *Nightmare or Reality: Guatemala in the 80's* (Amsterdam: Thela Publishers, 1996), and Allan Nairn, a renowned reporter. The latter's keynote address to a 1990 conference against torture at the Catholic University in Washington D.C. alternates with Sister Dianna's reflections (180). This polyphony supports the voice and the story of the survivor. It also provides a historical and political framework, while simultaneously displaying the web of solidarity concerning the victim's plight.

Sister Dianna has recently visited our campus to lecture on the eclipses of God generated by her ordeal. I took that opportunity to discuss her collaboration with poet and human rights activist Pat Davis, who produced *The Blindfold's Eyes*. Ortiz alluded to Davis' encouragement to "show and not just tell." She also mentioned her most frequent "homework": to remember, and then write. The process took two excruciating years, but it has proven extremely successful. As the communications director of the Guatemala Human Rights Commission, Davis is uniquely positioned to evaluate the quality and quantity of information required by the American readers to understand the conflict at stake. It is however in the selection of Sister Dianna's journal entries, and in her discussion of the struggle to keep her faith alive, that Davis' coaching reveals the most impressive results. One journal entry, the harrowing account of Sister Dianna's first rape incident, illus-

trates Elaine Scarry's contentions in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). Scarry elaborates on the torturer's aim at disintegrating the victim's world. Sister Ortiz writes, "Then, he slices every nerve in me apart. God, stop, stop. He sighs with satisfaction, whispers into my ear: 'Gracias'. 'Your God,' he says, pulling himself up, 'is dead.'" As the rapes continue, "Each thrust pushes the Policeman's words deeper" (64). The victim's body is the site of her God; the awareness of Her destruction starts for Sister Dianna a deeply feminist process of resistance.

The Blindfold's Eye is ripe with moments when patriarchal approaches to politics, religion, health, and information are challenged. In another recent testimonial text, a former U.S.-educated Dominican nun and teacher, María Suárez Toro, also elaborates on the theme of resisting male authority. She discusses her torture at the hands of the Honduran military in 1982 (*When I Look Into the Mirror and See You: Women, Terror, and Resistance* by Margaret Randall [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003]). However, these testimonial texts by two U.S. Latina nuns could not be more different. Both books are extremely innovative because they are *testimonios* from Latin America, first published in English in the United States. Margaret Randall, whose dedication to collecting and disseminating the stories of the marginalized for the past forty years is paralleled only by the work of Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska, and Salvadorean poet Claribel Alegría, appears prominently in *When I Look Into the Mirror*. Randall's questions and comments are transcribed, her name is the one on the book cover. Davis, on the other hand, erases her "penprints" from *The Blindfold's Eyes*, like any American ghost writer would. In that respect, Randall's text is more rooted in the Latin American tradition, where a well known intellectual helps disseminate the story of those who otherwise would never be heard or published. The practice can sometimes backfire, and then, instead of building solidarity, the intellectual wrestles agency from the victims as in the introduction by interviewer Elisabeth Burgos-Debray to the paradigmatic Latin American *testimonio*, *I Rigoberta Menchú, an Indian Woman from Guatemala* (London: Verso, 1984).

Like Sister Dianna Ortiz, María Suárez Toro, Rigoberta Menchú and many others, I am a survivor of state terrorism who resorts to telling and writing about my ordeal. Our collective goal is to stop genocide and to push for justice in the cases of all crimes against humanity. Like them, I am aware that the truth of the torture survivor might not resemble any scientific, religious or legal truth. The density of the experience and an utmost sense of vulnerability have contaminated it. In the preface to her book, Sister Dianna states, "Every time I have spoken publicly about what happened to me in that secret prison in Guatemala, I have relived the experience. During the writing process, I have felt more in control . . . But the risks in writing are greater . . . Every answer I gave to the torturers was wrong; they tortured me more. And I learned that my words—even the truth—can betray me" (ix). Although there are no recipes for survival, Dianna Ortiz's insights highlight the healing value of reclaiming our voice after it has been shattered by torturers. The journey from torture to truth empowers the survivors only if the next step, justice, is taken by the international community.

ALICIA PARTNOY
Loyola Marymount University