

Testimony: Beyond the Language of Truth

Nora Strejilevich*

ABSTRACT

Tension exists between the ways in which testimonies voice their truth, and the expectations readers or listeners have regarding what truth means and how it should be voiced. Society favors systematizing testimony as a collection of facts whereas testimony after genocide does not abide by the rules established by the scientific/academic/legal apparatus. Rather, it voices the intimate, subjective, deep dimension of horror. Having witnessed the abyss of atrocity, survivors can no longer rely on knowledge or facts as the basis for thinking. It is mostly in the realm of literature where recounting becomes an elaboration of language so that it can invoke the true nature of the "event."

Based on authors such as Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt, Ariel Dorfman, Shoshana Felman, Dominique LaCapra, Dori Laub, and Walter Benjamin, this article underscores the role of testimony as a means for working through traumatic memories and for social and cultural resistance—a must for the ethical recovery of a community after the experience of utmost exclusion.

What happened to us left a print that will endure for several generations. History is not one's own history, something which only one of us lived. It is a history in reverse that you can become familiar with or not, but your life, until you die, has to do with that . . .

* Nora Strejilevich is an Argentinean writer who survived state terror in her country (1977) and found political asylum in Canada. She is currently a professor of Latin American Literature at San Diego State University. Her testimonial novel *Una sola muerte numerosa* was granted the Letras de Oro National Award and published in the USA both in Spanish (1997) and English (*A Single Numberless Death*, 2001). She has also published essays, short stories, and a testimony, "About Survivals." Her most recent book is *El arte de no olvidar: literatura testimonial en Chile, Argentina y Uruguay entre los 80 y los 90* [The Art of Not Forgetting: Testimonial Literature in Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay Between the 1980s to 1990s] (2006).

what happened is so serious that the consequences endure, it's an unresolved issue, that returns again and again.¹

If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the Epistle and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony.²

The world we inhabit has turned into a place where music is used to cover up screams in torture sessions; where the line of demarcation separating the saved from the drowned becomes a confession, a story told to delay death. Why do survivors of such a sinister scenario insist on telling their story, and what type of story do they tell? "The need to tell our story to 'the rest,' to make 'the rest' participate in it, has taken on for us, before our liberation and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse."³ It could be said that even if the words "never again" were only the shape of a hope never to be achieved, witnesses will "always again" tell their story and remember, they will "always again" insist on memory. This is not because they can give precise data about horror. But maybe because they are speaking for the ones who did not return, and their suffering would be meaningless if this story was silenced.

I simply couldn't understand why I couldn't get this through their heads: . . . now I can't content myself with assuming that it all was a mistake, an aberration, some sort of an accident or that, in some way, it never really happened. I could see, I could see clearly that they didn't understand me and that my words were not to their liking, that some even annoyed them outright . . . and I heard him say: "Let him be. Don't you see he just wants to talk?"

And I did talk, possibly in vain and possibly a little incomprehensibly. Still, I did try to get myself across to them: "We can never start a new life. . . . Do you want all this horror and all my previous steps to lose their meaning entirely?"⁴

Witnesses of utmost abuse do need to share their stories, but "the rest" does not always want to hear. Primo Levi recalls a German guard reminding prisoners that even if they survived and wanted to give their accounts, nobody would believe them.⁵ Maybe this fear is the reason why, upon developing the testimonial, survivors attempt to create essential pathways that translate the language of the concentration camp onto the language of the "outside" world to which they have been thrown again, and where they want to actually return.

1. NOEMÍ CICILARO, *PAJAROS SIN LUZ: TESTIMONIOS DE MUJERES DE DESAPARECIDOS* 144 (1999)(Testimony of Sonia Severini as translated by the author).
2. Elie Wiesel, *The Holocaust as a Literary Inspiration*, in *DIMENSIONS OF THE HOLOCAUST* 9 (1977) reprinted in Shoshana Felman, *Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching*, in *TESTIMONY: CRISIS OR WITNESSING IN LITERATURE, PSYCHOANALYSIS, AND HISTORY* 5–6 (1992).
3. PRIMO LEVI, *SURVIVAL IN AUSCHWITZ: THE NAZI ASSAULT ON HUMANITY* 5–6 (Macmillan, 1961).
4. IMRE KERTÉSZ, *FATELESS* 188–89 (1992).
5. LEVI, *supra* note 3, at 54.

In one of the excursions to the outside world that some prisoners experienced during their life as disappeared people in Argentina, one of the survivors of the Olympus and other concentrations camps, Mario Villani, had this insight in relation to their particular use of language.

With a couple of guards, we were taken to Chacabuco Park. We must have been a very strange-looking group, given where we'd come from Afterward they took us to one of the cafés that bordered the park We sat around this table, drinking and talking about things going on at Olympus. For a moment I thought, "What if someone overhears us?" Then I realized that no one could have understood what we were talking about—we were speaking in code, as it were. Not deliberately, it was just how we spoke then. And it hit me: Here I am, sitting at a café—out in the world, but not a part of it. Not a member. In the night and fog of Argentina, [the interviewer adds], language itself became a prison.⁶

Upon liberation, survivors who wanted to transmit their stories had to rephrase this code and create, for themselves and their listeners, a language that could make sense for the outside world that could be understood. They would engage in the translation not only of the language but also of the gestures, the nuances able to provide a subjective dimension to collective trauma.

One of the first things I came to learn about Mario and other "*ex-desaparecidos*" said Rosita, was that they relate to words differently. . . . They communicated differently, minimally. They'd had to develop a minimal way of making contact. Gestures, looks, signals that in normal life would go unnoticed . . . means of communication they were able to discern in whom they could trust and in whom they could not.⁷

However, in spite of survivors' efforts to translate their memories, there is a distance between the way testimonies demand to voice their truth, and the expectations readers or listeners have regarding what truth means and how it should be voiced. Testimony, as every product in our culture, is often seen as a commodity that must provide practical use. Society wants to use witnesses' accounts as evidence, and testimonies are condemned in case they do not match evidence collected by other means.⁸ At this point testimonies' limitations become obvious, and they suddenly seem inappropriate and outdated.

The essential meaning of testimony is lost when defined as a means to provide information and knowledge based on facts. Testimony, rather, can "furnish documentation for a quiet study of certain aspects of the human

6. MARGUERITE FEJLDMITZ, *A LEXICON OF TERROR: ARGENTINA AND THE LEGACIES OF TORTURE* 83 (1998).

7. *Id.*

8. This is in reference to the dispute between David Stoll and John Beverley in relation to *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú y Así me Nació la Conciencia*. JOHN BEVERLEY, *TESTIMONIOS: ON THE POLITICS OF TRUTH* xiv–xv (2004).

mind,"⁹ aspects that develop under specific circumstances, when human beings are excluded from society so that sovereign power may assert itself. Testimony exposes utmost exclusion when it attempts to speak for the dead by "delegation" (because witnesses of absolute destruction cannot bear witness), even knowing that nobody can testify for the witness. In this context, a witness account that is not allowed to voice the intimate, subjective, real dimension of horror should not be called testimony but rather, a deposition.¹⁰

Memories of horror are not accurate, and witnesses who testify in front of a jury have to reshape their traumatic recollections to fit the requirements of the law, which demands precision.¹¹ A truthful way of giving testimony should allow for disruptive memories, discontinuities, blanks, silences and ambiguities;¹² it should become literary.

When a survivor returns from the never-ending present of the concentration camp to the "normal" world, that recent past suddenly acquires a dreamlike quality. Remembrances can be of smell and sound, scenes appear and disappear as in a dream. Links with our "everyday" present seem to be missing. The witness attempts to create bridges between "here" and "there" through the narration of what might not be told as a theory but as an insight. It is for this reason that a poetic voice might be needed to tell the story.

Having witnessed the abyss of atrocity, survivors often find themselves reclaiming memories that resist the rigidity of the truth since they can no longer rely on knowledge or facts as the basis for thinking. Moreover, "the risk of talking is evident: if that what is alluded to is inconceivable, every word will be faulty and will be marked by despair."¹³ It is only by first mak-

9. Levi, *supra* note 3, at 5.

10. Ricardo Forster, *El imposible testimonio: Celan en Derrida*, 8 PENSAMIENTO DE LOS CONFINES 77, 79 (2000).

11. Dori Laub's case of the woman survivor "relating her memories as an eyewitness of the Auschwitz uprising" is a good example of this point. "She was fully there. 'All of sudden,' she said, 'we saw four chimneys going up in flames, exploding. The flames shot into the sky, people were running. It was unbelievable.'" Laub mentions that later on, in a conference of historians, psychoanalysts, and artists, her testimony generated debate. According to the historians, it was not accurate, since the number of chimneys was misrepresented, and thus her account was fallible, since accuracy was crucial. In their view, "the limits of the woman's knowledge in effect called into question the validity of her whole testimony." Laub disagreed. In his view, she testified to the breakage of a framework, and this was historical truth. "She had come, indeed, to testify, not to the empirical number of the chimneys, but to resistance, to the affirmation of survival, to the breakage of the frame of death." Dori Laub, *Bearing Witness of the Vicissitudes of Listening*, in TESTIMONY: CRISES OF WITNESSING IN LITERATURE, PSYCHOANALYSIS, AND HISTORY, *supra* note 2, at 57, 59-62.

12. According to Lawrence L. Langer, "oral Holocaust testimonies are doomed . . . to remain disrupted narratives . . . by the quintessence of the experiences they record." LAWRENCE L. LANGER, *Preface of LAWRENCE L. LANGER, HOLOCAUST TESTIMONIES: THE RUINS OF MEMORY* (1991).

13. Héctor Shmucler, *Ni Siquiera un Rostro*, 3 PENSAMIENTO DE LOS CONFINES 10 (1996).

ing peace with the impossibility of comprehension that one can ever begin to comprehend at all. But how can a survivor actually learn about his/her immersion in that sinister world? When witnessing an event, one does not learn through abstract rational theory: testimony can provide knowledge mainly by means of the exemplary.

Through the example one . . . comes to knowledge in the manner of the witness, not through the abstractions of reason but through an empirical encounter . . . the example is the *contemplatio* not of an abstract but of a concrete drama whose action takes place in history . . . It is a “putting-in-front-of-our-eyes” . . . an “indication.”¹⁴

For prisoners who, after becoming a number, slowly forgot their identities in order to focus on hunger and pain; for prisoners without a name who abruptly returned to “normality” and recovered their lost identities; their narrative is one more example (*para-digma*) of the state of exception imposed by totalitarianism.

According to Giorgio Agamben, the origin of totalitarianism can be traced through the legal notion of “state of exception,” imposed by the Roman Empire as a response to threats to the nation, destined to protect it during limited frames of time. This mechanism, created to allow fast reactions in the face of danger posed from outside, started to be imposed to protect societies from “internal enemies,” and has become a way for the state to threaten its own citizens. The “state of exception”—applied in our Western societies since World War II—has become the rule. Sovereign power asserts itself through the exclusion of certain individuals from citizenship, from their lives as social beings. Once human beings are artificially reduced to a biological state or “pure life” (*zoe*), no law applies to them. At this point they can be either liberated or disappeared, since they are at the mercy of sovereign power, whose absolute reign is called a concentration camp. Needless to say, the state of exception is at the core of totalitarian regimes, which can develop even under democratic regimes.¹⁵

Paradoxically, in the last twenty-five years after the Nuremberg Trials, and in spite of the efforts to remember the Holocaust as the paradigm of evil that humanity should never reach again, the extent to which such machinery has expanded exceeds any prediction. International law seems the most visible challenge to this situation, since various countries have signed agreements for the prevention of torture and genocide. But these attempts—even if they have allowed humanity to recover a sense of itself as humanity—have not

14. Steven D. DeCaroli, *Visibility and History: Giorgio Agamben and the Exemplary*, 45 *PHIL. TODAY: THINKING IN ACTION* 9, 9–17 (2001).

15. *GIORGIO AGAMBEN, STATE OF EXCEPTION* 2–3 (Kevin Attell trans., Univ. of Chicago Press 2005)(2003).

succeeded in putting an end to the re-edition of atrocities.¹⁶ It is my contention that the truth told in testimony, even if it cannot stop the reiteration of such crimes, is one of the reservoirs of dignity left for humanity. It is in this sense that I agree with Ariel Dorfman when he writes:

Each testimony—and above all, all of them together, their extraordinary abundance—extends a certain concept of man and of woman opposite to the one exercised and cultivated by the torturers. Having fulfilled their duty, having given a sense and a reason to the rage and to the humiliation they have suffered, becomes in the secret source of all the accounts, a very concrete form to reiterate their ethical superiority in the face of totalitarianism.¹⁷

This ethical superiority might come as a process, not as a given, and should not be idealized. Witnesses have to find words to explain their own ordeal, as a way to re-create their divided self (*zoe/citizen*). It is through this effort that they can place themselves back into the time and space—frame of society, allowing for the past to become past instead of remaining a haunting present. Yet, of course, this is only the force moving the writing and the telling, since there is never a self that can be recovered. What is recovered is dignity after systematic degradation.

While historians work with documents, witnesses' truth does not abide by the rules established by the scientific/academic/legal apparatus, because, again, testimony does not belong to the realm of knowledge; it actually cannot speak without losing track of itself, since it names intolerable destruction.¹⁸ Nevertheless, its role is unique. Horror wants to erase all traces of the "enemy" so that history can pretend "the other" never existed. Testimony, instead, keeps traces alive, defeating annihilation by working through loss. Even if testimony feels defeated in its endeavor, it is an effective way of working through traumatic loss: "Historical losses can conceivably be avoided

16. At this particular time in history research and legal prosecution of crimes against humanity related to South American disappearances is at its peak—the task has become global. For instance, Judge Garzón has prosecuted Chilean and Argentine military responsible for the "Condor Plan" (a secret organization established by the State Terror regimes of Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Brazil, which facilitated the "mass murder corporation" teamwork during the 1970s). Garzón's attempt to extradite Pinochet, the Plan's main leader, from England for his prosecution in Spain was part of this project. Even if Pinochet finally returned to Chile and recovered his freedom, his image and status changed dramatically. The symbolic power of the dictator was shattered. "Long condemned as a pariah abroad, Pinochet has now been abandoned by his friends at home. The legacy he hoped for among his own military and the Chilean elite has *desaparecido*—disappeared, like so many of his victims. Today, Pinochet is as close as he has ever been to being prosecuted for crimes ranging from 'illicit enrichment' to international terrorism." Peter Kombluh, *Pinochet Stripped*, *THE NATION*, 27 Sept. 2004.

17. ARIEL DORFMAN, *SOME WRITE TO THE FUTURE: ESSAYS ON CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICAN FICTION* 137 (1991).

18. Forster, *supra* note 10, at 77.

or, when they occur, at least in part compensated for, worked through, and even to some extent overcome."¹⁹

Due to the fact that genocide is not a constitutive feature of existence but a historical event that could be avoided, testimony is not only a means for working through but, also a means for social and cultural resistance, which is necessary for the ethical recovery of a community. Still, testimony is unable to provide a large supply of what society values as truthful, namely, accurate data (although some survivors have been able to report names and descriptions which were crucial for the conviction of torturers). How then, can testimony that is voiced in a language not considered trustworthy, be trusted?

Testimony—even if it depicts a group experience—shares with autobiography the tacit pact of truth established by Philippe Lejeune between writers and readers of this genre. A pact following these lines seems quite straightforward; however, conflict is prone to arise between witness and audience. Coherence with what happened is an ethical responsibility of the witness, thus the accusation of lack of ethics in the face of any inaccuracy is authorized. Whereas the witness, as in the case of the survivor cited by Dori Laub, is not only unable to be accurate but also incapable of exhibiting all the horror, which can only filter between the lines of what is narrated, the reader might even demand a form shaped by media strategies, namely, total exposure.

Another aspect of the conflict posed between witness and readers by the pact of truth is that the narration of history is always already an interpretation. Even historical discourse—which hides the historians' viewpoint while a third person narrator tells the story, allowing for it to look objective—is an interpretation.²⁰ This fact becomes more evident in testimonial narrative because experience is told from an intimate perspective, often through the voice of a first person narrator. In this case, how can "lies" be distinguished from "personal perspectives?" How can a rigid distinction between fact and interpretation be sustained? "Facts" are always already interpreted in human

19. DOMINICK LACAPRA, *WRITING HISTORY, WRITING TRAUMA* 65 (2001).

20. Hayden White distinguishes between two ways of recounting history: the first registers reality while the second allows reality to speak for itself in an account characterized by use of a third-person narrator and past tense. These traits contribute to a quasi objectivity since the omission of any reference to the actual narrator appears to allow facts to speak for themselves. Nevertheless, this type of history, familiar since the nineteenth century, recounts events using techniques of literary narration, such as the invention of beginnings, middles, and endings and the creation of plots and heroes. Clearly, its objectivity is questionable. Narrating history by means of fictional devices, which is what history does, shows its capacity to give meaning to the past. Just as fiction offers meaning through the manipulation of imaginary events, cultural fictions produce meaning when applied to reality. HAYDEN WHITE, *THE CONTENT OF THE FORM: NARRATIVE DISCOURSE AND HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION* 45 (1988).

speech, and any given historical event is subject to multiple meanings. In the case of testimony, interpretation is part of the process because we are dealing with memories and with language. Nevertheless, witnesses are testifying to true experiences and are expected to tell what “really” happened to them. Are we not dealing with a Catch 22 situation?

The reference of testimony to events is itself problematic because “testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference.”²¹ Because the so-called experience cannot even be assimilated, one can argue that “massive trauma precludes its registration; the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction.”²²

The actual experience only happens belatedly, as a “performative speech act,” through the process of telling the story to another, a listener.

The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to—and heard—is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the “knowing” of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer.²³

Moreover, telling the story to a listener is one way for witnesses to work through the trauma.

In acting out, the past is performatively regenerated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription, and it hauntingly returns as the repressed. Mourning involves a different inflection of performativity: a relation to the past which involves recognizing its difference from the present.²⁴

This relation to the past hearkens back to an old debate, the one about the relation between events and narrative. One can, following Hayden White, say that narrative gives form to events. A plot is always imposed upon facts and thus, all “truth” presupposes a degree of fictionalization. Every historical discourse is produced as a story, which does not diminish the true value of what is being narrated.

However, most witnesses seem to disavow the relationship between fiction and history. After their liberation takes place, they engage in testifying without being totally aware of these distinctions. Generally, the first thing they forget is that there is no memory of the past without interpretation. More precisely, incontrovertible memory is itself a fiction. Another is that not even trauma can be described without recourse to a narrative structure.

21. Felman, *supra* note 2, at 5.

22. Laub, *supra* note 11, at 57.

23. *Id.*

24. LaCapra, *supra* note 19, at 70.

Some testimonial writers—in the belief that fictionalization diminishes the impact of horror—insist that their accounts are genuine reflections of reality. The desire for verisimilitude imposes itself in para-textual devices where the testimonial quality of the material is enhanced. For instance, in his prologue to *Tejas Verdes*, Hernán Valdés is annoyed with those who congratulate him for his new “novel,” when they very well know that he is telling a “real” story. It is of great consequence to him to be read as a testimonial author who might use a few literary devices. Valdés recounts the story of his detention in a concentration camp in Chile during the Pinochet era, via a fictional diary in which the prisoner registers his experiences. Although he was a writer of fiction before being kidnapped by the military, he does not want to be considered one in this case. What compels him is “to give voice to a recent personal yet shared experience which might have remained buried beneath the bodies of countless victims, which might have remained stifled beneath the weight of journalistic verbiage.”²⁵ This text should count as testimony, not as a literary piece. The author distinguishes his account from both journalism and fiction: “My book aims to produce an immediate reaction in the reader, to incite him/her, to solicit his/her solidarity with respect to concrete events.”²⁶

In short, ethical demands lead the narrator to stress the reality of events, but these very demands frequently cause him to disregard the role of memory, closely linked with exploration and imagination. Objectivity is identified as the verifiable referent preceding discourse, although witnesses mostly do not refer to events that can be proven: the referent has vanished, since perpetrators of genocide systematically erase it. Testimony seems to become the proof of what has happened, and this situation inspires narrators’ emphasis on the objectivity of their accounts.

I believe that, by falling into the snare of objectivity, testimony betrays itself. Testimony, again, does not contribute facts but rather incomplete memories that are often imprecise and shaped by fear. Since abuse, persecution, annihilation, and suffering are all true, testimonial discourse should focus on its capacity to transmit these certainties, thus enhancing its role, while confronting the assumptions that limit its power. In short, testimony should stress just truthfulness, not objectivity. As Jorge Luis Borges’ “Emma Zunz” concludes,

The story was unbelievable, yes—and yet it convinced everyone, because in substance it was true. Emma Zunz’s tone of voice was real, her shame was real, her hatred was real. The outrage that had been done to her was real, as well; all that was false were the circumstances, the time, and one or two proper names.²⁷

25. HERNÁN VALDES, *TEJAS VERDES: DIARIO DE UN CAMPO DE CONCENTRACIÓN EN CHILE* 7 (1979).

26. *Id.* at 8–9.

27. Jorge Luis Borges, *Emma Zunz*, in E. ALPHI 69, 77 (1969) (author’s translation).

Losses need to be specified or named for mourning as a social process to be possible after mass-produced death.²⁸ When death becomes anonymous, an extension of technology and statistics following a bureaucratic model, an unutterable loss for humanity is in process. Arendt called it "the banalization of evil," based on the use of "aseptic, banal principles dictated by science (biological or administrative)."²⁹ Witnesses who feel the need to speak up will not choose to use the very concepts and language of their murderers, who based their strategies in precise calculations destined to eradicate an obstacle—Jews, homosexuals, gypsies, communists, subversives.

Witness accounts are important to the effort of defying attempts to disappear the past and absolve those responsible for systematic torture and murder, but they are even more crucial in their "obsession to tell the one macro-narrative of human existence under very contemporary conditions of absolute terror,"³⁰ since humanity needs atonement after its own eruption of evil. The best of these macro-narratives are, according to Alejandro Kaufman, those showing their own impossibility, resonating in us with their nightmare of impotence and silence in the face of horror.³¹

Literary testimonies do not tell the story the way the witness had seen it or the way s/he had told it in oral accounts. We never say what we see, nor do we see what we say, neither do we write what we see and what we say. There is, rather, a confrontation between seeing, saying, and writing, and literary creation is always playing within these contrasts. What comes out of such a confrontation is an artistic endeavor in which ethics and aesthetics coincide. A literary approach to testimony allows for a distancing in relation to the intimate memories. The way to create an account of this sort is to piece together the fragments, the ruins of spared recollections in order to produce some meaning. Rather than knowledge, the witness/writer searches for understanding. This attempt becomes evident, among others, in *Tejas Verdes; Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number (Preso sin nombre, celda sin número); The Little School (La escuelita)*, and *A Single, Numberless Death (Una sola muerte numerosa)*. These texts share their preoccupation with narrative structure and language. The focus turns out to be language itself, and narrative is often fragmented in order for the text to expose the collapse of identity, of community, of social networks, of political projects. The process of recounting becomes an elaboration of language so that it can name or invoke the true nature of the "event," its

28. LaCapra, *supra* note 19.

29. Héctor Shmucler, *En la banalidad está el mal*, 8 *PENSAMIENTO DE LOS CONFINES* 45, 47 (2000).

30. David William Foster, *Foreword* in NORA STREJILEVICH, *A SINGLE, NUMBERLESS DEATH* IX, X (2002).

31. Alejandro Kaufman, *Tramas de Barbarie*, 6 *PENSAMIENTO DE LOS CONFINES* 27 (1999).

intensity beyond oblivion—which is what I went through while writing my own literary testimony.³²

After my detention in the so-called “Athletic Club” in Buenos Aires, Argentina, I was only certain that living under State Terror had questioned everything I had learned and thought up until then, and that in spite of having been immersed in its cruelest version, I was unaware of how the death factory really functioned. I needed to hear other stories coming from the same place in order to complete my own. This is why, after narrating my own story in a poetic voice, I went back to Argentina in the nineties determined to hear and record other voices—former prisoners, former disappeared, families of the disappeared, activists, friends of my brother and cousins who are still missing, and people who just happened to live there at that particular time. Dominick LaCapra has underscored the role of empathy in the attentive secondary witness.³³

Opening oneself to empathic unsettlement is . . . a desirable affective dimension of inquiry which complements and supplements empirical research and analysis. Empathy is important in attempting to understand traumatic events and victims, and it may (I think, should) have stylistic effects in the way one discusses or addresses certain problems.³⁴

I became an empathic listener, who simultaneously was recreating my story through the collection of different perspectives on the same, collective history. I ended up with a significant collection of oral accounts and with an array of sounds, smells, colors, with which I was able to figure my own picture of a time that had divided our lives into a before and an after. I wanted to recreate the atmosphere of the seventies: the sound of the political demonstrations, the silence of those confined in prisons and concentration camps, the lament of the ones departing, the unbearable pain of the mothers. All of these unfinished stories became a choir that opened the key to my own despair. My search for meaning had been painful but successful. I was not looking for conclusions, but to decipher my own echoes. We all wanted to understand how that inferno could have survived for so long, comfortably erected in the midst of our city, of our country, annihilating our social and personal projects, our world. Through telling, we were all able to finally figure the experience we had gone through.

I wanted to grasp why a Ford Falcon without plates driving against the traffic in a busy street then (1976–1983) did not seem to astonish passers

32. HERNÁN VALDÉS, *supra* note 25; JACOBO TIMERMAN, *PRESO SIN NOMBRE CELDA SIN NUMERO* (Toby Talbot trans. 1981); ALICIA PARTNOY, *THE LITTLE SCHOOL (LA ESCUELITA)* (1986); STRILEVICH, *supra* note 30.

33. *See generally*, LACAPRA, *supra* note 19.

34. *Id.* at 78.

by, especially when everybody knew that people were being kidnapped. I wanted to understand how people could get used to terror. In a way, I engaged in a personal socio-cultural research, following my own recollections and instinct. Whenever I had the opportunity to return to Argentina I would observe any circumstance that had to do with the legacy of horror. I kept looking for traces of the recent, still silenced disaster, in the new context of democracy. If political prisoners, for instance, were appointed for reparations, I would line up with them just to verify that I did not belong there, since former *desaparecidos* (at that time) were still in a legal and existential limbo that no reparations—moral or material—were possible.

When the Navy Mechanics School (ESMA) opened its backyard for students from certain high schools to play sports, a Canadian journalist and I used the opportunity to visit the former concentration camp. It could be said that I put myself, out of my free will, in their hands, but I did it in order to complete my account.

I revisited the ESMA aware of the risks involved in the adventure, since the military responsible for systematic killings were, still, in charge—back then, in the 1970s, and back then, in the 1990s—even if their methodology of forced disappearances had come to an end for some time.

By facing this familiar and yet new scenario I was able to reenact my past with a different script—I had returned to the same stage, but this time I had the chance of seeing (my eyes were not blindfolded) and of performing a role that was not the role of the victim, in a context that was not as threatening as it used to be, where I was treated as someone, at least, able to understand questions and answer without the mediation of an electric prod. That interrogation is recreated in *A Single, Numberless Death*:

“What’s your address in Buenos Aires?”

“I don’t have one; I’m just passing through.”

“Are you staying with someone?” . . .

“No, I’m by myself.”

“Don’t you have a family?” . . .

“It’s a long story, I confess to the Navy officer.”³⁵

“We want to know why you came to the ESMA, why you entered through a side door. Imagine if we were to enter your house through the backyard. You must just take us for thieves.”³⁶

“Trapped on the threshold of memory, I gape in astonishment at a familiar scene: the customary *milico* addressing me from the other side of the desk,

35. STREILEVICH, *supra* note 30, at 143–45.

36. *Id.* at 136.

from the absolute other side. Will he end up saying that he's sorry, that it was all a mistake?"³⁷

The completion of my testimonial novel became a working through my own relation to the practices that define totalitarian regimes—the very same practices that made it easy for entire populations to accept the “order” imposed by binary logics and logistics. Of course I did not transcribe facts—no story can replicate reality—but my goal was to depict and capture the mystery of horror. I wanted to understand how society can keep up with its “business as usual” when citizens simply vanish, are denied all rights, and cease to be seen as human beings. A dictatorship had turned lively youth into prisoners, *desaparecidos*, orphans, survivors, and exiles. I needed to revisit this past in order to recover myself: “We lost a version of who we were and rewrite ourselves in order to survive.”³⁸

The *storyteller*, according to Walter Benjamin, establishes a relation with human life similar to the one a craftsman establishes with its material. S/he works the material of experience in a solid and unique fashion. The problem, he reasoned, is that we are witnessing the downfall of this craft; what we are going through in terms of human destruction cannot be made into a story because it exceeds our possibility of representation. In the face of catastrophe only silence can speak. Since we go on narrating the impossibility of narration, we become post-narrators.³⁹ Maybe, and this is my conclusion and my way of seeing testimony, post-narrators are destined to master their craft in order to keep the dignity of truth alive—not, again, the truth of facts, but the truth of what has happened and is happening to humanity, at the verge of being derailed.

37. *Id.* at 139.

38. *Id.* at 171.

39. Shoshana Felman, *Benjamin's Silence*, 25 *CRITICAL INQUIRY* 201, 225 (1999).