Testimonial Narratives in the Argentine Post-Dictatorship: Survivors, Witnesses, and the Reconstruction of the Past

Ana Forcinito

No existen en la historia paréntesis inexplicables. Y es precisamente en los períodos de “excepción” en esos momentos molestos y desagradables que las sociedades pretenden olvidar, colocar entre paréntesis donde aparecen sin mediaciones ni atenuantes los secretos y las vergüenzas del poder cotidiano.

—Pilar Calveiro, Poder y desaparición

(There are no unexplainable parentheses in History. And it is precisely in these periods of “exception,” in the annoying and unpleasant moments that societies seek to forget, put in parenthesis, that the secrets and the shames of daily power appear, without any mediation nor extenuating circumstance.)

El asunto es ése: no acallar las voces discordantes con la propia sino sumarlas para ir armando, en lugar de un puzzle en que cada pieza tiene un solo lugar, una especie de calidoscopio que reconoce distintas figuras posibles.

—Pilar Calveiro, Política y/o violencia

(This is what it’s about: not to silence discordant voices with our own voice, but to add them in order to put together, instead of a puzzle in which each piece has only one place, a sort of kaleidoscope which recognizes different possible figures.)

Former detainees have, without any doubt, a central place in the Argentine redemocratization process that started in 1983. Their testimonies have been essential in determining the existence and location of Clandestine Camps, in
identifying repressors, in making visible methods of torture, living conditions in the Camps, and especially in providing information about the desaparecidos, when and where they were held captives, and other information pertaining to them. Their presence in the public reconstruction of the past is also connected with the constitution of the disappeared as a figure that could no longer be ignored in the redemocratization process. Nevertheless, this central role of the survivors seems to be conditioned by the marginalization of some memories, meanings and interpretations. Adriana Calvo, a survivor of the Clandestine Detention Camp “Pozo de Banfield,” says about the silence that surrounds the figure of the former detainee: “A todos les pasó lo mismo. No había orees dispuestas a escuchar, no querían saber, no podían soportarlo. No querían sentirse responsables de lo que estaba pasando” (Gelman 112) (It happened to everyone. There were no ears prepared to listen, no one wanted to know, they could not bear it. They did not want to feel responsible for what was going on). And later on, she adds: “Para esta sociedad existen las Madres y los HIJOS. Los detenidos-desaparecidos no existimos” (113) (In this society only Mothers and HIJOS exist. The detenidos-desaparecidos do not). Are the survivors—as those desaparecidos who can testify for those who did not survived—inside those parentheses that Pilar Calveiro, also a former detainee, proposes as what—and who—“societies seek to forget?” Even though their juridical role is widely accepted and unquestioned, are there other memories or senses attached to the very idea of becoming a witness that are not being listened to, as Calvo suggests? Or is this displacement a dispute about the meanings of multiple memories that cannot form a single perfect figure of the past but instead the kaleidoscope in which Calveiro locates the various possible figures of the exercise of remembering?

Memory as a social practice in the Argentine post-dictatorship continues to be open to new meanings, new questions, new recollections, sometimes conflictive, or even irreconcilable. Even though the recent commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the coup on March 24, 2006 took 100,000 citizens to the Plaza de Mayo (Página 12, March 25, 2006), the meaning assigned to memory, or better, to the plural memories of the past is still under construction. Once again, the concept of collective memory proposed by Maurice Halbwachs is challenged by approaches that privilege marginalized voices, individual stories and, as Michael Pollak suggests “underground memories” (4). The last years of democratic government in Argentina brought a number of changes in relation to the official politics in Human Rights. This official call for a politics of memory in the new millennium, thirty years after the last coup, is also opening new channels of debate that prove that memory, as Elizabeth Jelin points out, is a political struggle “not only over the meaning of what took place in the past but over the meaning of memory itself” (xvii). What at the beginning of the transition was thought of as a binary opposition between memory and oblivion has been more recently understood as a struggle that opposes “memory against memory”:

A basic fact must be established. In any given moment and place, it is impossible to find one memory, or a single vision and interpretation of the past shared throughout society. There may be moments or historical periods when a consensus is more pervasive, when a single script of the past is widely accepted, or even hegemonic. Normally the dominant story will be told by the winners of historical conflicts and battles. Yet there will always be other stories, other memories, and alternative interpretations. (xviii)

Those events, those subjects, those places, those meanings, and the will or desire to remember or forget them play an important role in the battle for the signification of memory. Memory is not just one but a set of recollections attached to oftentimes irreconcilable meanings, conditioned by—but also conditioning—the interpretations available in the present. Hugo Vezzetti uses the concept “labor of memory,” as Jelin does too, to refer to the process of “working through the painful memories and recollections instead of reliving them and acting them out” (Jelin 6). The labors of memory, as the labors of mourning in psychoanalytic theory implies, for Vezzetti, an “implantation,” a practice that aims to accommodate the past into the present not only against the meanings imposed by the dictatorship but also against the lack of meaning produced by the exhibition and repetition of the horrors in the media (33). In this task of reworking the past and the present, the memories of those who survived did not only reflect the attempt of reconstructing the past but also of problematizing memory, its blanks, its irrecoverable spaces, and the fact that the past—or that part of the past that remained in prisons and concentration camps—was to be remembered by former detainees, now witnesses but also suspects (of trauma, of unreliability). As Vezzetti puts it: “La memoria testimonial, viene a decir Primo Levi, es a la vez la ‘fuente esencial para la reconstrucción’ y una ‘herramienta insegura’” (182) (Testimonial memory, says Primo Levi, is at the same time, a ‘source essential to the reconstruction’ and an insecure tool).

One of the first steps in the redemocratization process that started in 1983 has to do—at least in the first years, before the impunity laws—with the official invitation extended by the State to the former victims, in the Commission of Investigation and then in the Trials of the Military Junta. That is the moment
in which the official role of the witnesses is born and, with that, the mark of the Argentine “transition.” This mark only stays as such, it can be argued, since then this gesture is superimposed by the history of impunity that starts in 1986 with the Full Stop and Due Obedience Laws and the Laws of Pardon of 1989 and 1990. It is, nevertheless, a gesture that impunity cannot completely erase, especially if we are aware that today, after the recent annulment of Punto final (Full Stop) and Obediencia debida (Due Obedience), new trials with charges of repression and torture are taking place in Argentina. It is through the restitution of the citizenship of the survivor that comes hand in hand with the very act of bearing witness, Vezzetti argues, that the State legitimates the voices of the former detainees (187). The act of witnessing is then constitutive of the new meaning of citizenship that emerges with the democratization process in 1983.

It is relevant to note that the juridical role of the witnesses is not limited to the first years of democracy. Almost thirty years after the coup, survivors of military repression continue their practices as witnesses in Argentina and abroad in order to bring justice to those responsible for the violations of human rights during the military regime. After 1990, human rights organizations have been able to succeed in the prosecution of military personnel who were already pardoned or who were not charged in 1985. Their role was also crucial in the demand for the derogation of the Full Stop and Due Obedience Laws, and in the transformation of Clandestine Detention Centers into sites of memory (ESMA, Mansión Seré, Olimpo, Club Atlético). New trials have been taking place since the Supreme Court annulled the Full Stop and Due Obedience Laws in 2005. Therefore, the role of the witnesses is still very active in Argentina today in the prosecution of military personnel who was involved in forced disappearances.

Beside their juridical testimonies in Argentina and abroad various types of testimonial practices have served to explore and reconstruct memory. The continuing role of the survivors is not to be circumscribed solely to juridical instances but also concerns a broad range of cultural practices, that not only serve to position witnesses as citizens in the official interrogation that was supposed to lead to justice, but also to affirm their role as cultural and political agents. An important number of testimonial accounts in Argentina have served a central role in the exploration of the past dictatorship and of the effects of that past in the present. Just to mention some of them, Preso sin nombre, celda sin número by Jacobo Timerman (1981), Recuerdo de la muerte by Miguel Bonasso (1984), Historias de vida by Hebe de Bonafini (1985), The Little School, by Alicia Parnay (1986), El vuelo by Horacio Verbitsky (1995), ESMA trasladados: testimonios de tres liberadas by Ana María Martí, María Mila de Pirles and Sara Solars de Osatinsky (1995), Ni el flaco perdón de Dios by Juan Gelman y Mara La Madrid and more recently, Sueños sobrevientes de una montonera by Susana Jorgelina Ramus (2001), Ese infierno by Actis, Munu, Cristina Aldini, Liliana Gardella, Miriam Lewin and Eliza Tokar (2001), Pase libre by Claudio Tamburrini (2002), 179 días entre El Banco y el Olimpo y una vida para contar by Celina Benfield (2003), El tren de la Victoria by Cristina Zuker (2003) and Nosotras, presas políticas by Viviana Beguán et alia (2006).

Also the role of human rights organizations is crucial in the reconstruction of social memory. In 2001, for example, the organization Memoria abierta (Open Memory) launched a project that gave birth to the first Oral Archive in Argentina that gathers testimonies about the last military dictatorship, including narratives of survivors of political repression. This project opened up a new space in which memories are being told, in relation to what is said and to whom—that is the audiences who could have access to the survivors’ testimonies as well as to the objectives of the testimonial practice. Mario Villani, one of the testimoniantes who was also a witness in the Trial of the Military Junta, reminds us once again of the suspicion that surrounds the survivor and his narrative. His example draws our attention to the language used by one of the defense lawyers of the military during the Trials of the Junta when he attempted to say “accused” to refer to the victim: “Que le pregunten al acusa...” Y se corrigió” (Ask the accused... And he corrects himself). Villani is pointing out that his position, as a witness in a Trial of the Junta, was still being perceived as the position of the accused—at least for the defense using the language of the prosecutor (246 A, September 14, 2002). These considerations about testimonial accounts show that the status of the witness is that of the witness “in process,” to borrow the concept that Julia Kristeva attributes to the subject, that is permanently being put into question, or under suspicion, but also is constantly trying to redefine himself or herself.

Testimonial literature serves as a privileged space—especially if compared with juridical testimonies—to discuss the transformations of the identity of the survivor and the way in which plural positionalities are negotiated in the past and the present: prisoner, illegal detainee, victim of torture, captive, militant, witness, citizen, and survivor. In the Argentine transition, testimonial writing concerns not only the accusation about the crimes against humanity that have been committed, but also the double movement of memory: “recuperar la historicidad de lo que se recuerda, reconociendo el sentido que en su momento tuvo para los protagonistas, a la vez que revisitar el pasado como algo cargado de sentido para el presente” (Calvino Política, 11) to recuperate the historicity of what is remembered recognizing the meaning that it had, in that moment,
for the protagonists while revisiting the past as something charged with meaning for the present).

This movement from past to present and present to past concerns the reconstruction of the events that took place inside the prison or Camp, as well as the construction of the subject of memory—and also of witnessing, interpretation and narration—and the unavoidable questioning of her/his viability to remember, interpret, and reconstruct that past. In her recent approach to “the culture of memory” Beatriz Sarlo has underlined Susan Sontag’s words when she states that “[p]erhaps too much value is assigned to memory, not enough to thinking” (Sontag 115). Sarlo’s attempt is not to dismiss memory as a practice but to argue that the act of remembering should be intertwined with thinking and understanding because “es más importante entender que recordar, aunque para entender, sea preciso también, recordar” (26) (it is more important to understand than to remember, although for understanding it is necessary also to remember).

Two texts will serve in these pages to discuss some of the considerations that I have been posing so far: Steps Under Water (Pasos bajo el agua, 1987) by Alicia Kozameh and A Single, Numberless Death (Una sola muerte numerosa, 1997) by Nora Strejilevich. Both texts, whose publication is separated by ten years, were written by victims of repression: as a former political prisoner (Kozameh) and as a former detenida-desaparecida (Strejilevich). The narration not only deals with an account of the witness/es but also with an interpretation of the past represented. In an attempt to make sense of the act of remembering, Kozameh and Strejilevich explore memory through its absences, lacks and incomplete zones. More than completing a linear story of the experience of kidnapping, detention and liberation, these texts focus on the interruptions, the fragmentations and the fissures of recollection, presenting—and representing—an experience of pieces that puts knowledge—or at least complete knowledge—into question.

**Testimonio, Memory, Fiction**

The testimonial novel Steps under Water, published in Spanish in 1987 as Pasos bajo el agua, narrates the experience of a political prisoner while affirming and problematizing simultaneously the constitution of the testimonial subject. The text assumes the pose of fiction while claiming that fictional stories are not, cannot be completely fictional. Kozameh highlights not only the experience of the prisoner but also her life after the release and, with that, the novel explores the process in which the former political prisoner remembers, makes sense of, and represents the past. When Nora Strejilevich (1991) studies The Little School, by Alicia Partnoy—one of the best known testimonial accounts, at least in the United States—she suggests that it is located in “an ambiguous zone between history and fiction” and that it actually represents “an effort to overcome the dichotomy between the two” (468). In the same way in which other testimonials seem to argue that there are fictionalized parts of any witness account, Kozameh seems to be proposing that there is no witness literature that can be completely fictional. As Kozameh herself points out in the English version of Steps under Water, after the publication of the book in Argentina, she was threatened by the Buenos Aires police. Therefore, the effect that the book has had as far as exposing police and military repression can be understood as the effect that testimony triggers in a juridical sense (as public accusation).

The role of the witnesses in the Argentine post-dictatorship entails a process of interpretation of the past and present, and of the very notion of the act of witnessing and its reliability in the resignification of social memory. Calveiro poses this dilemma:

Todo acto de memoria se interroga por su fidelidad, sin hallar jamás respuestas definitivas. Lejos de la idea de un archivo, que fija de una vez y para siempre su contenido, la memoria se encarga de deshacer y rehacer sin tregua aquello que evoca. Y, sin embargo, no deja de inquietarse, con razón, por la fidelidad de su recuerdo. (Política 11)

(Every act of memory questions its own accuracy, without ever finding definite answers. Far from the idea of an archive that fixes, once and for ever, its contents, memory is in charge of undoing and redoing, without a truce, that which is evoked. And, nevertheless, it does not stop worrying, rightly, about the accuracy of the recollection.)

The juridical role of the witnesses in the postdictatorship was and is still linked to the notion of truth and justice and to the accusation of Human Rights violations in prisons and clandestine camps. The cultural role of the survivors—in interviews, documentaries, testimonial writing—has been, somehow different, in the sense that while acting as witnesses (the writer in Kozameh’s case, the social scientist in Calveiro’s case) they put into evidence the complex mechanisms of memory and forgetting, fiction and truth, and their overlapping zones. Kozameh re-signifies and interprets the past through the representation of truth as non-necessarily transparent, but on the contrary opaque and blurred. Vezzetti has also suggested that: “los acontecimientos del pasado son opacos
y más aún cuando se trata de cernir su impacto en el presente" (46) (the events of the past are opaque and even more so when we are trying to measure their impact in the present). In Kozameh’s text, this opacity is expressed with the fragmentation of stories, the jumps in time (as a prisoner and after the release) and most importantly with the emphasis on the difficulty to remember and on the gaps in former prisoner’s recollections.

The chapters “Letters of Aubervilliers” in Pasos bajo el agua can be used to discuss the way in which Kozameh, in the eighties, explores the gaps, not only between past and present but also between truth and fiction. Let’s remember that the novel Steps under water starts with Sara, the protagonist, after her release and then it goes back to the day of her detention, her first days in the Rosario Police Station and later on in Villa Devoto, her writing, the defense of her writing while in prison, and her release with “freedom under surveillance.” It also includes stories of other detainees, claiming that the reconstruction of the past implies the fundamentally collective task of witnessing and, on the other hand, the unavoidable conflictive nature of collective reconstruction.9

The two letters between Sara and Juliana concern to the rethinking of their experience as prisoners in Rosario and in Devoto. These are letters that from their exile in Santa Barbara and Aubervilliers reflect on the life of these two and other women, and, most importantly, about the impact of those experiences after their release. The first of these two letters is Sara’s letter to Juliana, also a former political prisoner. Sara is writing a novel and she asks herself (and Juliana) questions about the past, a past that remains in her present in 1984 during her pregnancy, almost six years after her release. Her experience in exile is also—and this is very clear in 259 saltos, uno inmortal (2001)—about dealing with her experience as a former prisoner, who keeps listening to the voices of other victims of repression, and trying to make sense of that experience and, in Sara’s case, writing about it, making it public. In her search for memories Sara asks many questions and even refers to past questions implying that the incompleteness of recollection is a central part of her narration: her experience as a prisoner cannot be recovered without these gaps. In this sense the exercise of memory that Kozameh proposes through Sara is about the present: a question about the remains of the past in the present. At the same time, memory cannot be fully located in the present nor in the past but precisely in the “in between”: an unstable zone of contact and separation.

Sara is trying to remember one particular event of the past: the transfer from the prison of Rosario to Villa Devoto. She remembers parts of the transfer, but she needs to fill in the gaps in her story and she asks Juliana some ques-

10 These gaps are pointing to the fact that the exercise of memory must inevitably go through areas that cannot be recovered. As Vezzetti suggests “no hay memoria plena ni olvido logrado sino más bien diversas formaciones que suponen un compromiso entre la memoria y el olvido” (33) (there is not complete memory nor an achieved forgetting but diverse formations that suppose a compromise of memory and forgetting). This compromise is located, for Kozameh, in the possibility of the reconstruction or “reinvention” that memory offers to the bridge between past and present, and between experience and narration. In 259 saltos, uno inmortal (2003) Kozameh returns back to Juliana’s story and to the role that the letters played in the reconstruction of the former prisoners’ selves, their identity, and their memory after the release:11.

¿Qué sería el pasado sin los audaces que se animan a reinventarlo? Re-inventarlo. Volver a inventarlo lo que ya es: una fantasía. Una mentira, una historia creada para dar alegría, diversión, a la omnipotencia de ciertos niños que nos habitan. Pero nada más. Porque, ¿qué de cualquier pasado, puede estar tan muerto que no se retome en cada gota del presente? ¿Qué puede estar tan enterrado? ¿Qué puede haberse desintegrado tanto en qué vacío? ¿Qué puede haber desaparecido hasta tal punto? (259 Saltos, 93)

(What would the past be without those with the courage to reinvent it? To re-invent it. To invent again what already is: a fantasy. A lie, a story created to bring joy, amusement to the omnipotence of certain children that inhabit us. But nothing more. Because, what of any past could be so dead, that is not carried in every drop of the present? What could be so buried? What could have disintegrated so much in which void? What could have disappeared up to such extent?)
In contrast with the juridical testimonies of witnesses, Kozameh’s testimonial novel explores memory as a construction and the opacity of what is remembered and forgotten while posing the impossibility of knowing the complete story as a central part of the witness’ account. At the same time, the text affirms memory, with the transformations, the gaps, and the “reinventions.” In this way her narrative moves away, even in the eighties, from the legal notion of testimony and the notion of truth, and it goes beyond them to explore the figure of the witness, and the expectations built around it through an unanswered question: How does one provide a clear and transparent account of what feels gray and opaque in the labor of memory? Through Sara’s struggles, this testimonial novel suggests that no narration is bearing witness to the clarity of the experience recounted but to the impossibility of a complete and perfect account of the past, and to the complex process in which memories survive (or not) in the present.

Collective Memories, Suspicions, and Gaps

A Single, Numberless Death by Nora Strejilevich, a testimony of the late nineties (1997), also deals with these questions and limits, especially in relation to the difficulties of having access to a *one single* memory. The book is dedicated to “those who told me their lives far into the night and offered me the gift of stories in moments long as years” and therefore unfolds the intention of writing not only from one perspective but from numberless points of view. This text can be described as a collage of testimonies (some of them anonymous), quotes from newspapers, depositions in the *Nunca Más*, victims accounts, perpetrator’s recorded words, personal stories, and fictionalized segments. The voices are collective but also fragmentary. A *Single, Numberless Death* does not attempt to represent a coherent life story but the very impossibility of recounting the experience of kidnapping and detention with anything but segments that claim to be collective—numberless—but also irrecoverable. The shifting of testimonial voices and the multiple, though fragmentary and sometimes anonymous, perspectives addresses the question about the identification of those voices. Who is talking, who is remembering, who is after all composing this collage of voices? Where are we, the readers, located within the fragments? What is the effect of those segments in our own expectations of what testimonial narrative is or should be, or should accomplish?

*Nunca Más*, a text that does mention the first and last manes of the testimoniantes, also produces a fragmentation in the depositions according to the subjects being discussed in each section: detention centers, torture, anti-semitism, pregnant women, families who disappeared, among other topics. For example, Strejilevich’s testimony is included in the description of the detention center “Club Atlético” with specific references to torture: “During the interrogation I could hear the screams of my brother and his girlfriend whose voices I could make out perfectly” (*Nunca más* 145 [file 2535], Strejilevich 30). In the book published by the Commission of Investigation a multiplicity of depositions serve to “reconstruct” spaces, practices of violence, living conditions and information about the desaparecidos. Fragmentation, then, has a trajectory as a methodology that was used to present the information available about the Human Rights violations during the last dictatorship and therefore it serves as a paradigmatic example of “public” and official investigation. Strejilevich uses fragmentation as a strategy that affirms, at the same time, the possibility of reconstruction of truth—following the *Nunca más*—and its very impossibility, since the fragments are pointing to the incompleteness of testimonial narrative.15

The narrative structure of *A single, numberless death*, as I mentioned before, consists on fragments that interrupt the narrative of kidnapping and detention of Strejilevich herself. Even if we could argue that there is a main story (Strejilevich’s detention) the continuity of her story is very difficult to follow: there are other voices that complete, dispute, increase and dilute her narration, so her own narration is only one among many others as the title indicates. The testimonial voice is articulated precisely through its dismantling as if the text would be reiterating the impossibility of giving a complete testimony and at the same time proposing that giving a testimony should be understood as a practice that implies confusion and disorder in its attempt to represent the multiplicity of voices capable of reconstructing the past. The text is affirming not only clear and distinct voices of the survivors, but also their polyphony.

When in “Men quick to unzip” (14–17) Strejilevich rethink the specific violence received by women in detention camps she incorporates different testimonies that recount single stories that are also plural. This part starts with the anonymous narration of a woman who was pregnant during her detention and continues with the account of a rape and after that with a testimonial account from *Nunca Más* where another survivor bears witness to the violence received in a Clandestine Camp by a female detainee. After another anonymous testimony about a rape the narration focuses on a girl who was sexually assaulted in an elevator: “A hand gropes eagerly among the pleats of my smock, fondling, pinching, cornering me. I smell something blue. A glove covers my mouth” (16). The narration is now blurred and we cannot identify the
agent of violence, as there are many of them: "During the history class I envision armies of rapists, in geography I imagine continents of flesh, mountains of fat like that belly" (16–17). And, in the following section "Good-bye cruel world" the testimonial voice continues with the narration of her own detention: "They drag me into a cell to think it over. The guard says in a soft, intimate and paternal voice, 'Calm down, sweetheart, relax'" (17). Through this fragmentation not only reading and understanding the literal stories become more difficult but also the meanings that we, as readers, can assign to all the ruptures in the narrative and all the different voices that create a polyphonic confusion. As in the introductory images of Spoils of War (2000), the documentary directed by David Blaustein, where the voices of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo are superimposed and it is almost impossible to follow the single stories that are being narrated, it seems that the fragments in Strejilevich's text make difficult the task of recomposing the events of the past. All the witnesses have something to say. But the text is not pointing just to what needs to be said but to what remains unsaid. By rethinking the way in which these oral voices become writing, this narrative is exposing all that is lost in language. "¿Qué relato de la experiencia está en condiciones de evadir la contradicción entre la fijez de la puesta en discurso y la movilidad de lo vivido?" (27) (What account of the experience is in conditions of evading the contradiction between the fixity of discourse and the mobility of life), asks Sarlo, pointing to the failure of representation and to the gaps that cannot be translated from the experiential to the narration. By focusing on these contradictions, Strejilevich is putting into question not only memory itself as plural and irreconcilable but also the representation of those memories through a grammar that seems insufficient to depict simultaneous voices and images, their voids and their jumps.

Voices are not just the voices of other survivors. We also have popular sayings ("Bring the knife / ring the bell / you die / you’ll go to hell") (6) and protest songs ("Milicos, we have no fear / what did you do / with the ones who disappeared") (10). The existence and recording of some voices is contrasted with the disappearance of other voices, as with her brother’s:

Gerardo is taking part in a relay race for first graders. The spectators are clapping. On your marks, get set, . . . go! Gerardito sprints to the front of the pack. Suddenly he stops, turns his head 180 degrees, and waves: Mama is there. He takes off again at top speed but comes in last. He burst into tears. (8)

And then:

Gerardo is being watched. He does not sleep at home. Gerardo supports violence from below and challenges violence from above. Gerardo lives in fear because he’s being followed.

Gerardo reflects:

Suddenly it is clear to you: a flash of awareness that you are not forever. As if they’d casually taken a chunk out of you and then scornfully warned you, "Watch out kid," hinting that like it or not, slowly but surely, they’d continue chipping away at you until there was nothing left but ashes." (9)

The voice of her brother is incorporated into the narrative and as the voice of a desaparecido the claim of his juridical existence—and therefore the reconstruction of this voice—is bearing witness to the crime of his forced disappearance. This disappearance is represented with the memory of her surviving sister, also a detenida-desaparecida. At the beginning we read a poem: "When they stole my name / I was one I was hundréd I was thousands / I was no one." This obvious reference to her own experience is contrasted with some of the declarations of the military: starting with Emilio Massera "We shall not permit death to run rampant in Argentina" (3) or "Keep in mind that I have killed three or four people with my own hands" (4), and then going to Jorge Rafael Videla "In order for Argentina to achieve internal security, as many people as necessary will have to die" (6), and General Vilas "We conduct our operations between one and four in the morning when the subversives are sleep" (8). Her personal story gets lost again and again in the midst of official affirmations, popular songs, and the voices of those who were inside the Camp. Every time the narrative goes back to her own narrative we cannot but situate her narration within multiple and collective narrations, which are also highly conflictive because they imply the existence of contradictory memories, the effects of which explains the epigraph of the book (by Tomás Eloy Martínez): "From 1975 on, my entire country metamorphosed into a single, numberless death. At first this seemed intolerable, but later it was accepted with indifference and even relegated to oblivion."

The problematization of memory and the emphasis on its opacity have had an important place in the recent debates about memory in Argentina, where it has been underlined that recollection changes with time and with the cultural interpretation that accompanies the act of remembering. Vezzetti reminds us
of a chilling example for the Argentine paradigm using a study undertaken by Guillermo O'Donnell. In the first years of the military regime O'Donnell interviewed a number of people who claimed to be in support of the military government. The interviewees used the dichotomy “order/subversion” to justify the coup and the repressive actions of the Junta. During the first years of democracy O'Donnell interviewed the same people and asked them to talk about the opinion that they had about the military regime during the dictatorship. The results were very different: the answers emphasized the repudiation of the Junta, and the interviewees denied to have justified the military regime in the past while arguing that they had rejected it during that time (Vezzetti 45). What we have here, Vezzetti suggests, is a new cultural interpretation that emerges with the accusations of human rights violations during the regime;

Lo que me interesa—agrega Vezzetti—en todo caso es reconocer que esas formas de acomodar el pasado al presente constituyen el trabajo mismo de la memoria, en la medida en que se admite que la memoria es una construcción siempre retroactiva. (46)

(What interests me here—Vezzetti adds—in any case, is to recognize that these ways of accommodating the past in the present constitute the very labor of memory, as long as one admits that memory is a construction that is always retrospective.)

The change in the understanding of Human Rights abuses gives shape to the repudiation of the Junta that the interviewees emphatically underlined in the eighties, once the mandatory understanding of the “order” linked to the military regime was displaced by the resignification of what that “order” really meant as a practice of kidnapping, torture, illegal detention and so forth. Nevertheless, it would be relevant to ask how much of that interpretation given to O’Donnell during the regime remains, unconsciously hidden, in the answer provided in the post-dictatorship. This question would lead to rethinking the role of the witnesses and to understand it within the multiple—and conflictive—interpretations that surround survivors of military repression. I want to refer to two aspects that have undermined witnesses accounts: First, the question about the truth of testimonial accounts and the reliability of the witnesses, and second, the depolitization of the witness as the condition of his/her official interpellation as a citizen in the Argentine redemocratization process.

**Testimonial and Truth**

In a now classic approach to testimony and witnessing in relation to the Holocaust, Dori Laub points out that it is important to remember the main objective of each testimonial narrative, that is, what it is that a certain narrative is testifying to (Felman and Laub 60). Laub is rethinking the discussion that a group of historians, psychoanalysts, and artists had about the discrepancies that one particular testimony seemed to show with narratives of other witnesses. This testimony “in trial” was considered “suspicious” and it was not judged a reliable account. Laub uses this discussion to suggest that this particular debate about the reliability of testimonial narratives was distorting testimonial accounts by condensing the truth in details that, after all, could be forgettable because forgetting them did not damage in the least the experience to which the survivor wanted to bear witness. Laub’s approach—that has been recently discussed in the context of the post-Stoll debate on testimonial literature—is about having an understanding of testimony more concerned with the survivor than with the expectation of narrative authority. “[L]a historia nunca podrá contarse del todo y nunca tendrá un cierre, porque todas las posiciones no pueden ser recorridas y tampoco su acumulación resulta en una totalidad” (54–55) (The whole story cannot be told and will never have a closure because all the positions cannot be covered nor their accumulation results in a totality) says Sarlo in her reflections about the role of memory in the Argentine postd dictatorship, having in mind the relationship between testimonial accounts and History, and proposing that a dialogue between the two can only be possible with the recognition of its incompleteness. When discussing the testimony of Holocaust survivors, Giorgio Agamben argues, that one must also consider its “lacunae”:

At a certain point, it becomes clear that testimony contained as its core an essential lacuna; in other words, the survivors bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to. As a consequence, commenting on survivor’s testimony necessarily meant interrogating this lacuna or, more precisely, attempting to listen to it. (12)

Even if the survivor has an epistemological privilege (knowing what happened) this privilege implies a lack: “No one has told the destiny of the common prisoner since it was not materially possible for him to survive” (33). Agamben quotes Lyotard to affirm a sort of impossibility in the very act of bearing witness:
To “have really seen with his own eyes” a gas chamber would be the condition which gives one authority to say that it exists and to persuade the unbeliever. Yet it is still necessary to prove that the gas chamber was used to kill at the time it was seen. The only acceptable proof that it was used to kill is that one died from it. But if one is dead, one cannot testify that it is on account of the gas chamber.” (Lyotard 3, in Agamben 35)

Testimonial writing is not, cannot be, a complete narration. But even with the exploration of this impossibility, texts like *Steps under Water* and *One Single, Numberless Death* are presenting fragments, bits and pieces of what is not possible to recuperate, those “traces of the real” to borrow René Jara’s expression to refer to the images that testimonials narrate: “más que una interpretación de la realidad esta imagen es ella misma, una huella de lo real, de esa historia que, en cuanto tal, es inexpressable” (2) (More than an interpretation of reality that image is itself a trace of the real, of that story that cannot be expressed as such). At the same time, those traces call for an interpretation that attempt to make sense of those same lacunae that the narratives are exposing.

**Citizenship and Depolitization**

The figure of the disappeared has had a central function in the reconstruction of the very meaning of democracy after 1983. Cultural redemocratization was linked to the respect of human rights and was established around the figure of the disappeared as victim, as Vezzetti suggests when he proposes: “[E]n este nuevo estatuto de la memoria, lo primero no eran los héroes sino las víctimas y la enormidad de los crímenes” (30) (In this new statute of memory, the priority was given not to the heroes but to the victims and to the immensity of the crimes). In this context, are the survivors of Camps and political imprisonment during the last dictatorship being silenced or marginalized? How and where are the meanings attached to the *detenidos-desaparecidos* articulated? What does survivor or *desaparecido* mean in the Argentine cultural democratization? It is not uncommon for the survivors to state that they were *desaparecidos* during their detention in Concentration Camps—that also call themselves “detainee-disappeared” at least in the name of the organization *Asociación detenidos-desaparecidos*. The former detainee Graciela Daleo uses, nevertheless, the name *aparecidos* (appeared) in an attempt to both detach and attach the figure of the survivors to the figures of the *desaparecidos* and also to resignify the figure of the survivors through their militancy:

*Los aparecidos* somos portadores de la memoria del horror. Y eso no es grato. También somos—como tantos otros que sobrevivieron, aun sin haber pasado por campos de concentración—portadores del resuero y sobre todo de una práctica real de militancia, compromiso y lucha que protagonizó un vasto sector de la sociedad argentina. (Vezzetti 209, emphasis mine)

(The *aparecidos* are the bearers of the memory of horror. And that is not gratifying. We are also—as many of those who survived, even without having being held in concentration camps—the bearers of the recollection and above all of a real practice of militancy, commitment and struggle that had as protagonists to vast sector of the society.)

These parentheses built around the *aparecidos* are, nevertheless, surrounded by an undeniable active role that survivors of prisons and clandestine detention camps have had in narrating their experiences in human rights’ organizations, trials, commissions of investigation, literary texts, documentaries, and interviews. In particular, in the first decade of the democratic transition, the central role of the survivors in the National Commission for Investigation (CONADEP) and in the Trial of the Military Junta that took place in 1985 is marked by a process of de-politization that Vezzetti analyzes as the emptiness of meaning produced by the understanding of the *desaparecido* as a “purified victim” (119). This void of signification of the term “disappeared” is challenged, in the late nineties, by the three volumes of *La voluntad* by Martín Caparrós and Eduardo Anguita (1997, 1998) and their attempt to reconstruct the figure of the *militant* in the 1960s and 1970s.

Nevertheless, during the eighties, the figure of the disappeared, that served to resignify democratic practice in accordance with the respect of human rights, also marks the definition of citizenship deprived of the meaning of militancy, at least as it was understood during the years that preceded the last military regime. In part due to the lack of recording of the victim’s political affiliation in the information gathered by the Commission of Investigation and therefore due to the de-politization of the figure of the detainee-disappeared, the first decade of the democratization process is characterized by an emphasis on the victim, which served in part to silence the former detainees and to limit their narration (of the portion of the account that was to be heard) to the story of their victimization (Vezzetti 119). The figure of the disappeared was then linked to those who were killed, especially if “they entered in the category of the innocents of all militancy” (119). This understanding, which characterizes the first decade of democratization differs from, for example, the approach that Calveiro pro-
poses in the late nineties (1998) where she states that the majority of the detainees in Concentration Camps where part of a political organization.

One of the main points in Vezzetti’s argument is precisely to show the figures that are constitutive to social memory in Argentina, where the role of the State in the truth and justice process that starts with the appointment of the Commission is accompanied by a theory that plays an important role in the process of signification of the desaparecido. Vezzetti argues that by equating the armed struggle and the military, the “theory of the two demons” (teoría de los dos demonios) invokes the figure of the disappeared as deprived of political identity. It is this de-politized figure the protagonist of the resignification of democracy through human rights in the Argentine post-dictatorship. Even though the gesture was about creating a landmark in the construction of democracy, “the will of instituting an end to political violence and clandestine action” created a social memory of the past that displaced those memories that did include the popular participation that started in 1960s (121, 128).

Both Calveiro and Vezzetti refer to the depoliticization of the victim as a betrayal: “Cuando la memoria de un pasado cuyo sentido fue eminentemente político se construye como memoria individual y privada, recuperar ese aspecto, pero de alguna manera traiciona por lo menos en parte el sentido de lo que fue” (Política 16) (When the memory of a past which sense was predominantly political is constituted as a individual and private memory, it recuperates this aspect but it somehow betrays at least in part the meaning of what it was). The operation is therefore double: it seems to be insufficient the idea of finding a place for the past in the present without the other movement that implies to build a bridge, Calveiro argues, between two different ways of looking relations: that of the sixties and seventies and that of the present (Política 16).

Sarlo also proposes to rethink the relationship between the subject of the narration (and the experience) and the listeners, especially from another generations. As I mentioned before, Sarlo underlines the practice of understanding the past, and not only exposing it. Following Walter Benjamin, she reminds us of the shock that triggers the silence around traumatic experiences but also—and here she quotes Jean Pierre Le Goff—its nontransferable nature: “los jóvenes pertenecen a una dimensión del presente donde las creencias de sus padres se revelan inútiles” (36) (“young people belong to a dimension of the present where the beliefs of their parents seem useless”). The practice of memory, then, could not only be about attempting to understand an experience of the past through the significational marks of the present but also about going back and attempting to understand the meaning of the past in relation to the cultural marks that gave meaning to those experiences in the past. Once again, the idea of the “unbridgeable gaps” comes to surface, as well as the will to reconstruct a past that, as Kozameh proposes, is not, cannot be, completely dead but “carried in every drop of the present.”

Steps under Water and A Single, Numberless Death as many other testimonial narratives in the re-democratization period and the recent debates about memory and witnessing deal with “re-inventing” the past and, consequently, the present, as Kozameh herself suggests in 259 saltos. The re-invention of the narratives of the witnesses after thirty years of the military coup has to do precisely with the way in which the present interrogates those parentheses of the past that can no longer be ignored and with the way in which narratives, even testimonial narratives, are being transformed in an attempt to establish a dialogue with the interpretations that, in the present, will look at the past. The role of the survivors continues to redefine itself and to explore its significance, its limits and the new areas of a social memory that is constantly re-actualizing recollections and meanings. New voices, sometimes discordant, are added to former narrations and transform them, put them into question, and interrogate those parentheses and gaps from different places. The practice of re-narrating the past awakens new interpretations that add different lights and shades to the construction of collective memory. In this context, memory should be understood—and here I am borrowing again Calveiro’s image—nott as a puzzle where all the pieces match exactly and make a perfect picture of the past but as a kaleidoscope, where the pieces form different figures, different representations of a past that cannot be completely restored, and where the gaps as constitutive parts of those representations are pointing not only to what the survivors cannot bear witness of, but also to the parentheses that contribute to the depoliticization of the figure of the survivors, their experiences, their involvement and their claim to continue to be agents of democratization and acting witnesses of the past and the present.

Notes

1. I thank the American Philosophical Society for the Franklin Research Grant that allowed me to conduct research in Argentina during the summer of 2006, and especially to get access to the Oral Archive gathered by the organization Memoria Abierta.

2. All translations of texts quoted from Spanish are mine, except indicated otherwise.

3. The New York Times, for example, states “Impunity Gone, Trials begin” referring to the trial of the former chief the Buenos Aires police charged with “illegal arrest, torture and murder in eight cases” (Friday, June 30, 2006). The Organization Human
Rights Watch refers to this trial as the “end of 20 years of impunity” (hrw.org/English/docs/2006/06/19/argent13580.htm).

4. Mario Villani was kidnapped in 1977 and held captive until 1981. He was held in five detention camps: El Olímpico, Malvinas, El Atlético, El Banco and ESMA.

5. To see a list of the interviews of the Oral Archive, see http://www.memorialabierto.org.ar.

6. Alicia Kozameh was kidnapped in 1975, before the military coup but when the methodology of the paramilitary forces was already in place. She was a political prisoner first in el Sótano in Rosario and then in Villa Devoto in Buenos Aires, until 1978. Nora Strejilevich was kidnapped in 1977 and held captive in the clandestine center “El Atlético.” She was liberated five days after her kidnapping. Her testimony to the National Commission about the Disappearance of Persons, CONADEP (file 2535) can be read in Nunca Más.

7. The preface refers to Kozameh’s detention and imprisonment, establishing, from the very first pages, the connections between experience and writing.

8. It is relevant to remember that the book was published in 1987, that is two years after the Trials to the Military Junta, when the beginning of the impunity laws were taking place, in part due to military rebellions and coup d’etat threats. Pasos bajo el agua not only invokes the urgency related to the narration of political repression but also the path that testimonial writing takes in Argentina in the context of impunity: the claim for a justice that already began to fade. As a narration of urgency, Pasos bajo el agua deals with “a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle of survival, and so on, implicated in the act of narration itself” as John Beverley proposes when he outlines one of the definitions for testimonio (26). Even if Pasos bajo el agua is a novel, the testimonial dimension of the text and the urgency of the narration cannot be overlooked.

9. Barbara Harlow uses the expression “literature of resistance” to refer to the literature written by political detainees, a resistance that has to do not only with the logic of the prison but also with the logic of autobiography, through the affirmation of a collective first person. We should consider also the resistance that these texts offer to the expectation that collective reconstructions of the past should be a single consensual memory. Through these two fictional characters (Juliana, Sara), Kozameh refers to some of the survivors positions in relation to their experiences as political prisoners and the violence that surrounded that experience: Sara wants to remember and wants to make public her story through her writing. Juliana—and this is mainly developed in 259 saltos, uno inmortal—takes the conscious decision to forget. Recognizing memory as conflictive involves that even if the affirmation of the collective implies, as Beverley suggests, a connection between the individual subject and “a group or class situation marked by marginalization, oppression, and struggle” (35), it also involves paradoxically the existence of different voices that are oftentimes discordant.

10. In Nosotras, Presas políticas, a recent compilation of testimonial accounts of female political prisoners in Argentina, Kozameh narrates her transfer from Rosario to Villa Devoto with emphasis on the facts of the transfer and not on the gaps of the recollection (78). Again I want to underline that the questioning of memory and the acceptance of what she calls “unbridgeable gaps” does not erode the reliability of the witness account. On the contrary it affirms that the narration of facts can serve to the prosecution of repressors or to reconstruct the conditions of life and the violations of human rights suffered by as political prisoner but is never a complete narration.

11. 259 leaps can be read as a continuation of Steps under water (the accounts of imprisonment and liberation). Now the emphasis is placed on the narration of the exile in U.S. and Mexico and the return back to Argentina in 1984, with the advent of the democratic rule.

12. In her review of the text, Ileana Rodríguez states: “[N]o hay uno singular en este relato sino uno colectivo, el nosotros de esa sola muerte, esa sola tortura, esa sola pena y ese solo afecto, uno solo todo” (203) (“There is not a singular one in this story but a collective one, the we of this single death, this single torture, this single pain and this single love, all of them one single”).

13. Strejilevich’s doctoral dissertation Lituratura testimonial en Chile, Uruguay y Argentina 1970–1990 (University of British Columbia, 1991)—and later her book El arte de no olvidar: literatura testimonial en Chile, Argentina y Uruguay entre los 80 y 90 (Buenos Aires: Catálogos, 2006) deal with testimonial writing in the Southern Cone and discuss most of the theories and debates about testimonio. Strejilevich’s theoretical approach to testimonial narrative underlines that testimonio is a hybrid genre that blurs the frontiers among anthropology, literature, journalism, and history (1991, 17) and where “the search for truth undertaken by the testimonialista inspired in the trust of other (journalist, reader) is rather a joint search for truth by means of a tacit dialog between witness and listener” (17).

14. Even though I am quoting from the English version, I will also use the Spanish edition for these quotes: “Corto mano / corto fierro,” “Pisa pisuela color de ciruela” and “Milícios, muy mal paridos / que es lo que han hecho con los desaparecidos.”

Works Cited


