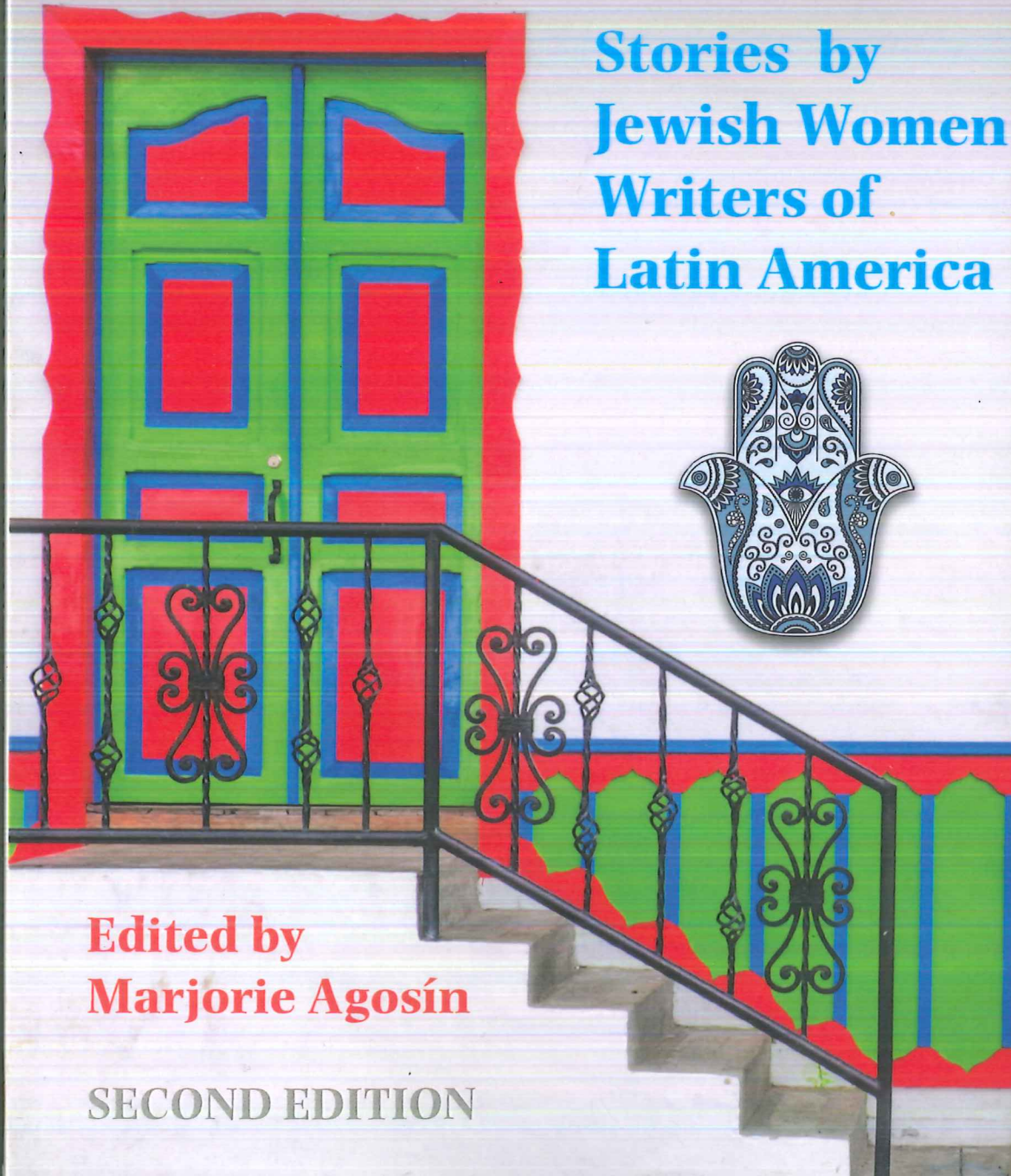


The House of Memory

Stories by
Jewish Women
Writers of
Latin America



Edited by
Marjorie Agosín

SECOND EDITION

The Role of the Witness: Writing and Memory¹

Nora Strejilevich

The memory of horror entails less a set of abstract definitions than the enquiry of those meanings imposed upon us by extermination that shape our present. We can still, therefore, call their objection “resistance.”—Perla Sneh

Introduction: Disappearance and Writing

Had I really returned somewhere, here or somewhere else, to my home, to wherever? The certainty [...] that I had not really returned, that an essential part of me would never return, this certainty sometimes took control of me, disrupting my relationship with the world, with my own life.—Jorge Semprún

The memory of my forced disappearance into, and reappearance from, Club Atlético, the Argentine Clandestine Center for Detention, Torture, and Extermination (CCDTyE), where I spent less than one week of my life, or all of it, makes me rethink ideas and keep recalling that past from a present that always propels me to revisit narratives of that experience. I don't choose the texts; they come to me. Neither do I attempt a thorough exploration—I trust that others will be able to continue to inquire into the writing that insists on putting horror into words.

It is hard to consider this text finished because questions don't end, and answers unsettle, contradict, and step on each other. They say and retract what they said—there's always another argument that challenges and disturbs any order. I know that thinking doesn't lead to solutions; it barely finds paradoxes that can't be solved. That's precisely why we can't put an end to it. There isn't an end. We wander among endless narratives that, as Laura Estrin says, can do it. And in this wandering, which is shared, common ground and rejections emerge that have different perspectives (the first, comfort and reassure; the second, irk and cause controversy). That's why I make way for other voices by interweaving my writing with quotes and excerpts I incorporate, whether or not I agree with them. They help me untangle the indelible subjective

¹ First published in 2019 by LOM Ediciones, Santiago, Chile. Translated from the Spanish by Judy Filc.

aftermath of an atrocity that keeps demanding attention, whose marks still prevail because they surpass us.

I don't intend to classify the writing that inspires these pages: testimony, concentration camp narrative, concentration camp memoirs, plain literature? If I join this debate, it's because other topics are being settled on the way.

I'm concerned, moreover, with the questions that stem from the intimacy of life in the camps, from the coexistence with this mark that is an identifying feature, whether we like it or not. I wonder, for instance, if survivors write so as to return to the world from which they were extricated; if they write to open another space by dint of words (another space that, unlike the camp, will be habitable); and if they will succeed, and if so, how and when.

Like certain novels or philosophies, certain testimonies remain topical—they don't abide by calendars. And it doesn't matter if they precisely describe the events to which they refer, since a text never transcribes the experience it recounts; it doesn't produce literal versions of what is real.

These writings aim neither to gather data nor to reconstruct true events. Witnesses recall from their present and, in doing so, discover new aspects of the deadly logic that still comes first in the contemporary world. Every testimony aims to retort and challenge with its weapons, which are its letters, the attack that humankind perpetrated on itself.

The Invisibility of the Witness

If, like any artwork, these texts outlive their times, their reception won't stop at a certain historical period. Nonetheless, we survivors are viewed, above all, as remnants of a particular past or repositories of information; as living evidence. For this reason, our story is valid in trials involving crimes against humanity. Yet outside this realm, we continue to be an Other who, since she epitomizes the victim of the crime for which nobody wants to take responsibility, is dismissed.

While Argentina is challenging in myriad ways, the sinister dimension created by former Commander Jorge Rafael Videla² with his noto-

² Jorge Rafael Videla was the head of the first military junta that led the coup on March 24, 1976. He was condemned to prison during the trial of the junta in 1985. In 1990 he invoked the pardon that was declared by President Carlos Menem. In 2010 he was sentenced to life in ordinary prison for having committed crimes against humanity; in 2012, to fifty years for the systematic appropriation of children of disappeared people. He died in prison in 2013.

rious dictum ("They're neither dead nor alive, they're disappeared"), the story of the "reappeared" hasn't gotten the seal of approval. And it hasn't gotten that seal, even if such story is essential to prevent this ghostly dimension from being mythicized. Watching concrete women and men suffer from up close and thinking together with those who have experienced the most exacerbated form of biopolitics can give us the key to understand what we are enduring today—power relations whose matrix still exists.

Albeit spectral, the void left by the catastrophe is full of faces, of human beings with names and histories who inhabited that limbo of exclusion called camp.³ Why are their voices still unheard? One potential answer is that anesthesia comes first, and that is why witnesses, considered as standard bearers of pain, are not appealing. In addition, these stories challenge members of society who don't question their tacit acceptance of a horror that, being naturalized, secures the required approval to delete the Other, whether the "subversives" (who object from their emancipatory power) or those who typify the blame for all our misfortunes.

I don't expect suffering to draw a crowd. I am only refuting those who claim that unlike fiction, testimonies can neither symbolize nor create meaning; that they impose a univocal sense to their narrative and do so with scarce or nonexistent literary development. I'm against such confusion between criticizing and condemning, between challenging and setting oneself up as a judge. I'd like, instead, to give survivors' testimony its fair role and recognize its irreplaceable contribution.

In the twentieth century, the Southern Cone region was destroyed by a disappear-making power (as Pilar Calveiro puts it) that transformed the entire region into a fateful laboratory for the human condition, whose effects are looming over the present. By keeping its word, the language of reminiscence stages, develops, and resists. As they recount their stories, survivors become witnesses, and no one can testify for the witness. "I experienced it, believe me" does not invoke truth as a coincidence with a referent; it invokes the account of one's own experience.

³ In this book I use both nomenclatures: *Clandestine Center for Detention, Torture, and Extermination*, widely used in Argentina and *camp*, a term that refers to Nazism and links various methodologies of forced disappearance that have left similar marks at the symbolic level.

The survivors' narrative goes against the grain of history—it is the history of the defeated. It is a way of calling attention with body-word. As Estrin puts it, testimonies bite; they affect.

When democracy had already returned, Videla complained of “the constant aspiration to keep rummaging through the past.” Moreover, having forgotten his integral participation in planning and implementing the systematic extermination plan, he stated:

[W]e must find a solution to the well-known problem of the disappeared and offer it to the Argentine society. Are they a real thing, a fib, a political or financial speculation? What are they actually? (*Página 12*, March 5, 2012)

I can answer the question about *who* they are—the commander never asked. The disappeared are my generation, the preceding one, and the next; my family, my friends, and my friends' children. My interest in the subject, therefore, surpasses academics. Is it possible to address genocide with the detachment of theoretical discourse? Each testimony embodies its vision of the camp—that inhabitable habitat, in Ignacio Mendiola's words, whose mission is to destroy subjectivity. Hannah Arendt called it *the corpse factory*. How could one refuse to listen to those who speak of and from the mark left by that factory, instead of distancing oneself from them based on adopting an objective knowledge that died decades ago? Each testimony is a journey of emotion and thought, without which we fall into instrumental reason whose coldness leads to disaster.

The Communal Wave

While it isn't included in the canon, this narrative is read in certain spheres, circulates in alternative circles, and joins a movement that, in Argentina, abruptly emerges in the post-dictatorship era with an intense human rights activism that strengthens with the onset of democracy. Fernando Reati shows the significance of this network to which, it's worth repeating, survivors owe their survival after the camps, even if in this case he is speaking, above all, about Mario Villani. To the question about the reason for remaining alive, Villani answers:

Perhaps leaving the camps alive was the easiest part [...] The hard part was choosing what to do with those traumatic memories. And this is where other survivors, victims' relatives, Mothers and Grandmothers

of Plaza de Mayo, members of H.I.J.O.S.⁴ [...], human rights activists, and the ordinary people who supported him were an integral part in his inner drive to spend the following decades bearing witness in any trial he could, granting any interview requested, and speaking at any forum that was made available to him. Without that gigantic communal network of friends and comrades who encouraged each other to keep recalling and denouncing [that wouldn't have been possible], especially in the tough 1990s, when it seemed that the rest of society was turning its back on him. ... (Reati, 2017, p. 182)

This wave, moreover, has generated a lengthy, fruitful debate on past events and their political and ethical meaning, which has led to years of making, staging, and writing films, plays, essays, and fiction—a powerful “*figuration work*, an *effort to frame* a way of speaking that is being destroyed” (Sneh). These were years of establishing museums and transforming former camps into places of memory; years of fierce controversies over the way to approach such a change (should we resignify these spaces or leave them as untouched symbols of dread? Should we explain horror, or might it be that, by rationalizing atrocity, we would run the risk of naturalizing it?) During these years, the post-dictatorship state, which after its historical trial of the juntas had backed down and passed the so-called impunity and pardon laws, is finally promoting public trials for crimes against humanity committed by the civil-religious-military regime. Nonetheless, the witness's voice, which is essential within the legal sphere, is still subsumed under the courts, which aren't the only spaces where we can assimilate *what happened and is still happening to us*. It is indispensable for the court to have a binary language that distinguishes the guilty from the victims. Witnesses, however, can also create plots that aren't determined by such ritual or categories. It's obvious that these are not enough; that it is imperative to inquire into the power relations making up our societies and the ways in which state violence is still exercising destruction (issues that are settled outside the court).

4 The word means “children,” but is also an acronym for “Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio” (Sons and daughters [fighting] for identity and justice against forgetfulness and silence). It's an organization made up by children of disappeared people that is engaged in reconstructing the history of the dictatorship and the fate of the disappeared and imprisoned activists. Its goal is to secure the trials of those responsible for crimes against humanity.

While the trials constitute an irreplaceable pillar for the *res-publica*⁵ to be viable after extermination, the survivor accounts (among others) are critical to identifying the mechanisms in which we continue to be entrapped and involved. That's why I agree with Alejandro Kaufman's statement that "horror, and the break of the bonds of responsibility and indebtedness it produces, requires a deep cultural conceptualization".

Such conceptualization entails a cultural change that has consolidated, to a certain extent, in some Southern Cone societies, with a different scope according to the country. Nonetheless, the pressure to end this process is ferocious. In Argentina the current government ignores every claim;⁶ in Chile there has been a resurgence of student and social fights, but the scarce trials for crimes against humanity have suffered a step-back; and Uruguay hasn't implemented yet any policy that fosters this type of trials.⁷

Beyond the legal aspect, from 2015 to 2019 authoritarianism reemerged in a republican suit, devoted to destroy what postdictatorship governments built. And it's our responsibility to reflect on this plot. Nobody can view themselves as removed from it; for terror devices to persist in different forms, exclusion must be tolerated, must be accepted to ensure survival. How is it possible that so many could agree that a section of the citizenry was erased and then later deny their erasure? Is there a connection between consent, as Kaufman calls it, and the reap-

5 The author does a play on words with the Latin *res publica*, public thing, and *república*, republic in Spanish.

6 The government that considered human rights as state policy between 2003 and 2015 has been followed by one whose interest is exactly the opposite in this and other senses. Survivors and activists have promoted public trials with great effort by collaborating with the prosecutors in the search for evidence and information. While these haven't stopped, their progress depends on institutional change; no legal fight can be maintained without cultural change. Such a change was insufficient to guarantee the continuity of the welfare state, but manifests today in a fight that is expanding its demands. A paradigmatic example is women's striking and taking action under the slogan "ni una menos" (not even one [woman] less). This was the first explosion of the feminist movement which, according to journalist Horacio Verbitsky, "represents the origin of a phenomenon such as the rounds of the Mothers [of Plaza de Mayo]" (*Página 12*, October 23, 2016). The women's movement has erupted in Chile with identical strength.

7 In the case of Uruguay the legal fight was left behind compared to civil resistance. In former prosecutor Mirtha Guianze's statement to *El Universal* journal, "after forty-five years since the military coup in Uruguay, on June 27, 1973, hundreds of legal trials and investigations are at a 'standstill' because there hasn't been a 'political will to progress toward the truth' [...] I think there has been scant progress. Actually, what has progressed has been the acknowledgment of civil society" (*El Universal*, June 27, 2018).

pearance of right-wing parties determined to create new figures of the *homo sacer*, a being that can be murdered and whose murder isn't even equal to a sacrifice? These questions, which Agamben, above all, raises, reverberate strongly in our region, where camps coexisted with everyday routine; underground centers were often located in cities—such as the Libertad prison in Uruguay, 38 Londres in Chile, and ESMA (the army's mechanics school) in Argentina—and kidnappings happened in broad daylight. While the 1970s resistance, state terror, and postdictatorships differ in each nation, I focus particularly on these communicating threads. I think that it's essential to spread the story of the survivors of the camps, who can report in minute detail the way in which saturnine states devour their children. That's why, when the question of whether these testimonies make a particular contribution to the culture of memory, I answer, yes and this book shows the nature of that contribution.

Literature, Testimony, or Testimonial Literature?

The texts I'm presenting here can't be classified: document-novels? Non-fiction narratives? I call them testimonies to emphasize that they recount borderline experiences (that's why they straddle genres). The "testimonial" category is so uncertain, that some authors reject it: Susana Romano-Sued, who survived several camps, prefers her book *Procedimiento. Memoria de La Perla y La Ribera* (*Procedure: Memory of La Perla and La Ribera*) to be considered simply literature, without a restrictive adjective. Hernán Valdés, on the other hand, advocates for the testimonial nature of *Tejas Verdes: Diary of a Chilean Concentration Camp* when it's classified as a novel, to underscore its denouncing power. The truth is that there are fictionalized and poetic concentration accounts, and others where orality and literary narration coexist. If we define all of them as *testimonial* it's to make them visible, since their contours stand out from the opaque background where everything looks the same. The main thing is to highlight that this writing exists and that reading it is essential, especially in these times, when a subjugating power (the continuation of a murdering power with a different mask) is being legitimized again in the region.

From A Single, Numberless Death¹

Nora Strejilevich

We shall not permit death to run rampant in Argentina.

—Admiral Emilio Massera, 1976

A certain perverse magic turns the key to the front door. Steps rush in. Three pairs of shoes practice their disjointed stomp on the floor, the clothes, the books, an arm, a hip, an ankle, a hand. My body. I'm the trophy of the day. A hide with a hollow head, eyes of glass. The make-believe hunters step on me. *Step on a crack, break your mother's back.*

This ritual exorcises my sins inside their temple: a green Ford Falcon with no license plates speeding through red lights up the wrong side of Corrientes Street. No one bats an eye. It's business as usual.

But it's not every day (or is it?) that the laws of gravity are broken. It's not every day that you open the door and four rooms are ripped apart by a cyclone that shatters the past and yanks the hand off the clock. It's not everyday that you stumble and fall, hands behind your back, trapped in a night that tosses about shreds of daily life. Dizzy you whirl in a vortex of scraps of yesterdays and nows crushed by orders and decrees. You get lost amid chairs overturned, drawers emptied, suitcases torn open, colors blanched out, maps slashed, roads severed. You barely make out the echoes reverberating "You thought you could escape, bitch" as an enormous mouth devours you. Familiar voices perhaps whisper, "She hasn't done anything, neither has he." But you are here, on this side, in this precarious body: soles tattooed on your skin, boots on your back, a gun at the nape of your neck.

"On your feet!" and you stand up, meek, confused, stunned, defeated, and you shriek, "They are taking me away, they're taking me away!" as claws of steel dig into your flesh. Shoved with impunity into the elevator at two in the afternoon, dragged out of the building, space vanishing under your feet. On the sidewalk you kick and scream against a nameless fate in some mass grave.

¹ Published in 2002 by University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, Virginia, USA, pp. 3-4. Translated from the Spanish by Cristina de la Torre.

I hurl my name with every last fiber—with lungs, with guts, with legs, with arms, with rage. My name fails wildly on the edge of defeat. The animal trainers order me to jump from the high platform into the void. They push me. I land on the floor of a car. Blows rain down on me. "Take that for screaming in Jewish, and this for kicking." And this, and this.

"You Yid piece of shit, we're gonna make soap out of you." I'm a toy to be broken. *Step on a crack, break your mother's back.*