

Multigenerational Responses to Genocide
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A Family Portrait¹



As a child I used to pose for
hours, hoping to see on my mother's canvas
a face that resembled mine. Instead, I learned
patience and a couple of things about art.

As a child she used to dream that
her parents were free again, holding hands
with her through the streets of a city terrorized by
genocide. Instead, she was forced to leave
her country to be able to hug them again.
She learned about loss, solidarity,
and the unmeasurable power of memory.

I am the daughter of doves
That disappeared into dust

.....

I have many friends and thirty thousand
Warrior angels to watch
Over my exiled skin.

.....

You will know me by this.
I am the daughter that never forgets.

Ruth Irupé Sanabria.

The Strange House Testifies

The thirty thousand angels that my daughter conjures up in her poem are the disappeared of Argentina, those hunted down, tortured, and killed by the military regime for embracing a different political credo.² Christians active in the Liberation Theology movement, Jews who had

¹ The subtitle is taken from the website published by Agricola in Germany
<http://www.nmartproject.net/partnoy/portrait.htm>

² Argentina's most recent dictatorship (1976-1983) disappeared about 30,000 people, mostly political dissidents, their families, and friends. Survivors were rarely released. After our time in secret detention centers, the regime usually sent us to maximum security prisons. Secret detention camp torturers and prison authorities drew their "inspiration" from the Nazis and from the training camps at the US sponsored School of the Americas, based, back then, in the Panama Canal Zone. National Security and Regional Security doctrines gelled in the criminal Condor Plan, sought to install a US-supported economic and political system in our region. The supremacy of capitalism

partaken in the kibutz experience, members of the Peronist Youth, the Revolutionary Workers Party, and other leftist organizations, they all had in common a strong belief in social justice. They, and their targeted families, belonged to a national group seeking social change.

The disappeared were kidnapped, taken to an unknown location, tortured and eventually killed. Their corpses were forever hidden in the deep ocean or in unmarked mass graves. Their children were systematically stolen from their surviving families, since their ideas, or a perceived genetic complicity pact rendered them unfit to raise those sons and daughters. My daughter and I are among a few lucky survivors. My parents recovered my girl from a neighbor's house, where the Army had left her after our kidnapping. Over five hundred children had their identities stolen by the dictatorship. We later learned that some were killed in captivity or when their parents resisted detention.

We credit our survival and release as refugees to international pressure and a strong domestic resistance movement which acquired further visibility in the figures of the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo.

My own mother, my daughter, and I have embraced art and poetry to tell the world about a genocidal campaign that still today, almost four decades later, is equivocally called "The Dirty War." The military government succeeded in perpetuating that nomenclature³ short for what, through propaganda and censorship, was engraved in the collective consciousness of our terrorized country as the "dirty war against subversion." However, we, the survivors of that

was at stake. Therefore, the "final solution," concocted by the dictatorial regimes to safeguard that system, called for the extermination of every individual and organization suspicious of political opposition.

³ here more information on recent and ongoing trials in Argentina, crimes against humanity, genocide, gendercide, reference from Kiernan's blood and soil, that chooses not even to mention the massacre in my country, just mentioned that discussions are taking place at "various international and national tribunals" p. 20

demonized population they aimed to destroy, today have our voices validated in court rooms. The cultural products born of our suffering are appreciated and respected by the younger generations.



Today, in many courts of law across the Argentine territory, the perpetrators who have not been spared by what we call biological impunity –their demise before justice is achieved, sit in rows behind hundreds of witnesses who present countless evidence of those crimes against humanity. Civilian accomplices, genocide instigators and propagandists, like the director of La Nueva Provincia newspaper in my hometown, or the priests who blessed the extermination weapons, are also summoned as defendants.

The trials against the perpetrators responsible for the secret detention camp where I was held, The Little School in Bahia Blanca, started uncannily on my daughter's birthday, June 28 (2011) and ended with a verdict on my granddaughter's birthday, December 17 (2013).⁴

My attention to these dates and our multigenerational performances⁵ might be better understood in the context of Gottfried Bloch's struggle against what he calls "unfree associations." Bloch, a psychoanalyst and holocaust survivor describes how his experiences in a concentration camp have returned to his memory in a painful, overpowering way, "intruding into present joy...magnifying (his) anxieties of tomorrow..."(3). To recover his strength he has turned to Heinz Kohut's definition of "the time axis" as the subjective inner sense of continuity of time within a person's life,

Reestablishing such continuity after the kind of traumatic fragmentation I experienced was an important part of my return to a fulfilling life. The continuity of the time axis from its roots in the past connects to the future and relates to fulfilling one's earlier goals.p.4.

In our case, the multigenerational testimony is a powerful resistance strategy to confront the trauma of family desintegration due to disappearance, imprisonment, and exile

⁴ here observation and brief discussion of Annette Wieviorka's concepts from *The Era of the Witness*, about how no longer in these cases the delegation of witnessing takes place, as opposed to the initial trials back in the early 80's.

⁵ here a brief account of our collaborations and performing witnessing events with my mother and daughter.

When in prison, I shared with other mothers who had been separated from their children, my own poems to Ruth. In that sense, as Frieda Aaron has brilliantly observed, we then wrote poems "less as a means of self-expression than as succor, a vehicle of mitigating daily disasters."p. 3. The immediate role of testimonial poems was to contribute to our survival in its most basic meaning: to sooth the victim's pain so she can make it to the next day, the next hour. Frieda Aaron's analysis in *Bearing the Unbearable. Yiddish and Polish Poetry in the Ghettos and Concentration Camps*, illuminated my own study of poetry written by genocide survivors and their relatives in the Southern Cone. Our testimonial poetry was too, frequently born from the impulse of easing the pain of others, which in turn helped mitigate the poet's own pain.

I will share a poem written at the Villa Devoto prison in Buenos Aires, after my time in the secret detention center. Although we could occassionally send poems to our relatives, this one was not allowed to leave Villa Devoto, it was returned to me with a stamp that read:

“Censored. Marxist Contents.”

To my Daughter: Letter from Prison

I
Listen:
My throat befriends the winds
to reach you
dear gentle heart, new eyes.
Listen:
place your ear to a sea shell,
or to this infamous prison phone,
and listen.

The reason is so simple,
so pure,
like a drop of water
or a seed
that fits in the palm of your hand.
The reason is so very simple:
I could not
stop fighting for the happiness
of those who our brothers our sisters. (23)

When I read this poem at American University, my mother, Raquel Partnoy, followed my reading with this poem she had written about the experience of visiting me at that prison, ⁶

Behind the High Facade

At 1 p.m.

Thieves to the right ! Subversives to the left !
We – subversives, comfortably line up
on the sidewalk along the high cement facade
washed by the falling rain.
The guard at the prison's gate, after
such a friendly welcome,
gesticulates to emphasize the necessity
of putting order in that exemplary place
while letting the line on the right side in,
which seems to have come in time.

At 3 p.m.

We gently are invited to enter the building
and are sent to the inspection rooms.
Woman warden, with delicate fingers, touches us
everywhere to check if we brought dangerous items.
That's a very important thing to do.
My three year old granddaughter
could have forgotten to leave at home the razor
blades and little knives she usually plays with
and bring them beneath her underwear
or maybe hidden in her body.

At 4 p.m.

Sure the line on the right side is in time.
They are sent directly to visit the prisoners.
Our line is sent to the prison's chapel, to wait,
and enjoy the place for hours.
When we tell the guard who passes by

⁶ Written initially in English, to add emotional distance to her process of remembering the trauma, the poem has been recently translated and published in Spanish in my hometown and it is included in my mother's first poetry collection: *Ciudad de rojos horizontes*, published at 81.

we are thirsty he, with a big smile
and very friendly, answers,
Go and ask God for water !

At 6 p.m.

Two guards come and ask us to follow them.
While walking through open gates
we smell the fresh meat aroma– a cook is carrying
in a cart, to prepare the prisoners’ dinner.
I look around to see if a bathroom is available.
When I ask the guards about that . . .they say that we just
arrived at the visiting room. He let us go in first
and shuts the door from outside, with a pad-lock.

My daughter, Ruth Irupé Sanabria, heard this poem for the first time at that event. She stood in
awe, and afterward proceeded to share what she had written about the same event, a section of a
longer poem titled “O Infamous Window,”

there were no water fountains or coke machines
in the courtyard waiting area
and most prisoners were called *los comunes*
because they were common thieves and murderers.

bottom line, sister, their relatives were allowed chairs and shade.

and “courtyard waiting area” is a bit generous
to describe where we waited.
we were not there for *los comunes*.

we stood against the endless prison wall,
on the outside, for all the better eyes to watch
our good clothes turn rank,
our clean faces salt.
we hated the eye back.

ask God for water! a guard spat
at a daughter of *los subversivos*
and there is nothing infantile or hollywood
about why. The longest finger of the crusades.

and so when the hour came, we marched
family per family into the church

that sanctified the prison, and then, out
and straight into the box
where all the demons were kept
and when we were in, we were in
and they closed the door. (13)

While we were reading, my mother's paintings were projected on a screen. Our works entered a new deep dialogue that helped us deal with the memories, and gave meaning to our suffering.⁷

Other Dialogues, Other Families

Other survivors recreate in their writings a multigenerational perspective. Such is the case of María del Carmen Sillato in her book *Diálogos de amor contra el silencio: Memorias de prisión, sueños de libertad*. Sillato, whom I befriended in that prison the previous poems evoked, had given birth in captivity. Her son, Gabriel, was returned to her family. *Diálogos* (Love Dialogues Against Silence) published three decades after the events, is a collage including letters from prison and two private journals. The first diary is a literary device, where Sillato reconstructs her life back then, and the second, written in the 70's by her sister Chary, takes the baby's voice and persona to tell his mother about his new life away from her. Even when Gabriel's voice is fictionalized in this book, his encouragement to have it published was a decisive element in its elaboration.⁸ The family's initiative to publish this work, amounts to reclaiming the events despite their traumatic nature. It echoes Dori Laub's words, "The event

⁷ Here: research on other multigenerational testimonies.

⁸ Personal communication with María del Carmen Sillato July 12, 2014.

must be reclaimed because even if successfully repressed, it nevertheless invariably plays a decisive formative role in who one comes to be, and in how one comes to live one's life. (86)⁹

In Sillato's book we can see the construction of an inner listener, a mediator so the readers can learn about the suffering endured by prisoners and their families.(here quotes from the book). This dialogue between the actual letters written by the mother to Gabriel back then and Chary's "Gabriel's Diary" exemplifies what Chilean scholar Rene Jara, had stated in his pioneer book on Latin American testimonial texts. For him testimonial texts, "go beyond [offering] an interpretation of reality. . . [they] are traces of the real, of that story that cannot be expressed as such. The image inscribed in the *testimonio* is the material vestige of the victimized subject"(2)¹⁰

Collective Testimonial Texts

That material vestige gains strength when the testimony is conveyed from the perspectives of generations of witnesses.¹¹ Letters from prison serve as evidence of those connections, as bridges to reconstruct memories, and as material vestiges of that past that needs to be remembered so Never Again becomes a reality. Letters sent sent from that Villa Devoto prison mentioned in our poems, are the most important feature of the book *Nosotras, presas políticas. 1974-1983*¹²[We, Women Political Prisoners].With introductory essays contextualizing historically and politically each chapter, and additional documentation in a CD, it provides a deep insight into the lives and beliefs of the over 1200 women who spent years in

⁹ He furthermore asserts, "The testimony is, therefore, the process by which the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as a witness: reconstitutes the internal "thou", and thus the possibility of a witness or a listener inside himself."(85) Here more analysis of this, and research on other texts.

¹⁰ My translation. Here connect with Laura Levitt's research on "holding" objects from the past.

¹¹ "Generations of Witnesses" are words borrowed from the title of a class I taught with Holy Levitsky and Kitty Dukakis, on the Holocaust, the Armenian and the Latin American genocides.

detention. This unique book, the collective work of 112 former Villa Devoto political prisoners, includes letters, writings and illustrations produced in captivity, and personal narratives written afterwards.¹³ This project had been initiated by Mariana Crespo, a former political prisoner with active participation in the Liberation Theology movement.¹⁴ Crespo had in turn been motivated by her encounter with a Holocaust survivor, as reported by co-editor Viviana Beguán,

Around the year 1998, Darío Olmo, from the anthropologists, invited some of us. . . to tell him about our prison experiences, since from the testimonials they had collected, they could detect a collective experience that was, for them, of great importance. . .Mariana had just returned from Europe, where she had interviewed a concentration camp survivor who had spoken to her about the importance of memory, of writing, of telling... She took the proposal into her own hands and called a meeting to write the book. . .¹⁵

Three years earlier, another a polyphonic¹⁶ testimonial text similar in its editorial dynamics, but radically different in its tone and content, was published. Embracing the need to produce a collective account, and inspired by the writings of Holocaust survivor Jorge Semprún, a hundred and fifty Argentine genocide survivors, socialized, remembered, and wrote. They had all shared years in isolation at the Coronda penitentiary, a high security facility in the North Eastern province of Santa Fe. In 2003 they published together *Del otro lado de la mirilla. Olvidos y Memorias de ex Presos Políticos de Coronda. 1974-1979* (The Other Side of the Peephole. Things Forgotten and Remembered by Coronda Former Political Prisoners). Their narratives are seamlessly assembled in a volume that reads like a novel. *Del otro lado de la*

¹³ For an extensive analysis of *Nosotras*, please see my article “Concealing God: How Argentine Women Political Prisoners Performed a Collective Identity.”

¹⁴ For an extended discussion of the role Liberation Theology, the Movement of Third World Priests (Sacerdotes para el tercer mundo), and the Base Communities (Comunidades cristianas de base), played in fighting for social justice and resisting dictatorships in Argentina, see Michael Burdick’s *For God and Fatherland*.

¹⁵ Personal communication.

¹⁶ Beverly’s term to allude to a testimonio “made up of accounts by different participantes in the same event”(28).

mirilla, was conceived as a literary endeavor.¹⁷ José Luis Hisi Paez, from the editorial team, reports,

In Buenos Aires, compañero Bas y Mansilla found a book that was almost the inspiring totem for the editors: *Literature or Life*, by the great Spanish writer Jorge Semprun. That book helped us understand why we got together so many years after the facts to write the Coronda book! And it reassured us on the path of a literary version.¹⁸

In *Literature or Life*, Semprún had written that after his liberation from Buchenwald he had questioned the “possibility of telling the story,” to finally realize that,

The only ones who will manage to reach this substance, this transparent density, will be those able to shape their evidence into an artistic object, a space of creation. Or of re-creation. Only the artifice of a masterly narrative will prove capable of conveying some of the truth of such testimony. But there’s nothing exceptional about this: it’s the same with all great historical experiences.”¹³

Those of us who produce and study testimonial texts might differ in our definitions of art, creation, or literature.¹⁹ However, I am convinced that the building of a discourse of solidarity with the victims is what ultimately will empower those who chose to tell and will encourage others to share their experiences.²⁰

¹⁷ Other testimonial and literary texts produced by men former political prisoners have appeared in anthologies, like María del Carmen Sillato’s *Huellas*, the book *Eslabones*, concentrating on the experience of survivors from the Córdoba province, and most recently *La risa no se rinde*, that includes excerpts from the Coronda narrative.

¹⁸ Personal communication. June 19, 2010.

¹⁹ Here reflect on Erin McGlothlin’s observations about literary character of memoir, and my own position: literary value, truth, are not the main features of testimonial texts. Instead, we should start looking at their central feature, which is the construction of a discourse of solidarity that empowers victims. Elaborate on discourse of solidarity and on solidarity pact after Philippe Lejeune’s autobiographical pact concept. Even when literary value helps the survivor in the sense that it provides a certain “economy of testifying,” because her word do not need to be uttered by her to preserve impact, saving her the emotional energy invested in the repetition of testimony.

²⁰ Here research on other collective testimonies from the Holocaust and other genocides.

After Justice, Silence, and A Musical Memorial²¹

Those responsible for the crimes against humanity connected to The Little School in my hometown of Bahia Blanca have finally been tried and imprisoned for their crimes. My voice and work were validated not only in the trials, where my book was presented as evidence, but by high level elected officials in my country. Then, I decided to take an year of silence from public lecturing. My silence has been broken only for two presentations at Bard College, with my mother and my daughter. At the first one, on International Women's Week, and in the framework of the Berkshire Festival of Women Writers, I performed this excerpt from my work in process. "Lidia. An Argentine Opera" is a tribute to Lidia Confeggi de Izurieta, the mother of Zulma and Graciela, who did not survive The Little School. Both active in the resistance movement, Zulma was my best friend from college, and Graciela, also very close, was pregnant when abducted from her home by the Army.

Lidia. An Argentine Opera (excerpt)²²

Let me embroider a ring around my silence
like a halo for Lidia, Santa Lidia,
with her old brown skinny dog
and her fat white and black cat
who eats from her kitchen table.

"Why did Dios let me live so long was it perhaps
to find Graciela's child, mi nieto?"

²¹ I just learned the concept of Musical Memorial from the archives of the Museum. Here more research on the concept, and operas written about the Holocaust and other genocides.

²² The video of the program "On the Side of Justice. Three Generations Paint and Write for Justice." Bard College at Simon's Rock. March 9, 2014. Please watch from minute 31 for my explanation and performance.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=USf90cjxEs8&feature=youtu.be>

Let me rather embroider a ring around my words
for Lidia:

A woven hat to give her warmth
amidst her solitude.

“Estoy tan sola,” she tells me on the phone,
“vos nunca me llamás, venime a ver.”

But when and how to call her
without making her cry,
or feigning laughter.

“You are like a daughter,” she explains,
“porque vos fuiste
amiga de las chicas.

They never made me cry,
we were so happy,
my girls and I were always like three sisters,
siempre riéndonos.”

Then I remember
her voice back
in nineteen seventy three:
Zulma and Graciela’s voices
return to be.

“You are like a daughter for me.”
“A terribly bad daughter don’t you agree?
“It’s not so,” she replays
“look what you did today!”

It’s true I paid that *remisero* dearly
to drive me for two hours
into the country side and back
so I could have *mahte con facturas*
and bring Lidia poster size pics of her daughters
commissioned by the Mayor of the little county of Villarino
a bunch of towns lost somewhere in this province.

It is true I paid that taxi driver dearly
to bring me here and back in a few hours
so I could tell Lidia of all the tributes
people have been paying to her daughters
thirty seven years after their kidnapping
after the terror
after they kept so silent.

It is true I paid that remisero dearly
to bring me here --now that is rush hour
in these highways surrounding Buenos Aires,
and back before midnight so I can tell her
of those posters of her daughters decorating
the high school they attended before college,
before the seventies, before the time I met them
when social change, an apple in our hands,
deliciously was luring us.

Let me embroider a ring around my silence
like a halo for Lidia, Santa Lidia,
with her old brown skinny dog
and her fat white and black cat
who eats from her kitchen table.
“Why did Dios let me live so long was it perhaps
to find Graciela’s child, mi nieto?
Why did He leave me alone on this Earth
will there be Justice?
will there be Justice?

Decime Alicia, ¿vos crees que habrá Justicia?
Decime Alicia, ¿vos crees que habrá Justicia?

Researching on multigenerational responses to genocide is my next project, and performing them has proven healing and empowering for myself and the people I love: my mother, my daughter, and hopefully Lidia too.

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