

Nora Strejilevich: Killing the Phantoms of Victimhood

"... *It will be a long time still, I think, before a woman can sit down to write a book without finding a phantom to be slain . . . It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality.* Virginia Woolf was referring to the shadow of the wings the *Angel in the House* cast over her page until she finally managed to kill it. Even though my ghosts were other, her statement caused me to wonder... Have we—the victims of State Terror, the leftovers of genocide—been able to work through the collapse of our existence? Have we killed the phantom? Have I have cut my phantom's throat forever? Here is my testimony of when and how I attempted, with many accomplices, this liberating assassination.

Once upon a time a professor of a literary course gave his students this option for the final exam: we could either produce our autobiography or write a paper. I set out to type my story simply to avoid the writing of another essay. But reality caught up with my intentions. My fingers seemed to have been waiting for the occasion—they rushed back and forth through time and space, running amok. My fingers would take me back to childhood only to summersault forward into my present as an exile... Then I went on to collect memories of other survivors, and finally I wove them together.

These survivor narratives seemed to me to come out of a region beyond individual suffering. The visceral pain that had overwhelmed us in a devastating past was now wrapped in the soft reverberations of a murmur. Had our memories lost their cutting edge somewhere in the labyrinth of trauma? Why, when we were together, were they pronounced so softly, in whispers, even with hoots of black humor?

Since 1983—the beginning of the ‘post-dictatorship’ era—grassroots movements had managed to change the face of public spaces in Buenos Aires. Squares, facades, sidewalks were marked so that the hidden story of the seventies would come to the surface. Street signs near the ‘Athletic Club’ requested drivers to yield before this concentration camp. Shadows of the Disappeared were stamped throughout the city. Acts of memory were designed for the community to elaborate its non-official story. In the early ‘90s such an event was organized at the concentration camp where my two cousins, my brother, his girlfriend and I had been taken—the black hole from which only I would return. We, the survivors, were at last invited to speak.

‘A path leads to the stage where emotions and festivities ebb and flow. A microphone says my name, not my code number but my name. And out of that name springs a voice that resonates despite myself, a voice that stands in front of me determined to speak its own text.

A certain perverse magic turns the key to the front door. Steps rush in. Three pairs of shoes practice a disjointed stomp on the floor, the clothes, the books, an arm, a hip, an ankle, a hand. My body.

I can almost touch people’s eyes as they stare at me, stunned by this voice of mine that repeats

Step on a crack, break your mother’s back.

I turn the page; the paper rustles between my fingers. Am I the one who’s reading and closing a circle?

They’re taking me away, they’re taking me away!

The secret road between my house and the Athletic Club becomes public, the floodgates open, words spill out.⁹

I had reached the end of my/our story—this reading was a closure. I was not only sharing the account of my kidnapping in the very place where I had become a *desaparecida*, I was basically re-writing myself. Terror had wanted to turn me into a victim and, instead, I had turned into a creator of my own life/text. A story that had been imposed on us in order to destroy our humanity was being turned upside down. My reading went on:

*‘We lost a version of who we were
and we rewrite ourselves in order to survive*

Words written so that my voice can pronounce them here, in this place that is neither dust nor cell but a chorus of voices resisting armed monologues that turned so much life into a single, numberless death.’

My accomplices—other witnesses, families of the Disappeared, passersby—were part of this mysterious ceremony in which our phantoms were being annihilated. For once, we were the perpetrators. Even if next time we’d had to get together to kill them again.”

Author and scholar Nora Strejilevich is a survivor of the Argentine torture and detention center “Club Atlético.” She is the author of A Single Numberless Death, about her abduction, illegal detention, and torture by the Argentine military in 1977 and El arte de no olvidar, literatura testimonial en Chile, Argentina y Uruguay.