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Narrativizing Pain: Reconstructing Selfhood through Memory and Language

Erin Joy Carden
Bard College

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Narrativizing Pain

Reconstructing Selfhood Through Memory and Language

Senior Project submitted to

The Divisions of Languages and Literature of Bard College

by

Erin Carden

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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This project is dedicated to the approximately 30,000 victims killed during The Dirty War and to the survivors who use the beauty and courage of the written word to tell their story.

Many Thanks To

My senior project advisor Nicole Caso who deepened my love for literature and its connection to the human conscience.

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My father for his encouragement and support.

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Introduction

For victims of Argentina's military dictatorship from 1976-1983, reality was shaped by a life in prison where human dignity was destroyed and replaced with unimaginable horror. Treated like animals, imprisoned, starved, and severely beaten, political prisoners kidnapped and imprisoned by Argentina's military came to internalize the degradation of their personhood and human dignity. This internalization caused the inability to recognize a sense of self once held before the experience of prison.

The power of literature, as a form of human expression and human consciousness, is found in its potential to help victims of trauma (such as those who were kidnapped and imprisoned by Argentina's military) build a path leading to a recovery and reconnection with a sense of unique selfhood and human dignity that was ultimately destroyed through the experience of imprisonment and torture.

The rule of Argentina's military dictatorship, otherwise known as the "Dirty War," was a period in which numerous Argentineans were subject to great repression and institutionalized violence, the result of which manifested in various ways for victims, one being, a destroyed perception of self. As a result of the Dirty War, approximately 30,000 people were killed or disappeared (Portela, 11). According to statements by the Junta, (the authoritarian state run by high-ranking military officers) the main goal of the regime was to eliminate "subversion" from Argentina and which manifested in a "systematic cleansing operation" (*La Nación*, 27. Quoted in Portela, 12). The term "subversive" referred to any Argentine who disagreed or could be suspected of disagreement with the Argentinean regime. The extermination tactic implemented directly by the military against the subversives was carried out through forced kidnappings, torture in detention

centers, the creation of concentration camps, and even murder (Portela, 13). Throughout these methods was the complete disregard of basic human rights for “there was a concentrated effort to break the prisoners physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially”(Graziano, *Divine Violence*, 16. Quoted in Portela, 14).

The three female authors I study in this paper- Alicia Kozameh, Alicia Partnoy, and Nora Strejilevich, all survivors of the military Junta’s state-inflicted terror, have written with great beauty about the horrors they experienced as political prisoners during the Dirty War. Through the written word these survivors gain the power to reclaim their human dignity and a sense of distinctive selfhood that was severely damaged through trauma and torture. Through analyzing four works: *Steps Under Water* (1996) by Alicia Kozameh, *The Little School* (1986) and *Revenge of the Apple* (1992) by Alicia Partnoy, and *A Single Numberless Death* (2002) by Nora Strejilevich, this study attempts to answer the question: How does fiction create a path for potential healing? In an attempt to answer this question this paper explores how fiction and imagination offer a new way to denounce injustice compared to standard retelling of facts that takes place in courtroom settings.

All four works examined represent how fictionalized perceptions create empathy. Through reshaping perspective all three authors represent not just a single experience but rather a collective experience of disappearance that is intertwined. Additionally, all three authors in certain moments of their narratives fictionalize their experiences by writing in third person in order to distance themselves from the painful details of what they endured. This distancing and fictionalization of experience gives these authors the ability to write a narrative from a less vulnerable place and thus they are better able to

understand their past. In addition, all three authors illustrate the way that imagination helped them hold on to a past understanding of selfhood and acknowledge their existence and survival. For example, in *A Single Numberless Death* Strejilevich records the imagined internal dialogues she held with loved ones while she was imprisoned. These voices reminded her of a reality that once belonged to her, a reality of freedom filled with affection and love. These imagined dialogues helped her endure the loneliness of prison until she was freed and could actually talk to them. Ultimately, Partnoy, Kozameh, and Strejilevich convey a more nuanced truth of what it felt like to be imprisoned, a truth that cannot be conveyed solely through facts, but primarily through fiction and imagination.

In chapter one I examine two works by Alicia Partnoy. *The Little School* (1986) and *Revenge of the Apple* (1992). This chapter analyzes Partnoy's incentive to fictionalize some of her personal experiences in prison, especially those of her fellow prisoners, in order to identify and show solidarity with other disappeared victims in an attempt to represent a collective experience of disappearance. I then introduce and explore two voices that Partnoy uses throughout both texts: a political voice and a literary voice. Partnoy's political voice reflects her incentive to write these two texts as a political duty for she felt compelled to speak on the behalf of those who could not speak for themselves. This chapter also explores Partnoy's use of poetry and narrative vignettes to supplement other discourses in the pursuit of justice, dignity, and truth. This section of the chapter is focused on what these literary genres are able to convey beyond factual evidence.

In chapter two I study *A Single Numberless Death* (2002) by Nora Strejilevich. Like *The Little School* and *Revenge of the Apple*, this text represents not only the author's

personal experience of imprisonment but also reflects the experience of disappearance as something that was shared by countless people. This chapter extensively explores the role of memory as both an act of forgetting and remembering. The act of forgetting is found to be an act of resistance while the act of remembering is used to hold on to a sense of comfort and safety. In other words, memory in this text is a reflection on both presence and absence, the ability of the imagination to transport the vulnerable mind to places of pleasure, personal connections with loved ones, and the need to rely on poetry and fiction to represent the unrepresentable.

The final, third chapter examines *Steps Under Water* by Alicia Kozameh (1999). This chapter explores the paradoxical situation of freedom that does not liberate the narrator, but rather, paradoxically prolongs a feeling of incarceration under an environment of continued state surveillance. The value of fiction is also examined and found to be a way for the narrator to cope with guilt, to pay tribute to friends, and to reimagine and reconstruct a sense of self that was lost through the experience of imprisonment. The theme of friendship and writing itself are central to the text. Ultimately this chapter demonstrates how although throughout the entire text Kozameh has shown how hard it was to transition back to her life before prison, she nevertheless is in the process of finding her “way back” to herself through writing *Steps Under Water*.

It is important to note that all three authors were forced into exile after they were freed because although they were released from prison, they still feared for their lives. Alicia Kozameh was exiled to the United States in 1980 and returned to Argentina in 1984 however, in both the English version of her book, *Steps Under Water* (1996) and in her second Spanish edition, *Pasos bajo el agua* (1987) she explains that she had to leave

Argentina again because the Buenos Aires police was threatening her (Portela, 17). Alicia Partnoy was exiled to the United States as well where she published *The Little School*. In 1984 she returned to Argentina to testify for the *Commission Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas*, or, the Argentine Commission for the Investigation of Disappearances (CONADEP) (Portela, 17). Nora Strejilevich also went into exile after receiving threats of being detained again. After traveling to many different countries she settled in Canada and then in the United States. Like Partnoy, Strejilevich also returned to Argentina to testify for the CONADEP (Ibid).

For these three women it took them years to write and publish their work which represents the trauma of the experience of imprisonment and the difficulty of adjusting back to a life of so-called “freedom.” That said, all three authors attempted to spread their belief in the power of the written word by becoming professors of literature, and in this way, showed others the importance of literature in the process for survival. As Strejilevich claims in an interview, “I started my Ph. D. for survival (Strejilevich. Quoted by Szurmuk, 98).

This paper highlights the challenges of remembering torture and powerlessness while trying to overcome this pain through memory and language. The role of memory in the narratives that I analyze represents a complex relationship between remembering and forgetting a difficult past. Told from the authors’ different registers, their memories of represent not just a single experience but rather a collective experience that is intertwined and that when joined together, helps reconstruct the past in a way that lends to a better understanding of the collective and personal present.

In the four texts I examine, imagination and creativity are used to create a cultural movement in the name of human rights in which numerous voices of the disappeared are taken into account. All four texts can be understood as a form of autobiography in that they are “an account of a person’s life written by that person”(“autobiography” OED Online). This autobiographical function is complicated by the responsibility each author feels to voice other individual’s experiences thus introducing an element of fiction to the retelling of memory. In fact, in *Fictions in Autobiography* Paul Eakin highlights the tension between historians who often separate the factual content of autobiography from its literary qualities while literary critics often view autobiography as an “imaginative art” and “have been willing to treat such texts as though they were indistinguishable from novels”(Eakin, 3). Eakin argues, “autobiographical truth is not fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation...”(Ibid).

As Eakin explains, twentieth century autobiographers have “shifted the ground in our thinking about autobiographical truth because they believe the fiction- making process to be a central part of the truth of any life as it is lived and of any art devoted to the presentation of that life”(Eakin, 5). In other words, fiction is a central feature of the truth that the author wishes to express. These writers no longer believe that “autobiography can offer a completely verifiable reconstruction of history but instead, they can reconstruct a past that is shaped by memory and imagination that represents present and past consciousness” (Eakin, 6).

Eakin’s insight on fiction as a central part of self-discovery lends itself to my analyses of these four works as autobiographical texts that can be understood as a work of art that represents both memory and imagination in the process of reconstructing

selfhood. While analyzing these works I am examining the way that nonfiction is used to condemn injustice and represent a collective struggle while fiction combined with renditions of testimony is used to make sense of oneself and of one's past.

It is important to note that one of the main ways that the Argentinean military regime attempted to physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially abuse their prisoners was through blindfolding them throughout their entire time in prison. Because of this, disappeared victims had no visual representation of the events they endured but instead, were forced to rely on all other sensorial perceptions such as taste, smell, sound, and touch. Because Kozameh, Partnoy, and Strejilevich were deprived of their sight, they were forced to imagine what they could not see. Thus, in their works, they elaborate on their imagination, fictionalizing, and at times, even inventing imagined details of certain events. In this way, these writers use fiction to make sense of memories that are fragmented and full of gaps.

Although these four works can be understood as autobiography, they can also be understood as forms of testimonial literature in that specific parts represent "a formal written or spoken statement, especially one given in a court of law" ("testimony" OED Online). Compared to autobiography, the notion of testimony represents the collective nature of all four works for they all represent the other voices of disappeared victims who could not speak for themselves. In *Crisis of Witnessing*, Shoshanna Felman argues that the act of testifying before a court of law or before an audience of readers or spectators is more than simply to report facts or record what is remembered. Rather, Felman argues, testifying conjures up memory in order to "address" another and to "appeal to a community" (Felman, 204). In other words, to testify is not merely to narrate an

experience but to take “*responsibility...for history...*”(Ibid). With this understanding of the political and social responsibility of testifying, I analyze how the works of Kozameh, Partnoy and Strejilevich all assume a political responsibility by not only representing their own personal experience but by also serving as a voice for the entire community of disappeared victims. All three writers represent an understanding that collective history is something that affects all citizens who live in fear under an authoritarian regime. My analysis attempts to show how the language used by these three women bear witness to repression, and they use their words to reject oblivion and silence while restoring life and human dignity to disappeared victims.

The works of Kozameh, Partnoy and Strejilevich all show the way that literature can gain a sense of urgency, become an act of courage, and embody both resistance and hope. For these three female writers, their words are their weapons. Through the written word they project their voice of power; they will not surrender to the silence they were submitted to in prison but instead their words fight to retain and regain a humanity that the military attempted to destroy. The power of the literature created by these three survivors lies in that it declares that its own citizens can speak through the power of their voice and the power of their words, and in this way, their texts prove to be effective in denouncing the abuses that occurred.

Gloria Anzaldúa, a scholar of Chicana cultural theory, feminist theory, and queer theory, beautifully articulates the empowering quality of writing. Anzaldúa has been extremely marginalized in society for her sexuality. Her writing does not reflect the same effects that writing has for victims of trauma but nevertheless I am introducing her as a writer whose insights on the empowering nature of writing can be applied to the four

main texts that I will be examining throughout the rest of this paper. In 1979 Anzaldúa wrote a speech titled, "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers" which was both published in *Women Writing Resistance* as well as Anzaldúa's feminist anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* in 1981. In this speech, Anzaldúa explains her relationship with writing:

Why am I compelled to write? Because the writing saves me from this complacency I fear. Because I have no choice. Because I must keep the spirit of my revolt and myself alive. Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve autonomy. To dispel the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul. To convince myself that I am worthy and that I will write, never mind their admonitions to the contrary (Anzaldúa, "Speaking in Tongues," 83).

In Anzaldúa's description of the power of writing she introduces its multilayered nature. She highlights the way in which writing is both a personal and public endeavor. The public endeavor of writing is found in how it is used to speak against an official history that has been silenced. Victims of repressive military dictatorships such as Partnoy, Kozameh, and Strejilevich, all write about their experiences of abuse as an attempt to correct incomplete versions of Argentina's history and resist political repression through narrativizing their experiences. At the same time, there is also a personal incentive within

creative writing that fights against the destruction of the self. For these writers, the process of creative writing allows for the illustration of moments that remind both the reader and the author of what it means to be alive. Literature, in this way, is not only a witness to abuse but is also a documentation of the experiences of being human in times of hardship and resistance.

It is the narrative act that connects pain and the reconstitution of the subject through the act of remembering. Therefore, a selfhood that may have been previously hidden can be discovered through writing. Through the act of writing individuals unbury aspects of the past and raise awareness to oneself. While writing can be used to escape reality, others write in order to make sense of their world that is full of pain and atrocity; writing helps gain control over a situation in which one was once rendered helpless. Anzaldúa claims that for herself as a writer, a poem works when it surprises her, when it says something she has repressed or pretended not to know (Anzaldúa, "Speaking in Tongues," 88). This point highlights the intimacy that writing allows for in the way that it can discover, understand, and preserve the self. Through writings' intimate connection with the self, victims of trauma are empowered. Writing can give individuals agency and control over their words.

All four works examined in this paper use the written word to uncover a sense of self that was lost through the experience of imprisonment. Through their first and third person accounts the reader is clearly shown the impact of being imprisoned, the degradation of human dignity, and the fragmentation of personhood. In these four texts readers are shown how difficult it is for these prisoners to understand their new reality behind bars consumed by darkness and terror. In certain areas of all four narratives

language is distanced from the details of torture as a means of resisting what the body was subject to, claiming that there simply are no words, no way to represent such an unimaginably horrible experience. Ultimately, these four texts represent the necessity in telling ones story. All three authors convey the great pain associated with remembering their lives before imprisonment and the difficulty in reconstructing both their life, and their sense of self after prison. Shifting tone from literary to political and from individual to collective, the writing of these three authors blur the lines between fiction and fact and show the way that literature can inspire social change.

Chapter One: Humanizing the Disappeared through Fiction and Poetry in Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School* and *Revenge of the Apple*

For survivors who were imprisoned and tortured during Argentina's military regime from 1976 to 1983, writing is used to denounce the great injustice they and their fellow prisoners endured. Through the written word, victims of state terrorism assume a political voice and through this voice, are able to create a path for justice. There is also a personal and intimate connection that writing has for survivors. By writing about their experience of torture, victims of state terrorism are able to make sense of their time in prison and reclaim a personhood that was degraded and destroyed through undergoing abuse and torture. Alicia Partnoy, survivor of the "Little School," a concentration camp in Buenos Aires, writes about her memories in *The Little School* (1986), and *Revenge of the Apple* (1992). The strength of Partnoy's writing lies in her choice to use both fiction and nonfiction to transcend the factual limitations imposed by human rights reports in an attempt to represent the experience of disappearance and the fears of submitting to inhumane treatment. The great beauty of Partnoy's writing is found in her descriptions of the small moments of joy she was able to find in a prison system created to destroy human dignity and personhood.

The Little School

The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival by Alicia Partnoy is a collection of what Maria Ghiggia calls, "testimonial tales;" fictionalized, personal accounts concerning those who were kidnapped during the Dirty War, a time of violence and repression during Argentina's military regime from 1976 to 1983 (Ghiggia, 187). Partnoy was abducted in January 1977 from her home in Bahia Blanca, a city in the

southwest of Buenos Aires. She was then taken to the Little School where some of her friends, who were also political activists, were held captive. After being imprisoned there for approximately three months she was transferred as a political prisoner to Villa Floresta, and then to Villa Devoto, two prisons in Buenos Aires. In 1979 she was given a visa to travel to the United States with her daughter Ruth. Shortly after Partnoy moved to Washington D.C and began writing the testimonial tales contained in *The Little School* to honor her friends who were not lucky enough to survive (Ghiggia, 190). Through writing *The Little School*, Partnoy is able to represent a collective struggle of her generation while also reclaiming her own personal voice.

Some critics have read *The Little School* primarily as a testimonial work whereas others have interpreted it as testimonial fiction. John Beverley, leading literary and cultural critic, defines *testimonio* as:

a novel or novella- length narrative in book or pamphlet form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually 'life' or a significant life experience. Testimonio may include, but is not subsumed under, any of the following textual categories, some of which are conventionally considered literature, others not: autobiography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life history, *novela-testimonio*, nonfiction novel, or "factographic" literature (Beverley, 34).

In her introduction of *The Little School* Partnoy includes a chronology of her life and several appendices that contain passages from her testimony before the National Commission on the Disappeared (CONADEP) where she provided facts pertaining to the

prison staff at the Little School and a list of people, missing and surviving, who were imprisoned there. Partnoy's introduction and appendices are a part of her storytelling that can be considered to be a genre of standard *testimonio* by Beverley's definition because she uses the first person to recount the events that she herself witnessed and experienced. That said, in her vignettes contained in *The Little School* Partnoy not only writes in first person but also chooses to write in third person as a way to fictionalize her experience as well as identify and show solidarity with other disappeared victims. Because of Partnoy's use of fictional elements other critics such as Ghiggia approach *The Little School* as a testimonial work in which the literary and poetic converge and which is why she considers *The Little School* a compilation of "testimonial tales;" "the word "tales" referring to the various literary devices the Partnoy implements to fictionalize parts of her narrative without negating the truth.

Diana Taylor, author of *Disappearing Bodies: Writing Torture and Torture as Writing*, is another critic who recognizes the literary qualities of *The Little School* and argues that there is a split in Partnoy's voice between her testimonial narrative displayed in her introductions and the appendices, and in the literary narrative contained in her "tales" (Taylor 167). In this way, Partnoy's testimonial text is what Ghiggia considers a "hybrid", assuming various qualities of testimony and fiction but not possessing any unifying characteristic. The hybridity of genres is found in Partnoy's use of both fiction and fact. Partnoy works at the intersection of these two genres because it is both her fictionalization and factual recounting that allow for the unveiling of the true horror of her experience in the Little School.

Both *Revenge of the Apple* and *The Little School* are deeply personal yet collective accounts of human rights violations that Partnoy and her fellow prisoners experienced. Taylor gives great insight concerning the “hybridity” of *The Little School*, claiming that Partnoy’s use of both fiction and nonfiction reflect two distinct writing processes. Partnoy’s narrative involves what Taylor coins in her text as a “decomposition process,” a “distancing part of survival strategy [that] protects against direct access to the past” and which allows for what Taylor identifies as a “recomposition” process in which literary qualities “contribute to the humanization of the disappeared...the healing of a lost community, the reaffirmation of a forgotten self, and the recovery of the disappeared have the opportunity to reappear through the process of writing”(Taylor, 159). These two different writing processes- decomposition- nonfiction- and recomposition- fiction, reflect two voices that Partnoy implements to represent two main incentives. That is, she uses both a political voice and a literary voice to represent her personal and the public incentive for writing. Partnoy’s public incentive for writing *The Little School* is represented by the decomposition process- her nonliterary voice that distances herself from the vivid, violent details of her experience. These details speak to the atmosphere of violence but are generally distanced from her emotional state of mind. For this endeavor Partnoy upholds a political voice; she provides facts that document injustice, identifies people and places, and calls directly for political action. This is how she makes her writing significant; it is storytelling for a purpose. Partnoy claims, “I leave the writing about torture for my work with Amnesty International. I write about what happened and the people who read it go out and do something about it” (Taylor, 166). It is Taylor’s definition of the recomposition process that I consider to be Partnoy’s personal endeavor

for writing. By distancing herself from her emotional state of mind during and after her experience of torture, Partnoy uses elements of fiction that allow her to find something deeper, something more meaningful about her experience and which allows her to reconnect to a sense of self that was degraded and destroyed.

Revenge of the Apple

In *Revenge of the Apple* (1992), a collection of poems where Partnoy conveys the despair of prison, and later exile, Partnoy explicitly addresses two voices inherent in her writing: her literary voice, and her political voice. Partnoy writes in her poem titled, “Song of the Exiled,”

They cut off my voice

So I grew two voices

Into different tongues

my songs I pour...(*Revenge of the Apple*, 95).

In this poem Partnoy claims that in prison the Argentinean military “cut off” her voice and in resistance to this repression, she “grew two voices/ Into different tongues” these voices being her conscious act to continue writing poetry that was both political and literary. The “different tongues” which Partnoy refers to is both her use of the English language and the Spanish language. Partnoy did not agree with the international affairs of the United States with respect to policies of economic support to Latin American dictatorships. In her introduction to *Revenge of the Apple* she explains that once she was released from prison and lived in exile, she felt the “pressing need to let everyone know how many were left behind in Argentina swept by state terrorism”(*Revenge of the Apple*, 14). Her incentive to publish her work in English manifested from a need to tell

Americans “that they must do something so their nation, the United States of America, stops fostering dictatorships in Latin America”(*Revenge of the Apple*, 15). Ultimately it was important for Partnoy to write both *The Little School* and *Revenge of the Apple* in both languages because it brought greater visibility to her story and these texts were able to reach a wider audience.

“Song of the Exiled” resists the great censorship centered around writing that Partnoy experienced both in prison and after she was released. In the introduction to *Revenge of the Apple*, Partnoy explains that there was strict censorship and poems were rarely allowed to leave the jail. Nevertheless, Partnoy explains that she resisted these restrictions and poured her “songs” that is, recited her poetry to her fellow inmates in prison showers where they had time to “flee or jump under the water when the guards approached”(*Revenge of the Apple*, 13). Partnoy explains that the censorship increased her “popularity as a prison poet”(*Revenge of the Apple*, 14). As the prison guards continued to repress her voice, her poetry assumed a political aura for it represented her resistance and solidarity with the rest of the political prisoners whose voices were constantly repressed. More and more her fellow inmates asked her to write. She wrote poems as birthday presents and “tokens of solidarity in bitter moments”(Ibid). Poetry, as a literary art and an act of political resistance became Partnoy’s “last refuge, the only place where her bitterness and rage blossomed”(Ibid). Through horrible repression Partnoy found that her poetry helped her establish connections within herself and with her fellow prisoners and in this way, poetry helped her survive; it helped her “lift the spirits of her friends” because it created a sense of community even under the most depraved social conditions (Ibid).

Writing about her experience did not come easily for Partnoy. Taylor explains that although years may have passed since a traumatic experience, the survivors of trauma who describe the violence:

seem trapped in the body/ mind split provoked by their torment in their efforts to keep their personhood out of the picture...The act of torture itself disconnects the victims from their personhood- it disconnects the self from feelings, thoughts, the personal ties that make life meaningful (Taylor, 161).

Taylor's examination on how trauma creates a disconnect within one's understanding of selfhood is reflected in Partnoy's introduction to *Revenge of the Apple* where she explains how "she", the writer/ victim was paralyzed-she could not write new poems. Partnoy writes,

Our prisoner doesn't write new poems. It would hurt her immensely to search for words to describe the past three and a half months of her life in a concentration camp where torture, executions, sexual harassment, hunger, and the certainty of imminent death haunt the victims. How could she bear, in the solitude of this cell, to write about the loss of her closest friends, killed by the military after months of torment in that secret detention place? Where could she find the spiritual strength to write about her eighteen-month-old daughter, left behind, and whom the torturers insisted they were going to kill? What words could express the horror knowing that a baby born in that place, cynically called the Little School was "adopted" by one of his mother's torturers? (*Revenge of the Apple*, 11).

Partnoy's lack of ability to create new writing reflects her attempt to hold on to her past as a way to cope with the torture that, as Taylor claims, disconnected Partnoy from her

personhood, her thoughts and feelings, and the “personal ties that made her life meaningful”(Taylor, 161). Yet despite this, Partnoy used this attachment to her past as an anchor- she begins the process of recovery through remembering the past poems she had written. Partnoy admits to readers that although writing about atrocity is never easy, she was slowly able to do so only after first talking about her experience many years after being released from prison. Partnoy explains,

I came to the U.S in December 1979, under the Carter Administration, as a refugee. My English was not very good, but I wanted to tell my story, to everyone. I wanted them to know that my friends have not been released. Then I started talking to people in the human rights movement. It helped me feel less powerless. After a while I started writing short stories (Taylor, 167).

From this explanation we see that Partnoy was able to write her narrative only after gaining power through verbally articulating her experience and revisiting her past in this way. “Many years later, “ Partnoy writes in her introduction that she realized that the “recovery of her old poems in that notebook amounted to the recovery of her soul, her history”(Revenge of the Apple, 12).

Partnoy admits that she first started writing about her experience imprisoned in the Little School because she felt she had to. Taylor claims that out of about 30,000 disappeared victims, only about 1,500 survived to reappear, Alicia Partnoy included. Being one of these 1,500 survivors Partnoy felt compelled to use writing not only speak for herself but also to speak on the behalf of those who lost their lives. Partnoy writes, “if the intent of the oppressor is to silence, then speaking out is a defiance, a small victory”(Taylor, 160). This statement reflects the political voice that is inherent in both

The Little School and *Revenge of the Apple* for her writing is ultimately used as a powerful tool to resist silence and claim agency over the voices of the disappeared.

The Decomposition Process- Writing as a Public Endeavor

Partnoy's claim that she began writing in order to speak out in defiance reflects her public incentive for writing. Although Partnoy initially struggled with writing about her experience, she began to feel that it was her duty to represent the collective struggle of the Argentinean people who were imprisoned during the Dirty War. Partnoy's political voice and her public incentive for writing is apparent in her nonliterary material that falls under Beverley's definition of testimony - facts given in first person about the events she experienced and witnessed and which are contained in her statements to human rights groups as well as in both the appendix and the introduction of *The Little School* and *Revenge of the Apple*. Taylor claims that Partnoy's choice to give straightforward facts devoid of any emotional detail about the trauma she experienced reveals the decomposition process- distancing herself from the specifics concerning her emotional and psychological state during imprisonment as a way to protect herself.

Partnoy received wide criticism for her distant tone. In her poem "Testimony" in *Revenge of the Apple* Partnoy contradicts those who accuse her of omission. The tone of her reply in this poem suggests that she believes descriptions of torture would be inappropriate in stories about the disappeared.

They say

I have not managed

to forcefully convey the pitiless rage

of the cattle prod.

They say that in matters such as this

nothing must be left

open

to the imagination or to doubt.

I take out

the Amnesty report

and begin speaking through that ink.

I urge: "Read" (*Revenge of the Apple*, 157)

In this poem Partnoy recognizes this tension between her political voice, facts associated with standard testimony, and her literary voice, her use of imagination and fiction. It is important to note that in this poem Partnoy begins with the pronoun "They" which suggests that she is writing about the human rights community who insist that she give facts, for imagination is to be excluded from the kind of testimony appropriate for Amnesty reports, especially in circumstances in which evidence and proof of facts are required to attain justice. Imagination, as they would argue, is only appropriate for the literary field.

There is a need for more than factual evidence in the path towards justice however. The "imagination and doubt" that Partnoy speaks of is exactly what readers find in *The Little School* and in *Revenge of the Apple* because Partnoy relies on her imagination to reconstruct what she never visually experienced since she was blindfolded throughout her time in prison. Because Partnoy was deprived of her sense of sight, there are elements of doubt when she writes about her experiences; she cannot be completely certain of all the details because she never visually saw it for herself, she instead relied on

what she heard, smelled, tasted, or touched. This sense of doubt is fundamental to her understanding of her past for she cannot articulate past experiences without conveying that her sense of doubt and her lack of certainty is what shaped her understanding of her reality in prison because it forced her to imagine what she could not see. It is important to note that this uncertainty does not invalidate the truth of Partnoy's perceptions. It is her imagination and fiction that allow her to bridge unbridgeable gaps imposed by the blindfold.

At the end of the poem Partnoy resists the expectations of evidential facts in courts of justice and of public opinion. That said, she did provide this type of evidence in the CONADEP report, in the appendices of *The Little School*, and for several decades through her political activism in the pursuit of justice in Argentina. This type of evidence however, is another "ink," distinct from her poetry and creative narrative. In "Testimony" she writes that she will "begin speaking through that ink," that ink being the facts she provides for the Amnesty report. In characterizing this fact providing voice as "this ink" Partnoy draws a distinction between poetry and fact, the two registers with which she uses to address the traumas of her past.

Partnoy's incentive to use poetry as a tool to denounce injustice is reflected in her introduction to *Revenge of the Apple* where she describes how she had to defend her poems because she was asked to "explain" her verses to human rights groups such as Amnesty International. Partnoy claims that because they asked her to "explain" her words, her poetry was able to gain its "original strength" because she was given the opportunity to explain the exact ways that she used each verse to denounce injustice (Partnoy, 14).

Partnoy's use of fiction adds to the political discourse surrounding the injustice of the Argentinean military regime. That is, her poetry and fiction convey a particular kind of truth. In writing *The Little School* and *Revenge of the Apple*, Partnoy uses her imagination and fiction in order to represent what it *felt* like to exist in a tiny cell where she was blindfolded and tortured. This attempt to convey particular feelings is a kind of truth that cannot be conveyed through the factual recounting of events that take place in court. Fiction and poetry, as an art form, proves to be something Partnoy needs in order to convey this feeling to readers; facts cannot convey the magnitude of her experience. This is how Partnoy uses both a political and literary voice in order to be heard; she denounces injustice through fiction.

Partnoy makes a conscious decision to use both nonfiction and fiction to achieve her goal of denouncing injustice, representing a collective struggle, and recovering her own humanity through the written word. An example of Partnoy's choice to use a distant tone and straightforward facts as opposed to vivid descriptions of physical and psychological abuse, is evident in her introduction to *Revenge of the Apple*:

Lunch was at 1:00 PM and dinner at 7:00 PM; we went without food for eighteen consecutive hours daily. We were constantly hungry. I lost 20 pounds, going down to 95 pounds (I am 5 ft. 5 in.). Added to the meager food, the lack of sugar or fruits, was the constant state of stress that made our bodies consume calories rapidly. We ate our meals blindfolded, sitting on the bed, plate in lap. When we had soup or watery stew, the blows were constant because the guards insisted that we keep our plates straight. When we were thirsty, we asked for water, receiving only threats or blows in response. For talking, we were punished with blows from

a billy jack, punches, or removal of our mattress. The atmosphere of violence was constant. The guards put guns to our heads or mouths and pretended to pull the trigger (*Revenge of the Apple*, 15)

In this example, Partnoy presents these statements in a matter of fact way, listing a series of facts such as the time in which meals were served, her dangerously low weight, and the ways in which the guards abused them. In listing these series of facts she assumes a seemingly detached position; she does not give any details on her emotional state while enduring the starvation and brutality in *The Little School*.

This detached position exposes Partnoy's public incentive for writing *Revenge of the Apple* and *The Little School*; her endeavor to honor the collective experience of all those who were kidnapped by Argentina's military regime. In this poem Partnoy implements irony by calling these victims the "bad apples" of society for she is echoing what the right-wing supporters of the dictatorship would have called her and other dissidents. These "bad apples" were targeted by authorities, kidnapped and imprisoned, tortured, and sometimes killed. The military authorities attempted to purge society of these dissenting voices. Partnoy writes about herself and the other dissenters explaining:

They tossed me away
 like a stone,
 a weed, an evil herb;
 separated out
 the rotten, subversive
 apple...(*Revenge of the Apple*, 73).

In writing *Revenge of the Apple* Partnoy is both taking revenge for herself as well as representing the revenge of the other “bad apples” for she claims: “My revenge is to survive to tell the story” (*Revenge of the Apple*, 17). Even though Argentina’s military dictatorship attempted to silence the dissenters, to “toss out the bad fruit,” Partnoy chooses to speak out against injustice through the written word. Partnoy explains her personal relationship to this poem in her introduction where she claims: “I was the rotten fruit repressed by the military because I was just not going to accept the rule of the dictators” (*Revenge of the Apple*, 16). She then illustrates a powerful image to convey her solidarity with the other political prisoners of whom she calls, “troublemakers.” She writes, “Let my juices ferment and join those of other troublemakers. Let us become the cider that inebriates the torturers to the point of nausea” (Ibid). This image is especially powerful for Partnoy describes herself as an apple that joins together with other apples, the other political prisoners, and through joining together, their juice is able to take away the control of the torturers by making them sick and inebriated. This reflects the collective nature of *Revenge of the Apple* and Partnoy’s solidarity with those whose voices were also silenced and with those who lost their lives. Partnoy speaks to the collective nature of *Revenge of the Apple* in her introduction:

“In this city I have heard from Latin American refugees countless stories of repression, suffering and resistance. When I travel and when I teach literature, all of them go with me. Their voices, like mine, gather the voices of their peoples. They, like me, are the fruits tossed out of their crates. Ours is the revenge of the apple: to come back after years of fermentation, our cider mixed with that of other survivors, to overpower with our sweetness the strength of the executioner who

has cast us away, as rotten fruits, condemned to die in isolation”(*Revenge of the Apple*, 17).

In this passage Partnoy claims that the voices of other Latin Americans who, like her, also experienced repression, suffering, and resistance, are a part of her. She explains that together, her voice, and their voices represent a collective voice: “voices of their peoples.” The image that Partnoy creates of the fruit being “tossed out of their crate” emphasizes how these political dissidents were considered to be “bad” or “rotten” because they were not “good” enough to be eaten; they had to be tossed and thrown away, and which the Argentinean military regime did by kidnapping and killing the political dissidents. In addition, it should be recognized that rotten fruit is contagious to the other fruits surrounding it; one rotten apple leads to more rotten apples. Therefore, Partnoy uses this metaphor of subversives as rotten fruit in order to resist the act of being tossed and thrown away by the dictatorship because she, as a “bad apple,” had already conveyed her “subversive” ideas to others.

Ultimately Partnoy takes revenge by resisting the oblivion surrounding the disappearances of Argentinean political dissidents by creating a platform through her poetry where she makes public the torture, the abuse, and the dehumanization the military imposed. Therefore, *The Revenge of the Apple* is written to make the larger world recognize the sheer inhumanity the Argentinean government imposed on their own people as well as make sure the torturers themselves take responsibility for the immeasurable suffering they brought to innocent people. Only until then, will there be justice.

With this incentive to denounce injustice Partnoy highlights the importance in understanding her audience in order for her “message to be effective,” especially in the United States where state terrorism has not occurred. She explains that when she came to the United States to testify and tell her story, she learned that “people eagerly demanded the details of her torture” because they were “trying to protect themselves.” Partnoy claims “the more horrendous the experience, the more removed from everyday life,” and therefore, because her details concerning her experience of torture were so horrifying, so “alien to their humanity” and “removed from every day life,” her American audience generally believed that nothing of what she experienced could ever happen to them (*Revenge of the Apple*, 16). It then becomes clear to Partnoy that this is exactly why she needs to tell her story and this is also why she had her poems translated from Spanish to English in order to reach a wider audience: if the world continues to believe that nothing as horrendous as what happened to thousands of Argentineans is possible, then atrocities such as what she experienced can never be fully prevented.

The Recomposition Process- Writing as a Personal Endeavor

While a distant tone is present in Partnoy’s nonfictional statements such that are contained in her introduction and in the appendices of *The Little School* and *Revenge of the Apple*, the more literary elements of *The Little School* are contained in the twenty vignettes where Partnoy organizes her memories into short chapters of various anecdotes. *Time Pieces*, by Wright Morris, an American novelist, photographer, and essayist, gives insight on the value of fiction:

Although we attempt to face up to and live by the facts, we carry on the business of living in fiction. We do because we can't help it. Only fiction will accommodate the facts of life"(Morris, 102).

Morris explains that the value of fiction originates from before mankind created tools, claiming that men and women fictionalized clues that confirmed their humanity, clues that made them "more human." Morris claims that if language is concerned with "what it's like or not like to be human, it's some sort of fiction"(Morris, 105). Morris asserts that in order to "confess up a life experience," as Partnoy does in the *Little School*, it requires the same imagination to create a life experience through words. Morris claims, "it is a fact that we are born, and die but in between it is all a tangle of fiction, rounded with sleep"(Morris, 105).

Morris' insight on the role and importance of fiction can lead to a better understanding for why fiction is needed in order to convey the horror of Partnoy's experience. Fiction can be understood as imagination and invention. *The Little School* is considered fiction in the regard that it is partly based on imagination and some parts are fictionalized and even partially invented. It is important to recognize that Partnoy and all the other prisoners in the Little School were blindfolded throughout their imprisonment. Therefore, in order to make sense of a reality that was never seen, only understood through all other sensorial perceptions, (taste, smell, touch, and sound) Partnoy relies on her imagination to reconstruct what was never visually represented. In this way Partnoy reinvents a language to represent what is ultimately, unrepresentable: "What words could express the horror knowing that a baby born in that place, cynically called the Little School was "adopted" by one of his mother's torturers"(*Revenge of the Apple*, 11). Using

Morris' insight on the human tendency to use fiction to make sense of one's existence, fictionalizing her experience is essential to Partnoy's process of making sense of her past in prison, and which she has no visual recollection of, and in which the horrors of her experience transcend language itself.

Partnoy fictionalizes her experience at the Little School through various ways such as writing in third person. This choice is especially important because it represents both her personal and public endeavor for writing. As Taylor argues, Partnoy writes in third person because she chooses to distance herself from the violence she experienced. Taylor claims that Partnoy often writes in third person, as if the "I" telling of the story can no longer connect with the "I" who lived through the experience. Partnoy explains her choice to write in third person, claiming that she is representing "the moment of detention" that goes through her "mind like a movie." As Taylor explains, this is a simile that conveys the "repetitive, intrusive recollection of past trauma that haunts victims of torture and the distancing and displacement through representation that allows some of them to cope with, and somehow delimit, the memories" (Taylor, 168). Partnoy's use of third person in order to distance herself from traumatic memories is a way in which she fictionalizes her narrative. That is, because Partnoy is haunted by memories of torture, she has to, at times, distance herself from herself; she has to write in third person as a way to present her life as fiction in order to understand her experiences in a fuller way.

Taylor argues that Partnoy's choice to omit vivid details of her emotional state of mind reflects a survival strategy Partnoy learned in the Little School. As Taylor claims, by distancing herself from the facts of the torture and death taking place around her, Partnoy is entering the recomposition process- she is able to cling to a need for "human

connectedness and wholeness”(Taylor, 158). This search for “human connectedness” is what distinguishes Partnoy’s literary account of her experience from excerpts of her testimony before the Argentine Commission on the Disappeared. Partnoy distances herself from the violence and instead focuses on writing about other small, seemingly insignificant details. Partnoy’s writing stresses the ordinary as opposed to the extraordinary nature of her experience. She describes many ordinary senses such as the smell of rain and the feeling of the sun on her skin; the things, as Taylor points out, that “we so often take for granted”, and which takes on a “shameless lyricism, a humanity that the reader discovers along with Partnoy”(Taylor, 167). Therefore distancing herself from the torture allows Partnoy to focus on the ordinary moments which take place amidst an extraordinary event of imprisonment. This type of distancing technique allows Partnoy the opportunity to forget her past status as a disappeared victim and connect instead, to a sense of self she held before the terrible event of her abduction. This distancing is exactly what Taylor is writing about when she says that the decomposition process- the distancing from the experience of violence- leads to the recomposition process- the recovery of her soul.

It is the small details that make Partnoy’s stories so heartbreaking and that convey the true horror of her experience. Partnoy includes a child’s nursery rhyme that runs throughout the mind of her husband while he is being tortured. She describes a friend’s jacket that protects her against the guard’s blows. She recounts the feeling of happiness that comes from catching raindrops in the palm of her hand where the window leaks during a rainstorm. Partnoy includes these details in order to show the glimpses of her life that she captured through the bottom of her blindfold when it didn’t lay completely flat

against her face. These moments are reminders of human existence and the possibility of choosing solidarity and building community even in extreme conditions. In this way, these literary accounts help humanize the disappeared in a manner that Partnoy's testimonies before human rights groups do not.

Partnoy's act of humanization through writing follows Taylor's process of recomposition-her attempt to write about things that other people can relate to as opposed to focusing on torture- an experience so horrible she may have not been able to find the words to represent it. Partnoy explained in an interview, "I talk about my nose, feet, slippers, things that I saw, like torture. I don't know how to write about torture, not yet"(Taylor, 167). Partnoy's short story in *The Little School*, titled, "One Flower Slipper," is a story that represents the "literary" version of her kidnapping. In this section Partnoy writes about the violence as if she could somehow isolate and avoid the atrocity she experienced by displacing it onto the "she" protagonist and then onto a pair of slippers. The fate of the protagonist can only be understood through the fate of the slippers. Partnoy writes,

That day, at noon, she was wearing her husband's slippers....She realized who was at the door and ran towards the backyard...She lost the second slipper while leaping over the brick wall. By then the shouts and kicks at the door were brutal. Ruth burst into tears in the doorway (*The Little School*, 24).

This vignette represents Partnoy's recomposition process in her attempt to humanize both herself and the disappeared victims through her writing. She chooses to focus less on the atrocity and more on the absurdity of the situation of being a disappeared victim, a situation she shares with other prisoners. Partnoy is able to reclaim her dignity as a

human being by focusing on the mundane details, such as the plastic flower on the slipper instead of focusing on the way her humanity was degraded and the way the torturers made her feel like an animal. Partnoy writes, "...that one-flowered slipper amid the dirt and fear, the screams and the torture, that flower so plastic, so unbelievable, so ridiculous, was like a stage prop, almost obscene, an absurd joke" (*The Little School*, 28). Instead of having the painful screams as the focus of the narrative she focuses on the absurdity of this ordinary flower and which presents to the reader a world of unimaginable inhumanity in a manner more immediate, perhaps more meaningful than what any human rights report can do. Taylor points out that focusing on the small details, as opposed to the traumatic event itself helps Partnoy retrace her steps to that terrifying moment of captivity and disappearance and allows her to heal and reconcile the parts of her own personhood that were destroyed when she was kidnapped.

Decomposition and Recomposition- The Connection between Partnoy's Political Voice and Literary Voice

Ultimately, Partnoy's poetry assumes both a political voice and a literary voice that can be better understood through Taylor's definitions of the decomposition and recomposition process. It is important to note that Partnoy's two voices, her political voice and her literary voice are not separate; it is through her fiction and poetry that her writing can become political for she uses both writing styles as a ways to resist Argentina's military regime as they attempted to suppress her voice.

The connection between these two "voices" (Partnoy's political voice and her literary voice) is represented when Partnoy is permitted to read one of her tales, "Graciela: Around the Table" to the court during the truth trials of Bahía Blanca and

where the perpetrators of the torture were present (López-Gay, 92). This tale is written from the perspective of Graciela, a woman who was also a prisoner at the Little School at the same time as Partnoy. In this story Graciela speaks to her unborn child as she walks around a table in her prison cell. Through Graciela's voice Partnoy tells of how she was brutally tortured because the military personnel knew she was pregnant (López-Gay, 96).

Partnoy writes:

“they weren't worried about my belly when they arrested me. The trip from Cututral-Co to Neuquén was pure hell...They knew I was pregnant. It hadn't occurred to me that they could torture me while we were traveling. They did it the whole trip: the electric prod on my abdomen because they knew about the pregnancy...Each shock brought that terrible fear of miscarriage...and that pain, my pain, my baby's pain. I think it hurt more because I knew he was being hurt, because they were trying to kill him...Sometimes I think it would have been better if I had lost him...The baby walks around this table with me, within me...The thirteenth round of this living death. Don't forgive them, my child. Don't forgive this table, either”(*The Little School*, 53-56).

This tale is both factual and fictionalized. It is factual in that Graciela was in fact kidnapped and brought to the Little School while she was pregnant. It is fictional in that it is not Partnoy's story; instead she writes from the point of view of Graciela and she identifies with her suffering through imagining what Graciela was thinking and feeling. In this instance Partnoy connects both her literary voice and her political voice through assuming the perspective of Graciela. In doing so Partnoy denounces the injustice of kidnapping and torturing a pregnant woman and she claims that the torturers should not

be forgiven for these terrible acts: “Don’t forgive them, my child. Don’t forgive this table, either.” Partnoy’s connection between her political voice and her literary voice in this instance proved successful for it was included as legal evidence at the truth trials of Bahía Blanca of 1999(López-Gay, 92). Ultimately, Partnoy needed to use both her political voice and her literary voice to truly make an impact.

Partnoy’s *The Little School* and *Revenge of the Apple* are unclassifiable texts because they assume both qualities of testimony and fiction. This hybridity of genres that make Partnoy’s texts personal yet collective is what makes her writing powerful. Taylor’s decomposition and recomposition processes give great insight into the function that both Partnoy’s political voice and literary voice play in representing both a public and personal endeavor for writing. Both *Revenge of the Apple* and *The Little School* are works of literature that participate in providing evidence of the great injustice the Argentinean military regime inflicted on their own peoples. This political incentive to declare justice is what frames both texts while Partnoy’s literary voice, her focus on small details that readers can relate to, is how she connects with humanity in a way that standard testimony before human rights groups cannot. Ultimately, *The Little School* and *Revenge of the Apple* are works of literature that contribute to the pursuit of justice beyond factual evidence because Partnoy uses imagination and fiction in order to convey not only the facts of what happened but also what is truly felt like to be a political prisoner. Thus, it was both her factual and literary retelling that proved an effective and powerful way to denounce the great injustices of the Argentinean military regime.

Chapter Two: Reshaping Selfhood through Memory in Nora Strejilevich's *A Single Numberless Death*

Nora Strejilevich's *A Single Numberless Death* (2002) is a passionately deep and tragic story of human endurance under conditions of absolute terror. It is both a fictional and nonfictional text. It is fictional in that it tells the story that is not specific to one individual but rather many individuals who shared the experience of disappearance. The text is nonfiction in that it contains specific factual information concerning the process of repression and the experience of those who were victims of state terrorism in Argentina during the Dirty War. It is impossible for readers to assume a complete understanding for the events Strejilevich experienced however she uses metaphor to transcend readers' lack of experience in order to help them understand what cannot be fully represented. Ultimately, through fact and fiction Strejilevich is able to translate her experiences in a way that allows readers to sympathize and involve themselves in the despair of the victims Strejilevich writes about.

Nora Strejilevich was kidnapped in July 1977 and remained disappeared for days in a secret detention center called the "Club Atlético," or the "Athletic Club" located in Buenos Aires. Her brother Gerardo, his girlfriend Graciela Barroca, and her two cousins, Abel and Hugo, were also kidnapped and brought to this same detention center. It was stated in *Nunca Más* that at least 1,500 people were taken to this concentration camp (CONADEP, *Nunca más*, 157. As quoted by Taylor, 129). After being released Strejilevich went into exile and traveled to many countries including Israel, Spain, Italy, Brazil, the United Kingdom, and Canada, until settling in San Diego in the United States where she finished writing *A Single Numberless Death*. She began writing this book

while taking an autobiography class at the University of British Columbia, Canada. During this time the author returned to Argentina several times, once in 1984 to testify for the CONADEP however she never moved back.

A Single Numberless Death is divided into three main parts. The first part concerns the experience of being disappeared, the second, the experience of exile, and the third, the fight for justice. Each of these three parts include a collage of fragments reflective of the fact that Strejilevich was blindfolded throughout her imprisonment and therefore, she has no visual bearings from her experience as a coherent totality. Because she was deprived of her sight Strejilevich weaves and pieces together fragmented memories in a form of a collage in order to connect her present with her past. The author also implements visual registers that contribute to her fragmented narration. For instance, she italicizes many passages which represent the protagonists' stream of consciousness during her time of confinement and which creates a feeling of immediacy for her readers who begin to feel as if they too are experiencing the events she writes about.

Unlike Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School* or Alicia Kozameh's *Steps Under Water*, *A Single Numberless Death* is unique in the sense that it records real dialogues of other victims and which allows countless survivors to speak for themselves. This text contains oral testimonies of other survivors, transcriptions of testimonies from *Nunca Más*, and other written documents related to the repression that the Argentinean people faced and which she compiled during her visits to Argentina (Breckenridge, 42). Her focus on collectivity and community is threaded throughout her text as she continuously switches from first to third person, from past to present, and from stories of everyday life to stories of torture and unimaginable horror. Strejilevich speaks to her incentive to

represent a collective experience of disappearance: “I needed the company of other voices- genocide and its legacy of collective tragedy, not solely my own. Mine was only one register in a choir of voices that I yearned to hear”(Strejilevich, *Beyond the Boundaries*, 174).

In her narrative Strejilevich uses her imagination to engage in both an internal dialogue as well as a fictional dialogue with her loved ones in a way that attempts to make sense of a traumatic past that is both personal and collective and which allows readers to understand the gravity of an experience that was shared by thousands. Ultimately, through creating a narrative landscape for numerous voices Strejilevich is able to contextualize her personal experience within this historical time period. Strejilevich claims that these exchanges with survivors taught her that “traumatic recollection has to be integrated into cultural memory” and therefore, “resisting the open wounds of our history- working through pain even if these wounds will never heal since we cannot find out how each of the *desaparecidos* was assassinated- is achieved mainly through weaving threads of memory, an act that needs at least two human beings- survivors and listener” (Strejilevich, “*Beyond the Boundaries*,”176). This collective nature of reconstructing the past through writing that Strejilevich speaks of is represented by the text’s narrative fragments that are structured as an internal dialogue; an imagined or remembered conversation between Nora, the narrator, and her loved ones who are absent in the moment of her writing.

In an unpublished interview with Maria Malusardi, Strejilevich explains her intentions behind engaging in dialogue with her loved ones in her narrative:

I then realized that I was talking to the dead...Primo Levi used to say that a survivor speaks for others who cannot tell their stories because they are dead and those are the ones who really suffered the worst. I thought that, in my case, I did talk *to* them, and not *for* them. And then I understood why I said at the beginning of the book: “for the three of whose departure left me in mid-sentence.” My parents and my brother...Then I thought that when you give testimony, you always have to have someone who listens to you. In my case, I invented them so they would listen, I talked to them; this is what I think I did (Taylor, 131).

This statement reveals one of Strejilevich’s most prominent motives behind writing *A Single Numberless Death*; her incentive to represent both a personal and collective trauma through rewriting her experiences and the experiences of others. Strejilevich’s claim in the above passage: “I did talk *to* them, and not *for* them” is especially powerful because it shows that through writing *A Single Numberless Death* the author is engaging in an imagined dialogue in which she lovingly conjures up the deceased. She is not assuming a level of authority over their unique voices by attempting to speak *for* them but she is in fact assuming a more intimate and equal relationship by writing *to* them about the similar experiences they all shared as disappeared victims. In order to talk *to* those who lost their lives as opposed to talking *for* them through her writing, Strejilevich claims that she invented survivors so that they would listen to her testimony and so that she could talk to them because as she believes, “when you give testimony, you always have to have someone who listens to you (Ibid). Even though Strejilevich knows that witnesses like herself will never be able to testify fully to the true horror, she nevertheless feels the need to tell what she does know.

The complex nature of this text is reflected in the title: *A Single, Numberless Death*. The death is both single, as in Strejilevich's own disappearance, as well as collective, or in other words, numberless, as in the other 30,000 victims who disappeared during the repression. The title of the text is taken from a quote by Tomás Eloy Martínez, an Argentinean journalist and writer who wrote in his work titled, *Lugar común la muerte*: "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." Strejilevich inserts this quote in the very first page of *A Single Numberless Death* in order to emphasize the collective nature of the experience of disappearance as well as resist the indifference and oblivion surrounding the disappeared victims and whom she represents in her work.

The opening poem of the text conveys the sheer number of people who endured the experience of disappearance. Because there was an enormous amount of disappeared victims, the death is numerous, but it is also numberless because the disappearance of these victims was not acknowledged; it was denied and kept secret.

When they stole my name

I was one I was one hundred I was thousands

I was no one (Strejilevich, 2).

In this passage Strejilevich tells readers of how her name, a symbol for her identity, was stolen from her and she was diminished to existing solely as a number both literally and metaphorically. Strejilevich explains that when she was brought to the Club Atlético she had to "surrender" her name "as if it were a weapon" and she was given a new name in the form of a number: "K-48"(Strejilevich, 40). Strejilevich explains that when she was

kidnapped and her name was stolen, she became “nobody” and was given a number for her new identity. She asserts her personal experience of disappearance by claiming that she was “one” but then also shows that she represents “thousands” of the other victims who were also disappeared; who also were not recognized as individuals with their own names and distinctive lives. By showing how identity is symbolically erased when names are taken away, Strejilevich emphasizes how names bring out the particularities of individuals and gives power to human dignity because when one individual addresses another individual by their name, a level of respect and equality is established. It is easier to understand how the absence of one’s name, and which is linked to one’s identity, increased this notion of “disappearance.” That is, without their names, the identity of these victims became invisible; they had disappeared.

While Strejilevich writes about the loss of individuality in captivity she does not fail to assert her own individuality in her text by writing about certain personal memories that she uses to remind herself of her unique personhood. Strejilevich writes, “Right then I seal a pact with the Nora-to-Come: to remember. I store away these images in the pocket of my memory so I can reach them whenever necessary. Today I project them onto my closed eyelids to snuggle against the cold”(Strejilevich, 41). Memory becomes an anchor for the narrator to not only comfort herself in times of hardship, to “snuggle against the cold,” but her memories, “these images” that she stores in the “pocket” of her memory also remind her of who she was in the moments when these memories were made. Holding on to her personal memories in this way becomes a way to preserve her significance as an individual and her unique selfhood.

As mentioned previously, while Strejilevich asserts her individuality in her text, she also has a large incentive to represent the experience of disappearance as something that was shared by countless people. This motive is reflected in her descriptions of torture and which she complements by including the experiences of other women. At the end of the first part of *A Single Numberless Death*, Strejilevich presents a parallel between her experience and the experience of a woman named Diana, which Strejilevich takes from Osvaldo Bayer's *Rebeldia y esperanza* (Bayer, 330-32. As quoted by Taylor, 135). The parallel is constructed by alternating paragraphs that narrate the two women's abduction from their apartments on Corrientes Street one day in July 1977, their experience of torture and abuse, and their escape into exile (Taylor, 135). In this parallel, Strejilevich narrates how Diana was gang raped by her captors in her apartment. In the passage it is difficult to know whose experience Strejilevich is writing about for she does not refer specifically to her own experience of rape. That said, she does suggest that sexual abuse is a part of every woman's experience of torture and emphasizes the fact that rape was a typically practiced by the forces in power (Taylor, 136).

WHEN THEY WERE READY one said, "Take off your clothes!"

We took them off, Diana. And right then a new battle began. The Dirty War. THE TERRIFIED young woman, her eyes covered, was conscientiously raped by each of them. Two hours apiece. While two slept the third one raped her. Anything went. A real victory of Argentine pricks over a helpless English woman. Finally a victory! The goals add up. Argentina! Argentina! When they got hungry, they went down for pizza and Cokes. And back upstairs for more.

Did they eat a sandwich and a 7 UP after dumping me in my cell? (Strejilevich, 87).

This passage is particularly disorienting because Strejilevich doesn't specify which parts of the experience of rape is her experience and which parts are Diana's experience and in this way, the separation between an experience that is unique to one individual is erased, and instead experience is presented as something that is shared. Strejilevich uses the shared experience of rape as a metaphor for how the experience of being a disappeared victim is very personal, but it is also one that is shared by thousands.

In *A Single Numberless Death* the experience of rape and torture is often narrated in fragmented language, and which is used to represent the tortured body's physical fragmentation when inflicted by torture. Strejilevich writes,

the loathing for that sharp tip that explodes on contact with the skin, vibrating and hurting and cutting and piercing and destroying brain, teeth, gums, ear, breasts, eyelids, ovaries, nails, the soles of the feet. My head, my ears, my teeth, my vagina, my scalp, the pores of my skin, give off a burnt smell (Strejilevich, 23).

The notion of fragmentation is demonstrated in this account of torture through Strejilevich's descriptive use of verbs to illustrate the destructive effect that torture has on her body as both a part, and as a whole. For example, she uses verbs that convey destruction in reference to the sharp tip inflicted on her body: "explodes", "vibrating", "hurting," "cutting", "piercing", and then describes the sharp tip as "destroying" a multitude of singular body parts such as "brain, teeth, gums, ear, breasts, eyelids, ovaries, nails..." To finalize this account of torture the narrator brings all her singular body parts

inflicted with pain, together, claiming that they all give off a “burnt smell.” Not only does this account of torture demonstrate the notion of how torture fragmentizes the body in a both literal and figurative sense, but this account also shows that extreme pain traumatizes not only the body, but also the psyche; this experience of torture can only be represented by a fragmented illustration of her memory of the event.

Strejilevich’s use of fragmented narration represents the role of memory as a technique that is both dangerous as well as instrumental for coping with trauma. In *A Single Numberless Death*, the act of forgetting is an act of resistance. The narrator speaks to her act of obliterating memory as a type of “technique” that allows her to cope with the horrors experienced in prison and resist a “break down.” For the narrator, the act of remembering must be removed from her existence in prison:

It’s not clear how or when someone might experience such a breakdown...Every prisoner worries about breaking down. How long will I be able to take it?...I succeed thanks to a technique that obliterates memory. Memory must coagulate and take on a life apart, far from here, among its own characters and landscapes (Strejilevich, 34-5).

Not only is the act of forgetting a coping mechanism, but it is also a way to reclaim a sense of humanity that the military guards are trying to destroy through torture and imprisonment. Strejilevich writes about the desire to escape and the desire to forget:

I want to escape this web of wounds and bruises. My shackled feet no longer struggle. Pain moans through my body, repeating obsessively, ‘You’re in a hell-hole, disappeared, dis-ap-pear-ed. ‘ I cover my ears. I curl up and try to sleep, to forget that I am this throbbing, inert thing...(Strejilevich, 41).

In this passage, Strejilevich chooses the word “thing” as opposed to the word “human,” or “person,” in order to illustrate the loss of humanity that torture brings. That is, torture is so dehumanizing that it causes the narrator to forget that she is human; she can only think of herself as this “inert thing” “throbbing” in pain. Escaping the “web of wounds and bruises” through forgetting that she is this “inert thing” “throbbing” with pain allows her to forget that she is in a “hell-hole, disappeared.” Ultimately, through forgetting her painful reality the narrator is attempting to cope with the horrors she is facing and resist a breakdown.

Although Strejilevich introduces the benefits of obliterating memory as a way to resist horror and repression, memory is also used on the other hand, to resist and reach a place of comfort and safety. For example, in a passage mentioned previously, the narrator admits that she has purposefully made an attempt to remember her past self: “Right then I seal a pact with the Nora-to-Come: to remember. I store away these images in the pocket of my memory so I can reach them whenever necessary. Today I project them onto my closed eyelids to snuggle against the cold”(Strejilevich, 41). In this instance, Nora’s memories of her life, simple memories such as an image of a beautiful landscape representative of her freedom before imprisonment, is a way to resist the oppression in prison. The last sentence of this passage returns the narrator and the reader to the narrator’s prison cell in the Club Atlético in which pain and the cold are unbearable and therefore, she uses her imagination of a beautiful landscape to “project these images” onto her “closed eye lids to snuggle against the cold.” In this instance the narrator uses these memories of beauty and joy as a way to comfort herself, to remind herself of the beauty of life before prison as an attempt to cope with her new repressive reality.

Ultimately in this instance, it is the connection between imagination and memory that bring the narrator to a place of safety, comfort, and pleasure.

Memory is further represented as a coping mechanism in the way that Strejilevich uses interconnected memories to cope with her traumatic past. In an interview with Jorge Boccanera, Strejilevich explains her narrative strategy of using interconnected memories:

The superimposition of scenes- my childhood and what came afterwards-allow me to reveal that which, if said explicitly, would become one more fact. I try to superimpose inner and outer worlds in order to relate what we are. The story looks for an assimilation of that past so that it becomes experience rather than obsessive trauma (Boccanera, *Redes de la memoria*. As translated by Taylor, 145).

While Strejilevich uses memory to escape pain, she also actively remembers upsetting moments in her past in order to relive the pain at the moment of writing so she can better articulate and illustrate her experience of imprisonment. That is, Strejilevich uses fragmented memories of painful moments in order to place the new pain experienced in prison within categories of familiarity that are more understandable and relatable for readers. Strejilevich creates these categories of familiarity by linking memories of pain experienced as a child and the present pain inflicted by the experience of torture. This kind of correlation is displayed in the story of her visit to the dentist on her birthday when she was a child. This flashback is interrupted by another flashback where the narrator is at the Club Atlético, and which connects her childhood experience at the dentist to her experience of torture in prison.

They tied me to an enormous chair that leans back, leaving me with my head down and my legs up in the air. I scream, but they do not stop...I'm going to throw up. They release me so that I can spit blood out into the sink. I spit out my birthday...I'm left with a scarred soul, an invisible mark that will grow with the years and become a scab (Strejilevich, 65-6).

In this passage Strejilevich begins by claiming that she was “tied to an enormous chair that leans back,” leaving her with her head down and her feet in the air,” a description of an event that arguably could have taken place in both the circumstance of going to the dentist as well as the experience of torture. The next sentence, “I scream, but they do not stop” is more reflective of an experience of torture however it could also be true to her experience at the dentist. The third sentence, “they release me so I can spit blood into the sink” imitates a common occurrence when one goes to the dentist but the word “release” gives the sentence an impression of imprisonment reflective of the experience of torture. The last sentence of this passage, “I'm left with a scarred soul, an invisible mark that will grow with the years and become a scab” is infused with the effects of torture.

Ultimately, these shared feelings, ideas and words used to describe the narrator's pain, despite whether it's pain experienced in the past or present, allows the reader to recognize the connection between the event of torture and the feeling of pain in general, and thus helps the reader understand the pain that Strejilevich endured. Furthermore, by connecting her experience of torture to more common endurances of pain, such as going to the dentist, Strejilevich is able to make an unrepresentable event such as torture, into a somewhat relatable experience and connects to her readers in this way.

When recounting the effects of torture, Strejilevich illustrates a loss of humanity represented in the loss of the ability to think.

The mind gradually shrinks and your world becomes limited to when they open the door; when they close it, what you eat today, what you'll eat tomorrow, when you're punished, and when you're not. Those were the things that mattered to me, When your life gets so small, you forget where you are, who you are...Thinking becomes pointless (Strejilevich, 60).

This passage reflects the loss of humanity caused by the experience of torture. Humans, unlike all other animals, have the open-ended ability to think and imagine. The experience of torture destroys this unique human quality because, as Strejilevich explains, the traumatized mind gradually shrinks and can only think about torture and hunger, the two thoughts that dominate one's existence in prison. Strejilevich writes about the loss of humanity not only in terms of losing the ability to think, but also in becoming consumed in the "unreality" of her new world in prison where she is continually harassed and told by the torturers that she does not exist. In *A Single, Numberless Death* Strejilevich illustrates a scene where the torturers are harassing her: "You're a piece of shit, you don't exist" another voice adds. There's only pain. The unreality of the world settles somewhere beyond my gums and my molars. Beyond that, nothing"(Strejilevich, 17). The immense pain and "unreality of the world" in which beyond the narrator's pain, there is "nothing", is representative of the way that disappeared victims were stripped of their humanity and made to understand their new oppressive reality as a world where pain is the only thing that exists.

Although Strejilevich writes about how the disappeared victims were stripped of their humanity by being told that they did not exist, she also writes about the constant reminder of existence after survival; she writes that after the narrator's experience of torture and disappearance, she "emerges invested with a new skin inscribed by scars," and which are constant reminders of her survival. When the narrator is released from Club Atlético and arrives back home, the scars appear both literally and figuratively: "Mama stays right by me and notices the scars that will not be sponged off. I remember the feel of her hands on the welts on my [new] skin. My skin...changed during [that] time"(Strejilevich, 85). This "new skin" is the skin that Nora has acquired through torture and it becomes a marker that defines her and all the survivors of the Dirty War: "our second skin, almost two decades old"(Ibid). This "new skin" which is a part of the narrator's body and the body of all the survivors, is also a metaphor for the text. The "new skin" that Strejilevich writes of is not completely new skin, it is scarred, it is marked by painful memories, but nevertheless, it is skin that heals. Therefore, Strejilevich writes *A Single Numberless Death* in order to heal, but also to remember her painful past, to remember the scars that will never completely fade from this "new skin."

By writing *A Single Numberless Death*, Strejilevich is defining the experience of disappearance in both a personal and political way. While she writes about the disappeared and repression in a more intimate and personal manner, her writing still provides a strategy for political resistance. Through her writing Strejilevich gains agency after enduring an experience of imprisonment where all agency was taken from her. In a reading Strejilevich gave at Lehigh University in April 2007 she claimed, "Through my writing, I went from being a victim to being an agent"(Taylor, 159). This reclaimed

agency allows Strejilevich to engage in political action by denouncing the dictatorship through her writing and in this way, her work as a testimony is a political duty against those who repress and continue to repress her voice and the voices of other Argentinean survivors.

Strejilevich's last words of the book represent this act of resistance through writing for she emphasizes the need to preserve a living memory in order to resist: "Words written so 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"(Strejilevich, 171). In this passage the author is explaining one of her main incentives for writing *A Single Numberless Death*; the incentive to resist the "armed monologues," that is, the perpetrators of state violence who are armed with weapons and who have the power to provide an official narrative of history. This narrative however is not one that represents a history of those who have been imprisoned and killed, it is a history told only from the perspective of the perpetrators who, because they silenced the histories of the disappeared victims, "turned so much life into a single numberless death." This last part of the book shows that *A Single Numberless Death* calls for the reader, as a listener, to engage in political action and resistance by reminding readers about the necessity of resistance and the power of words against death, silence, and oblivion.

Not only is writing an act of resistance for Strejilevich, but it is also a way to reassert her human qualities that have been taken away through imprisonment and torture. Strejilevich writes about the loss of humanity caused by imprisonment:

In that place you weren't allowed to speak, you weren't allowed to look around, you weren't allowed to move. The cells had a peephole on the outside. They would approach unexpectedly and look in, and if they found you- even in the darkness- with your blindfold off, or walking about, or exercising, or giving the least sign of being human and showing any hint of resistance, the punishment was swift (Strejilevich, 45).

Strejilevich writes *A Single Numberless Death* to counter the official narrative that claimed that countless individuals had just “disappeared.” That is, she writes this text to declare that the government in fact kidnapped these disappeared victims and therefore, the “official” history of Argentina that the perpetrators told was not the true history. In addition to countering official history, Strejilevich also writes this text in order to reclaim a selfhood that was lost through her experience of imprisonment. That is, writing about her experience is a way to reclaim a sense of self that was stolen. As she explains in *A Single Numberless Death*, her prison cell consisted of, “eight beds and no closet, no night table, no place to keep whatever it is you have, no room to be who you are...”(Strejilevich, 62). In an environment where selfhood is obliterated, writing is a way to recreate a sense of self that was lost. Strejilevich writes:

I fill the void with voices, which at least distract me from so much blood, with letters that throb to the touch. I can write only vowels and consonants that barely invoke you. Words, only words remain. Your name is bodiless, fleshless, your name is weightless, your name is remorseless-your name (Strejilevich, 10).

Strejilevich connects to a lost sense of self through writing about her experience as a way to “fill the void with voices”; this “voice” being her own voice as well as the voices of

other disappeared victims. For Strejilevich, writing is a way to “distract” herself from violence. Strejilevich writes that her name is “bodiless” and “weightless,” and therefore, “only words remain”; her selfhood, her name, and her body have been destroyed after her experience of imprisonment and torture and therefore, all she has left is the power to use words to fill this void, to fill her “weightless” name and make it whole again.

Strejilevich’s incentive to write about the experience of disappearance in order to prove the existence of the disappeared, to resist oppression, and to create a new selfhood is reflected in her poetry:

My name a climbing vine
 got tangled
 among syllables of death
 DE SA PA RE CI DOS....
 Yes, I will write
 thousands of gs of rs of os.....
 whirlpools of desire
 that once were names...
 I will resist you will resist
 with first name with last name
 the shameless language
 of oblivion (Strejilevich, 159-60).

In these excerpted lines from Strejilevich’s longer poem contained in *A Single Numberless Death*, she illustrates the way that her selfhood was lost, her name “tangled” among the experience of being a disappeared victim who was close to death, a “DE SA

PA RE CI DOS” as she spells out in Spanish. In order to “untangle” her name and reclaim her selfhood, she claims “Yes I will write thousands of gs of rs of os.....whirlpools of desire that once were names.” This statement represents Strejilevich’s both personal and collective incentive to writing *A Single Numberless Death*. Her personal incentive for writing lies in how writing about her experience allows her to attempt to escape the horrors of her past and build a new, more tolerable reality. Strejilevich writes, “I cannot cling to the past; I have to let it pour out, in an avalanche of scenes and voices. I’d like to let it escape so I can air out that corner where I have so ill-fittingly lodged it. I want it to have a more bearable existence”(Strejilevich, 161). While that is the personal incentive for writing *A Single Numberless Death*, Strejilevich also asserts that she will write about the victims that also once had names and selfhoods, and that were destroyed and stolen just as hers was.

In *A Single Numberless Death* names are very important not only because they are signifiers of selfhood and individuality, but they are also used as tools for resistance.

Strejilevich writes,

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. I hurl my name with every last fiber-with lungs, with guts, with legs, with arms, with rage. My name flails wildly on the edge of defeat (Strejilevich, 4).

In this passage the narrator is struggling to free herself from her captors. Strejilevich writes in the second person, using “you” to represent a collective experience of being kidnapped; not only was she kidnapped, but many others were also kidnapped. This use

of the second person also creates a level of both immediacy and intimacy for her readers; they begin to feel that they are also part of the story. The image of someone kicking and screaming “against a nameless fate” is extremely powerful for Strejilevich is alluding to the way that disappearance stripped individuals of their personhood and identity and rendered them nameless. Strejilevich also uses the term “mass grave” to emphasize the collective event of being one of these victims who are kidnapped, who then become nameless and then are killed. Strejilevich then writes, “I hurl my name with every last fiber...my name fails wildly on the edge of defeat.” This statement shows that by resisting the threat of becoming nameless, the narrator is metaphorically throwing her name at the captors as a sort of weapon to resist defeat and to resist having her identity taken away from her. She is reaffirming her name and thus reaffirming her personhood.

The importance of names is further highlighted in the last chapter of *A Single Numberless Death* where Strejilevich writes about the powerful moment where her identity was recognized by the CONADEP when she was called to testify. Strejilevich writes, “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”(Strejilevich, 170). This is the first instance in which Strejilevich hears her name, not her code number representative of her status as a prisoner and therefore, lack of status in society, but her name, and which represents her identity as a dignified human being and individual. She then reads the opening chapter of *A Single Numberless Death*, telling the public the previously secret event of her abduction. The passage highlights the great effect this reading has on narrator. Hearing her name and thus having her identity recognized, “springs a voice” that “resonates” within

Strejilevich, a voice that is “determined to speak its own text.” This “own text” becomes Strejilevich’s *A Single Numberless Death*. Strejilevich writes about asking the Argentinean government for reparations and gives insight on the power of language and the written word:

I spend half an hour in yet another hidden office, where I’m asked to have a seat and write down the basic information regarding my kidnapping: date, place, period of detention...I tell myself I’m summarizing the essential data in a paragraph. At the end of my application I ask for reparations from the moment of my confinement to the present, since my whole life has been shattered by these ‘events’(Strejilevich, 154).

From this passage we can see that by being kept in a hidden office and asked only for basic information concerning her experience of imprisonment compels Strejilevich to write her own text, for written language offers in a way that basic facts cannot, a window for seeing the way that imprisonment shattered her entire life. Thus, it is this “voice that speaks its own text” and which Strejilevich creates through writing *A Single Numberless Death* that uses both fact and fiction in order to convey the true horrors of what she endured.

In an interview with Monica Szurmuk the value of fiction can be found in Strejilevich’s explanation for how she started writing. She admits that around 1977 and 1978 she started writing poetry although she had never read a lot of poetry and didn’t consider herself a poet. Despite this she claims that poetry allowed her to extract “sense out of words since the meanings of words had been lost. Poetry allowed me to draw with words, play in a world which at that point was absurd and meaningless”(Strejilevich.

Quoted by Szurmuk, 98). In this way, Strejilevich invents meaning for meaningless words through fictionalizing her narrative. Like *The Little School*, *A Single Numberless Death* switches a between poetic voice and a more objective voice used to report facts. These more factual accounts are more concise, direct and distant in tone. Strejilevich uses a more factual tone when providing excerpts from her testimony given in a formal context compared to some of the more intimate and poetic moments throughout the text.

Ultimately, *A Single Numberless Death* documents detailed facts which demonstrates the way that testimony is effective in legal and human rights contexts however the more compelling function of the text can be found in how the author involves testimony into a narrative framework. Strejilevich speaks to the value of fiction, claiming it be a way “to tell the impossibility of telling” and explains that her “quest” in writing *A Single Numberless Death* was to confront this “impossibility of telling” by representing through her narrative, the “countless deaths that have marked at least three generations of Argentineans”(Strejilevich, “Beyond the Boundaries of Legal Justice,”178). Strejilevich claims agency over her words, declaring that since she was a witness and because she survived she therefore had to “write a story in which the source of truth” was her own word. She explains that she had to “shake up sentences in order to let the unspeakable speak” and had to “invent a form that would somehow translate the shock of horror.” Strejilevich explains that this need to “invent” a new form of language in order to “translate the shock of horror” came from the fact that it was impossible for language to represent such a horrible experience because “horror resists representation” and therefore, “the concentration camp had pushed” their “lives to such a limit that usual vocabulary seemed impotent to recall it.” Strejilevich also claims that representing her

experience “did not agree with a story that has a beginning, middle, and end, nor with well-developed characters.” Instead she wanted “recollections to scream out on the page, but the screams had to have a shape, an aesthetic and an ethical meaning”(Ibid).

This “shape,” this “aesthetic meaning,” this “invented” new form of language that Strejilevich speaks of is what she created through her imaginative language contained in *A Single Numberless Death* and which conveys a truth that expands beyond the sphere of legal justice. Strejilevich juxtaposes her two forms of writing (fiction and nonfiction) alongside one another, making it clear for readers the different effect each form has. The first stanza of the following passage was taken from the CONADEP while the second stanza is a literary description of the same information given through the CONADEP report.

WE WERE TAKEN to the bathroom three times a day... We marched in single file, in groups of ten, holding on to one another’s shoulders. Most of the time we couldn’t take care of our needs because as soon as we arrived, they’d give us order to return to the cell block, or they’d beat us, or they’d allow just two to three minutes for all of us to use the bathroom. They also gave us water there, but usually no time to drink it. – CONADEP.

‘From the cell to the bathroom we choo-choo train along... This isn’t any cute little choo-choo train; it’s more like a slimy, reeking centipede. Forty pairs of legs shuffling along from hole to hole. (Strejilevich, 67-70).

Because of the limited nature of CONADEP, Strejilevich was only permitted to testify using straightforward, factual information devoid of any detail that illustrated the true

horror of her experience. Thus, Strejilevich includes part of her testimony for CONADEP concerning the non-hygienic daily routine while imprisoned, and then compliments this account with a literary description. Strejilevich's description of the prisoners as a "choo-choo train" and then a "slimy, reeking centipede" highlights the absurdity of the inhumane, humiliating, and greatly unsanitary treatment of forcing individuals to hold on to one another's shoulders in order to engage in the very private act of using the bathroom. This understanding of humiliation and dehumanization cannot be conveyed through Strejilevich's factual report given to CONADEP, it can only be illustrated through her description of the prisoners as a train and a disgusting centipede because it calls the reader to imagine, alongside the narrator, what this disgust and horror looks and feels like.

Strejilevich includes another report from *Nunca Más* concerning hygienic routines in prison and then again compliments it with a more personal, literary account of the facts given in her statement.

THERE WAS a disguised entrance to the basement, which had no ventilation or daylight...Kitchen, washroom, and showers, these with an opening in the wall through which the guards would check out the women's asses- *Nunca Más*.

We strip and run to the showers still wearing our chains, pushing, stomping, kicking. It's usually the women who get pawed. The guards rate us as soon as we start to pull down our pants....The ass of the third one, the legs of this one, the tits of the first one in line- one hundred points. Any other bids? Going once, going twice...

‘Watch out, blondie, you’re going to get it!’

Ice cold lashes on your back. Better enjoy it, this might just be your last time under water....(Strejilevich, 69).

In her CONADEP report Strejilevich uses more formal language to simply state that the “guards would check out the women’s asses” when they were in the showers whereas the following passage paints an image of pure terror and humiliation as she describes the naked female prisoners running from the guards, their feet shackled in chains. Strejilevich also gives more detailed information in her literary account, explaining that the guards would not only “check out the women,” but as soon as they would pull down their pants the guards would “rate” their individual body parts: “The ass of the third one, the legs of this one, the tits of the first one in line- one hundred points. Any other bids? Going once, going twice...”(Ibid). These specific details concerning the ways in which the guards “rated” the female prisoners demonstrates the humiliating, degrading, and ultimately dehumanizing feeling that the male guards imposed on female prisoners, and this understanding behind the emotional experience of this event is not demonstrated in the CONADEP report. Ultimately, the fictional elements in Strejilevich’s narrative help readers imagine alongside the narrator, the feelings of disgust, horror, humiliation, and degradation and therefore, the reader is better able to understand what this experience was like for Strejilevich and can better sympathize with her and other disappeared victims.

While fiction is needed to make an unimaginably horrible incident somewhat understandable for readers, Strejilevich also attempts to use facts to restructure and make understandable, for herself, the death of her brother Gerardo; why, how, when, and by

whom are all questions that resonate throughout the book. The author's efforts to analyze and research facts concerning her brother's death and then ultimately write her own story represents her attempt to understand his absence while simultaneously understanding her own abduction and torture. The full reconstruction of Gerardo's death however is ultimately unattainable as the narrator talks directly to her absent brother and explains towards the end of the book:

I come back, Gerardo, to tie up the loose ends of our story into a knot that might undo the uncertainty. To recover a version of facts that could be pieced together and understood and believed. To free myself from the compulsion of inventing endings, endless possibilities (Strejilevich, 152).

As Portela explains in *Displaced Memories*, writing is part of a mourning process by which "language and representation becomes the object that might help fill the void that manifested from loss" (Portela, 43). For Strejilevich, writing is part of a process in which she can "tie up the loose ends" of her own story as well as Gerardo's story. That is, through recovering facts and piecing them together in her narrative, Strejilevich is not only attempting to make sense of a shared experience of disappearance, but she is also seeking a sense of peace. For Strejilevich, writing is an anchor that helps her cope with the trauma of disappearance. The act of writing *A Single Numberless Death* gives her a voice; it gives her a way to use her voice to resist violence and fill a void of silence surrounding the experience of the disappeared victims after so many years of oppression. The phrase "undoing uncertainty" speaks to the fact that Strejilevich writes *A Single Numberless Death* as a way to cope with the devastation of uncertainty. She no longer wants to be uncertain about her past and her brother's fate, and so she attempts to "undo"

this “uncertainty” by putting her experience of imprisonment into words; she writes a story that represents a shared experience of disappearance.

Although Strejilevich writes *A Single Numberless Death* in order to make sense of the experience of disappearance, it is important to recognize the use of the phrase, “undoing uncertainty,” for she does not choose to use a word such as, “clarify” or “erase” uncertainty because she cannot clarify or completely erase the uncertainties she has, she does not know Gerardo’s fate. It is also important to note that the title of this last chapter is “Open Sesame” thus highlighting the open-ended nature of her narrative. This lingering sense of doubt reflects the fact that *A Single Numberless Death* is not a text that can provide complete closure for Strejilevich. That said, although writing does not give all the answers that would ultimately undo the uncertainty that the narrator is burdened by, it does however allow Strejilevich to begin the process of mourning, to recognize the feeling of loss, and then to try and understand it. Ultimately, *A Single Numberless Death* is the “knot” that allows Strejilevich to free herself from inventing endless possibilities concerning the fate of Gerardo and which allow her to engage in a process in which she can mourn his death.

In the very last pages of the text Strejilevich ends with a poem that represents what she means by “undoing uncertainty.”

Voices from the past take over my body. I am, we are the poem
murdered
my brother her son his grandson
her mother his girlfriend her aunt
her grandfather his friend his cousin her neighbor

ours yours us

all of us

Injected with emptiness.

We lost a version of who we were

and rewrite ourselves in order to survive (Strejilevich, 171).

This poem is indicative of Strejilevich's incentive to write *A Single Numberless Death* in order to mourn the entire community of disappeared victims. This poem is very personal. It is about family. It is about "my" and "yours" and "us." This poem is about individuals belonging to one another and having the need to rewrite oneself in order to survive. In other words, this poem is about the need to fill an empty void caused by the experience of abduction and then being considered a disappeared person. In this poem Strejilevich writes, "Voices from the past take over my body. I am, we are the poem..." to show how all those voices of the disappeared victims transcend her body and become the poem; their voices are translated into words that Strejilevich uses to write *A Single Numberless Death*. This opening line of the poem is especially important because it shows her incentive to not only tell her own personal story of disappearance but also to intertwine the other voices, the other personal stories of all the disappeared victims who shared a similar experience of imprisonment.

This interweaving of her own voice and the voices of others highlights the importance of poetry, fiction, and creative writing at large. For Strejilevich, using poetry is a ways to "rewrite" herself in order to survive. That is, converting the memories of her past into fictionalized poetic prose is a ways to make an unimaginably horrible experience somewhat understandable either to readers who cannot relate, or to those who

can. Ultimately, through fiction and poetry Strejilevich is able to reconstruct a personhood that was destroyed through the experience of imprisonment. By interweaving her story and the stories of others she is able to make human connections, and this is what brings her closer to a sense of wholeness after a life shattering experience of imprisonment and torture. The call for survival at the end of the poem is not an urge to return to the now “lost version of who we were” but rather, a command to “rewrite” a new version of individuality and collective selfhood. In other words, *A Single Numberless Death* is not only written to tell her story and the stories of other disappeared, but it is also written so that these stories can be understood in a new way, a way that shows how the disappeared victims and their loved ones are forever changed.

Chapter Three: Reconstructing Memory through Writing in Alicia Kozameh's *Steps Under Water*

Alicia Kozameh's *Steps Under Water* (1996) is a text about a young women's struggle to recognize herself in a world of freedom after experiencing unimaginable horror in prison. The text confronts and explores the paradoxical situation of freedom that does not liberate the narrator, but rather, prolongs a feeling of incarceration. Kozameh uses fiction as a way to grapple with guilt, to pay tribute to friends, and to reimagine and reconstruct a sense of self that she held before prison, and which was severely damaged through the imaginable horror she faced while incarcerated.

As Portela explains in *Displaced Memories* Kozameh was a militant in one of the organizations that tried to change Argentina's social order and she was among the "lucky" and the "legal" prisoners who did not become one of the thousands of disappeared victims (Portela, 91). Kozameh was kidnapped from her home in September of 1975. Members of the military force stormed into her house, beat her for hours, and robbed her and her partner of their belongings. She was then taken from her house to police headquarters in Rosario where she was detained for fourteen months. After this Kozameh was transferred to a penal colony of Villa Devoto, where she served two and a half years. She was released on December 24, 1978 on a particular condition: "freedom under surveillance," which meant that she was kept under surveillance and constantly harassed, arguably another form of incarceration (Portela, 91). She requested a passport in order to leave the country because she was afraid of being kidnapped and imprisoned again, but was forced to wait until 1980 until she could leave. In 1984 Kozameh returned

to Argentina where she stayed until the Spanish publication of *Steps Under Water*, *Pasos bajo el agua* in 1987 (Portela, 91).

Sara, the protagonist of *Steps Under Water* is a twenty-two year old woman who is kidnapped from her house by members of the military and held in prison for three years and three months. The book tells her story of imprisonment, freedom, and exile, and also refers to other female prisoners and family members who were affected by her imprisonment. In an interview with López-Cabrales, Kozameh explains that Sarah is a character created through the combination of both her experiences as well as testimonies of other female inmates (López-Cabrales, “El compromiso,”188. Quoted by Portela, 193). While Sara is the main protagonist, sometimes other female voices narrate, such as in the recorded letter from Juliana and which is analyzed later in this paper.

The first edition of *Steps Under Water* was in Spanish, *Pasos bajo el agua* (1987) and was first written in tiny handwriting on rolling papers that Kozameh had hid inside the leather lining of her sandal straps so that it would not be found during prison cell searches. Kozameh introduces *Steps Under Water* with a brief note where she states

These stories were written so that these events will be known...the substance of story, of every episode, is real; it happened. Either I myself or other *companeras* lived it. I have, however, replaced names or possibly details that in no way affect the essence of what occurred (Kozameh, 46).

In this passage Kozameh is explicitly telling her readers about the collective, truthful, and accusatory story he/she is about to read. In this way, Kozameh writes her text as an act of resistance against the perpetrators and those who repressed and continue to repress her voice. It is important to note that she explicitly informs her reader of both her personal

recreation of the events as well as their accuracy. That is, on one hand Kozameh emphasizes some of the standard traits of testimony, such as the claim to truth, and the focus of the narrative in the collective experience, while on the other hand she explains this text to be a literary work with elements of fiction and creativity. Because of the mix of fiction and nonfiction in *Steps Under Water*, there is an evident disintegration of boundaries between reality and fantasy in the representation of the protagonist's experience. The role of imagination and fiction in the text will be further explored later in this paper.

The title for Kozameh's text, *Steps Under Water*, represents a lingering sense of imprisonment that the narrator is consumed by even after being released from prison. The protagonist's struggle to control her new found freedom becomes especially vivid with Kozameh's metaphor of freedom as water. Kozameh writes that after Sara was released from prison, after spending, "three years and three months without seeing the nighttime sky," she shielded herself from a freedom that she describes as "falling" on top of her. Kozameh then uses rain as a metaphor for this freedom, contemplating the fact that it could have been raining as she crossed the space between the prison and the military bus; the space being freedom: "To cross that space between the prison and the military bus in the rain. Three steps under water. Good title, if I were telling the story"(Kozameh, 142-3).

The beginning of her title, "Steps" reflects the three steps that Sara took from the prison to the military bus; her first three steps of freedom. Kozameh adds to this title, "Under Water;" the water representing rain falling from the sky, and this image being a metaphor for the freedom she describes as falling on top of her. This image of Sara

shielding herself from the rain illustrates the unexpected discomfort that this new freedom brought to the protagonist for she does not describe herself as feeling refreshed or joyful when the rain falls on her; she describes herself as shielding herself, therefore, protecting herself from the fall of the raindrops on her skin.

It is important to note that rain is something that is natural, it is water that gives life to all living things and in this way, is something that is positive, like freedom, and yet the narrator still feels vulnerable and uncomfortable in this new freedom. If we think about the concept of rain as droplets of water that cannot be grasped, cannot be held in ones hand, Kozameh's symbolic use of rain translates to the understanding that Sara is trying to shield herself from this discomfort that comes with freedom that she feels is falling down on her because she has no control over it. Thus, her title, *Steps Under Water* can also be read as, "Steps Under Freedom," alluding to the fact that although Kozameh was freed from prison, she ultimately remained below, under, and beneath freedom; she never felt fully free even after being physically released from prison. Ultimately, Kozameh's illustration of Sara being bombarded by falling raindrops is immensely effective in helping readers understand the great magnitude of the powerlessness the narrator feels once she is freed.

This feeling of powerlessness that consumes the protagonist manifests from a lingering feeling of imprisonment and guilt for having survived. Sara claims that she wants to go back to prison because she misses her friends, and she feels guilty. She claims, "They should be free, all of them. And sometimes I think I don't deserve this freedom I have"(Kozameh, 49). In this instance the root of Sara's guilt manifests from her feeling that she is immorally "celebrating" her freedom by putting her lover in the

position of cheating on his wife, who is not only her friend, but also lived in the same prison cell with her. Kozameh writes, “ Look at what I’m doing. I’m celebrating my freedom by putting you in the position of cheating on your wife. You didn’t do it when she was in jail. But you do it now, when she’s free. This is all so ridiculous”(Ibid). This statement alludes to the understanding that Sara is in some way, tainting the immensely lucky gift of freedom by engaging in an act of betrayal against her friend, someone who she loves and who she relates to on a very deep level because they both experienced imprisonment together.

Sara’s feeling of guilt extends beyond her affair with her friend’s husband for she also feels guilty for the fact that she still feels imprisoned even though she has been granted with the luck of freedom and survival. Kozameh writes,

‘Elsa...I walk the streets, sleep, hang out with friends, shop, think, talk to people, go and sign in at the police station- I’ve got my routine, my goddamn routine. I’m supposed to be alive, I’m supposed to be free. But that’s not how I feel...’(Kozameh, 54).

In this instance Sara is writing to her friend Elsa, who also lived with her in prison, explaining that although she has survived, and now has the freedom to hang out with friends, shop, think, and talk to people, she still does not feel alive nor does she feel free. Kozameh uses the phrase, “goddamn routine” to show that the protagonist is aware of the great privilege it is that she even has the freedom to make shopping, thinking and talking a part of something she can do everyday. These acts become a daily marker of Sara’s survival and yet, there is something lacking, she is not fulfilled by the privilege of having the freedom to have this type of routine; she still does not feel alive.

The protagonist explains to Elsa exactly what this imprisonment in freedom feels like:

I feel like I'm sitting in a movie audience. Each little action, each word, isn't coming from me. I'm not the protagonist...it's like I'm so far removed...I'm in the middle of all that movement, but emotionally I just don't take part. It's like sitting there watching a movie. And not just any movie, but a really insipid one...Ever since I was released, I feel like a prisoner more than ever. In prison with everyone who hasn't been released yet (Kozameh, 54).

In this instance Sara explicitly admits that although she is freed from prison, she feels even more like a prisoner than she did when she was incarcerated. Sara uses the metaphor of being an audience member in a movie theater where she watches a movie about her life, but she is not the protagonist; each word and action she watches on the movie screen does not come from her. Although she is in the middle of all the action that is taking place in the movie, she cannot connect to it emotionally, she claims that she is "too far removed," a statement conveying that she feels disconnected from reality. Ultimately, it is this image of alienation that reflects Sara's ultimate fragmentation of selfhood. At the end of the passage Kozameh writes, "And I can't help but feel guilty for enjoying a freedom that doesn't just belong to me, but to all of us"(Ibid). The statement shows how strong Sara's guilt is for having survived when everyone else who was also imprisoned unjustly, also deserved freedom. Ultimately, the protagonist may be unable to feel free because her guilt for being free is so strong.

Sara's friend Elsa attempts to console Sara's guilt by explaining to her that the acts of the military are not her fault, the fact that she is alive and others lost their lives, is

not Sara's fault. Sara claims that the rational parts of her mind are not working; she is aware that it is not her fault that innocent lives were lost, and yet, she still feels guilty for having survived when others did not: "I know that, Elsa. But it's not the rational part that isn't working right...(Ibid)." Sara then describes her emotions as so strong, they are like "explosions" that make her flinch as she tries to analyze herself and understand this life of "freedom" she now has after being released. Although Sara admits to making a conscious effort to analyze and understand her new life of freedom, she confesses to a great feelings of instability, as if she is constantly fighting to put her "feet on the ground"(Ibid). Ultimately Sara admits to feeling very disconnected from herself and her life of freedom for she claims she is not sure of what she sees, hears, or says.

This notion of a disjointed sense of self relates to the passage where Sara claims that in her new life of freedom she feels as if she is watching a movie about her own life, but where she is not the protagonist. Sara's feeling of brokenness and disconnect from her self is highlighted when she compares herself to a jigsaw puzzle that she struggles to put back together just so she can recognize herself because, "So many things have changed over the past few years..."(Kozameh, 55). Sara has experienced so much "madness and so much horror" that she can no longer feel comfortable in her own skin and in her own reality as a freed person. Sara's broken, or fragmented selfhood is evident in her statement: "Now I've got this identity crisis; I stop knowing...who I am. I lose my way..."(Kozameh, 88). Ultimately, after being released from prison the narrator stops knowing who she is; she feels lost and finds herself unrecognizable.

Sara elaborates on this feeling of guilt and this disconnect from herself by describing a great desperation she has to "feel alive."

'It's a desperation to feel alive. To confirm that you're still the same Sara. That they didn't destroy you. The brilliant, generous, the courageous Sara, the writer with so much promise. The one in prison who always wore her best face. All the wonderful and complex ingredients she was made of...What I want to do Elsa...I'd like to borrow some of that good, natural predisposition of yours so I can put myself back together, so I can return to the way I once was. Do you think that would help me see what's going on in my life more clearly?' (Kozameh, 55-56)

In this passage Sara claims that she frantically wishes she could confirm that she is "still the same Sara," that the military didn't "destroy" her. Sara describes herself as brilliant, generous, and courageous: "The writer with so much promise. The one in prison who always wore her best face." These are the "wonderful and complex ingredients" Sara used to define herself with and yet, she can no longer connect to these characteristics; the trauma the perpetrators inflicted on her destroyed her understanding of her self. At the end of this passage Sara speaks directly to her friend Elsa, asking her to help her see her "life more clearly." Sara asks Elsa to give her some of her "good, natural predisposition" so she can put herself back together, as if her selfhood were a jigsaw puzzle that if she could find the way to "piece back together," she could "return to the way" she once was; she could reconnect to a sense of self she held before prison and which would allow her to feel more grounded in her new reality of freedom.

In *Steps Under Water* Kozameh illustrates how Sara's friendships with the women she lived with in prison help her in this process of reconnecting with her past sense of self. Kozameh also introduces the theme of friendship to highlight her incentive

to write a text that not only tells her own personal story but that also tells a story that is shared by other prisoners. Kozameh describes her and her friends as “women who defied the enemy” and “who concentrated on the fight” for survival. Kozameh writes about this collective fight for survival in the face of looming death:

‘Those women. Who defined their enemy. Who concentrated on the fight...Women who shared with you, four at a time, a cell meant only for one. Those friends, Sara. Ones who day after day exchanged frightened looks with you. Looks of understanding. Looks of farewell in the face of imminent death...’(Kozameh, 43).

In this passage Kozameh explains that the women she lived with in prison all concentrated on resisting the perpetrators in power. Kozameh claims that “each circumstance, each event, dropped us more or less into the same forms of defense” and that it was “always with the unconditional affection and dedication of friends” that allowed them to defend themselves for as she writes, “we needed each other. We had each other (Kozameh, 80). Not only does Kozameh write about a personal bond between Sara and her fellow inmates that turned into a collective act of resistance against the enemy, but she also highlights a great sense of community that was built through supporting one another everyday as they all “exchanged frightened looks...looks of understanding. Looks of farewell in the face of imminent death”(Kozameh, 43). This statement highlights the notion that the experience of imprisonment and the fear of death was something that was shared. The protagonist is not described as being alone in these feelings for she exchanges looks of understanding with her fellow political prisoners that confirmed that they all understood what it meant to fear death in this way. This suggests

that no one is able to understand the protagonist in the way that her fellow prisoners can because only they know what it means to experience sheer fear in the precise way that they suffered together.

Kozameh concentrates on this theme of friendship as a way to illustrate that not only does friendship in this text represent a mutual understanding of imprisonment, but it also exemplifies how individuals can shape one another and help one another heal from horrifying events. One friend that represents this is Cristina. Kozameh writes about the great impact Cristina had on Sara:

Cristina cleared up the vision of the world for me. She broke open the confines to which winds from all directions had subjected us, winds that stunned us...And we continued our movement...Cristina... was the one who hovered over me, who let me know that my feet had gotten too far of the ground...who...simply dragged me towards reason. Cristina was my measuring stick in reality (Kozameh, 83).

In this passage Kozameh shows the way that Cristina helped Sara by clearing "up the vision of the world" for her and breaking "open the confines" of the prison in which they submitted to. According to Kozameh Cristina used reason to help Sara keep track of reality while they both suffered an experience of imprisonment that made their existence feel unimaginably surreal. Ultimately this passage reflects the importance of friendship which Kozameh uses in order to highlight how her experience of prison was shaped by the fact that she was not alone in her suffering, her suffering although personal, was shared with other women. This theme of friendship is important for Kozameh to include in *Steps Under Water* for it is a testament to Kozameh's attempt to show how the experience of imprisonment and disappearance is one that was shared; and the path

towards healing from these horrors is one that is built through the bond of those who experienced similar, if not the same, type of pain.

Kozameh's incentive to represent a collective experience of imprisonment calls for a transformation of testimonial writing into a consciously fictionalized narrative that combines different strategies of representation that all result in a fragmentary structure: letters, diary entries, and recreation of dialogues with different narrative voices that all concern the different aspects of her experience. Through these various modes of representation Kozameh attempts to reconstruct the struggles she faced using narrative techniques that emphasize both the horrific nature of the events as well as the impossibility of language to convey the pain and she endured. The narrative lacks a chronological sequence as it starts and ends with Sara's return home from prison and randomly skips throughout chapters from exile, to imprisonment, to freedom under surveillance.

Fiction is valuable for Kozameh in writing *Steps Under Water* because she uses the creative act of writing as a tool to both narrate the experience of, as well as survive, the trauma she has suffered. That is, Kozameh explores how fiction can be used as a medium to express seemingly unrepresentable experiences. As Portela points out, through fiction Kozameh avoids confronting horror straight on and instead searches for other ways that allow for both memory and survival (Portela, 92). For the author, fiction, as an art form, is unquestionable and therefore, she considers it to be the best form of testimony. This claim that fiction is unquestionable stems from the idea that art is something that is wholly personal, and because art stems from a solely personal place, the art that one makes cannot be untrue; it is always true to the person who is creating the art.

Therefore, *Steps Under Water* as a work of art and as a fictional recreation of true events conveys the truth of a personal experience of disappearance to readers who otherwise cannot understand or relate to a similar experience of horror.

Kozameh writes about the value of fiction and the role of fragmentation in her writing and which emphasizes the role of pain when writing about trauma:

I don't know if it is my wish. I would say that it is the way I feel the reality that I want to convert into fiction. I feel it fragmentarily. I feel the need to jump to one thing to another, probably in order not to be invaded by an emotional state that would not even allow me to express myself in my writing. I think that the origin of the fragmented literature has to do with a determined capacity of incapacity to dwell on a topic without feeling the wound (URL cited in Portela, 94, footnote 12).

There are two main important aspects of this passage that speak to the relationship between trauma, memory and language in *Steps Under Water*. First being that Kozameh is expressing a conscious effort to fictionalize true events and second being, her need to write in fragments in order to endure the pain caused by narrating painful memories from the past. Ultimately these fragments of narration highlight the main characteristic of the relationship between writing, memory, and trauma: the impossibility of its complete representation through language.

In the last letter of the text, Juliana, a woman who lived with Sara in prison, writes to Sara. Juliana translates her memories of prison into words, and which helps her cope with a past that haunts her.

Sara dear, my sister...Mariela avoided talking about prison the whole time. I prefer not to stir stuff up, but if something does come up, I don't hit the gas pedal. She, what can I tell you: she almost lets it be known explicitly that the subject really gets to her...I mentioned the girls in the isolation cells...I wasn't trying to be all doomy and gloomy, but if it's there it just comes out all by itself. I gradually broached the subject without employing any real strategy (Kozameh, 144-45).

In this letter Juliana compares herself to Mariela, another woman whom they lived with in prison and who unlike Juliana, chooses to remain silent instead of discussing their traumatic past. In *Steps Under Water*, both Sara and Juliana's letters are written at a distance from the events- both geographically, due to their exile, and chronologically, a few years after they were released (Portela, 121). This level of removal is necessary for both Sara and Juliana to better process, analyze, and remember events that took place in the past within a broader context. Thus it is through writing these letters that both women are able to start the process of writing as a path towards healing.

The process of writing letters thematizes some of the various positive effects that the act of writing has for survivors of trauma. That is, the act of writing is a way to rebuild and create after devastating destruction. The process of letter writing not only establishes a type of healing process but it is also significant because it helps fill the gaps in the collective memory of these female prisoners who experienced imprisonment together. This also highlights Kozameh's incentive to write *Steps Under Water* as a text that not only tells her own personal story of imprisonment, but also the stories of others who shared a similar experience. Furthermore, the collective nature of *Steps Under Water*

is important because Kozameh was only able to tell her own story once she reached out to the other women she lived with in prison and together, they helped each other fill the various uncertainties in their memory and which helped them better understand, and ultimately distance themselves from a past that continues to haunt them.

Although writing proves to be a sort of cathartic process for Sara and her friends, there is still a difficulty in expressing memories in writing that Sara admits to: “What I’m doing just isn’t working, trying to describe a moment of that magnitude. Almost absurd. Possible, but absurd” (Kozameh, 143). Sara also recognizes a problematic relationship she has to language; she states that her main frustration as a writer is the inadequacy of language to express herself completely. Sara describes this difficulty in expressing herself as a paralyzing fear she has in not being able to find the “right expression, the suitable one.” She then claims the literary process to be both “anguishing” and “rewarding” because of the various limitations:

...the most enjoyable aspect of the manipulation, the most anguishing and rewarding part of the literary kneading process is to replace one word with a better one. Although you can use absolutely the worst word or one nearly as poor, or one not so poor but oddly irreplaceable. And those are limits. And the most aggravating part (Kozameh, 143).

Ultimately, *Steps Under Water* is a text that represents and explores the question of how one tells the untellable. That is, through fiction, Kozameh attempts to represent an experience that she ultimately believes, cannot be fully represented.

In the text Sara also writes to her friend Juliana while in exile in Santa Barbara. In this letter she reflects on memory and writing. As Portela highlights, the purpose of the

letter is to ask Juliana to help her remember so that she can write a short story about her transfer from a prison in Rosario to a prison in Villa Devoto (Portela, 117). Sara writes about her difficulty in remembering most of the experience. The letter opens with Sara reflecting on the act of remembering and how writing about memory is painful but also cathartic:

What kind of effect will these sorts of aftershock, or whatever you want to call them, have on you down the road? (It's never too late dear!) since they're like needles located in strategic points throughout the brain. What I mean is that catharses never come alone: the Paraná River flows from the Matto Grosso, dragging along with it a variety of specimens. The water lilies, Juliana, and the piranhas. The water lilies I'm fairly sure about. But I wonder why the piranhas never reach Rosario (Kozameh, 90).

In this passage there are several significant points regarding memory, trauma, and writing. Sara uses the word "aftershocks" to express the pain she feels as she tries to remember details concerning the event of her traumatic transfer. Kozameh uses the simile of "needles located in strategic points throughout the brain" in order to represent the painful act of actively trying to remember upsetting events in her past. While needles represent the pain that the act of remembering brings, the cathartic feeling that comes from the act of remembering is represented through the metaphor of the water lilies found in the Paraná River. While water lilies can easily be remembered, piranhas are too painful and even dangerous to recall. The piranhas can be compared to breaches in Sara's memory, and which she continues to look for: "I thought about sorting through those events always willing to linger behind"(Kozameh, 90). This sentence shows how Sara

both consciously searches her memory in order to write her story about her transfer, as well as purposely seeks out the pain it provokes in hopes that it will in some way, prove to be cathartic: “Even if I turn myself inside out like a glove trying to get over all of this”(Kozameh, 91). Ultimately, in this passage the author demonstrates how accessing her memory through writing to a friend who shared the same experience helps her cope with her past and present pain. Additionally, the collaborative process of reconstructing the past through letter writing should be noted. That is, Kozameh shows how the protagonist does not revisit her memories alone, she has to engage in a dialogue with another individual who she lived with in prison in order to try and reconstruct a clearer vision of her past.

Throughout the letter Sara skips from one thought to another, as if her memories interrupt one another; she never focuses on one particular topic for more than a few sentences, and which connects the fragmented structure of *Steps Under Water* to the fragmentation of the protagonist’s memory. Therefore, the disjointed structure of this letter is representative of the fragmentary narrative structure of *Steps Under Water* as a whole. The seemingly patchy narrative structure of the letter highlights the fact that because Kozameh’s past was traumatic, she cannot fully articulate what happened because she cannot entirely remember the great horrors she faced. The narration then reaches a point where Sara is unable to continue with her description and her memory is interrupted by a set of questions directed at Juliana, inquiring about her life in Paris:

...Tania so tall and the other one so short, with her mustache and all her personal belongings in a blue sack made from jeans...Tell me about Paris. Ok? Isn’t that

where you live? Your streets must be like one of those in Posadas...(Kozameh, 91).

After these questions Sara returns to the event of her transfer and tries to remember the event of her abduction: "Who were you cuffed to? I don't recall seeing anyone next to you at that time"(Kozameh, 92). From this it is clear that Sara is struggling to activate certain parts of her memory. She describes her memory loss as if a sheet were hung between her eyes and brain: "I've been making a serious effort to remember certain episodes. But no such luck. It's like a sheet hung between my eyes and my brain"(Kozameh, 96). Sara then gives a reason for her memory loss:

The reason for the memory loss is all right there in the colors, the shapes, the greater or lesser clarity, the rhythms. The lethal potential of events... I can still feel the asphyxiation, the rills of sweat skipping down my back, I feel the dehydration as if right now they were trying to force me to swallow a watermelon whole. With that intensity. I see gray and green; the green and gray have stuck with me. But there are great, unbridgeable gaps"(Kozameh, 96-7).

In this passage Kozameh implies that Sara is aware of the reason for her memory loss for she claims: "The reason for the memory loss is all right there in the colors, the shapes, the greater or lesser clarity, the rhythms." This sentence is interesting because although Kozameh claims there to be a reason for Sara's memory loss, she does not give explicit details about what this reason is; she only gives abstractions, claiming that this reason lies in "the colors, the shapes, the greater or lesser clarity, the rhythms." It is also interesting that although Sara claims to have memory loss, she writes that she can still feel, with the same intensity, certain feelings she experienced while in prison, such as the

“rills of sweat skipping” down her back. While it “impossible to recall everything” she declares that she does “remember certain moments of anguish.” (Kozameh, 91).

In the passage above Kozameh repeatedly contradicts Sara’s claim of memory loss, showing that although there are “great, unbridgeable gaps” in her memory, she nevertheless holds on to particular sensations that have stuck with her such as “moments of anguish,” the feeling of sweating, certain sounds, and sights such as colors of “grey and green.” This passage highlights a great difference between forgetting concrete events and forgetting sensations. While the narrator forgets the main event, she still remembers colors, shapes, and sounds associated to certain events. That is, while the facts concerning certain events escape her memory, certain sensations such as the feeling of sweat, or, the colors of grey and green stick in her memory. Perhaps this is because these small moments were easier for the narrator to hold on to, they were things that she paid attention to while enduring a traumatic event and while she suppressed the details of horror, she subconsciously “hung a sheet” between her “eyes and brain” and only allowed herself to remember the small details apart from the event of pain and the violence as a whole.

This passage ultimately shows how the narrator resorts to colors and sensations to convey what otherwise cannot be reached because of the great gaps in her memory. This reliance on sensory detail as opposed to concrete visual memory amplifies the value that imagination and fiction hold when telling a story that is seemingly untellable. That is, because of Sara’s memory loss she has to elaborate on what she can remember, colors, shapes, rhythms, and certain feelings, and which are less obvious compared to the facts pertaining to concrete events. Not only does she have to elaborate on these bits of pieces

of what she remembers but she sometimes even has to imagine and thus, fictionalize the colors, the smells, and the other sensations that she does remember in an attempt to fill in these gaps of her memory while simultaneously conveying the overall horror beyond factual details.

Sara's effort to fictionalize fragments of her memory reflects her belief that her words have a certain power; the power to reconstruct the events of her past. Kozameh writes, "I believe in the word. Fervently. For so many who can't imagine certain realities...there's no recourse other than words that are heard, read. Images or no images, always the word"(Kozameh, 143). According to Sara, the word is the only way through which realities can be understood. This last sentence highlights how Kozameh's writing, her use of the word, and specifically, her use of fiction allows her to go beyond the limits of representation imposed by her traumatic experience. Like Strejilevich who hopes to "tie together the loose ends" of her story and Gerado's story through poetry and fiction, Kozameh also uses fiction to imagine and create certain realities that will help both her readers and herself understand her past reality in prison and her present reality in freedom. Ultimately, in *Steps Under Water* Kozameh introduces memory as something that can be fictionalized in an attempt to feel grounded in a world where one has deep cracks in his/ her memory. One of the main ways Sara attempts to cope with her feelings of powerlessness and guilt after being released from prison is to attempt to elaborate and even fictionalize the tiny pieces of what she can remember such as sounds, shapes and colors, so that she can in one way or another, understand her past in a way that ultimately helps her better adjust to her life after prison.

As noted throughout this paper, *Steps Under Water* tells the story of a young woman who struggles with readapting to life after prison. The narrator's struggle manifests in various ways such as feeling guilty for the new freedom she has, wrestling with how to put memories into words, and struggling to connect to a sense of self she held before her experience of imprisonment. Near the end of the text Kozameh illustrates Sara's slow yet conscious effort to readapt and restructure some emotional attachments to her past in attempt to accept a new reality of freedom. In the proceeding passage Sara speaks about a denim jacket she used to associate with her lover, Hugo, admitting that she has to reconstruct her emotional attachment to this jacket because it no longer belongs to Hugo and Hugo remains disappeared, and which makes the denim jacket the physical manifestation of absence and loss.

Kozameh explains that this jacket had a symbolic relationship with Hugo, it inherited part of his overall attitude, it became a part of him, like an extension of his "umbilical cord." Kozameh writes,

...certain jackets seem to have attitudes. The attitudes of certain human beings...There are jackets that are a part of some people...People who wear clothes that seem like an extension of their umbilical cord... Jackets are incredible. There are people who are nobody, or nothing without a jacket....(Kozameh, 73).

Kozameh then explains that once the military guard put the jacket on, it's story changed immediately because it was no longer worn by Hugo: "But when that asshole put it on...the story changed like you could change the date of a party. Just like that"(Kozameh, 74). When the narrator sees the military guard wearing Hugo's jacket Kozameh

describes him as “invading the space which didn’t belong to him” and describes it almost as if he were “peeling off Hugo’s skin and covering himself with it”(Kozameh, 75). This is an especially vivid image, highlighting the denim jacket as a metaphor for Hugo’s stolen identity; not only is the military guard wearing something that does not belong to him, but he is in a way, stealing Hugo’s identity by stealing his jacket. Kozameh explains that after seeing this she was forced to “restructure” her feelings, and this was something that was painful; she had to talk to herself in order to cope with the absence of Hugo: “And don’t think it didn’t hurt to restructure my feelings. You had to be able to readapt. You had to be capable of telling yourself, *That jacket isn’t the same as before.*” Kozameh then compares this process to tearing a cancerous growth out with ones own nails (Kozameh, 79). This passage is significant because it highlights a conscious effort the narrator makes to readapt, and structure an emotional attachment to this denim jacket and which she associates with Hugo.

Through the narrative of Sara, Kozameh demonstrates how the wounds she attributed through the experience of torture, imprisonment, and trauma, have not healed. Sara is a victim of imprisonment who, after being released finds that she can no longer recognize herself, and she is plagued by the feeling of guilt for having survived when countless other innocent lives were lost. That said, Kozameh shows how despite these hardships, Sara slowly begins to gain control of her life through readapting and restructuring her emotions. Despite this failure to reconnect to a sense of self she held before prison, the last chapter of *Steps Under Water* hints that by writing this text, Kozameh, through the narrative of Sara, is coming closer to a sense of wholeness. Kozameh writes,

I got to thinking and told myself: you're young, darling. You're not even twenty-five yet... You're fit for feeling and not feeling. Enjoy the rare virtue of getting angry when you don't get your way and then you're always forgiven afterwards (Kozameh, 148).

In this quotation the protagonist is marking the difference between the extreme repercussions and fear of death that threatened her actions while imprisoned, and the fact that now she is free, she no longer has to fear the repercussion of being killed if she acts out. Kozameh continues to write, "You're torn between the urge the write and the urge to urinate..."(Ibid). In this sentence urinating takes the same priority as writing. Urinating is a bodily function, it is something that comes natural to all animals. Therefore, by drawing a parallel between the urge to urinate and the urge to write, the act of writing is represented as something that is just as natural as the urge to release ones bladder. Drawing on the notion of writing as a healing technique, this statement shows that the protagonist needs to write in order to heal just as naturally as she needs to urinate.

In the next sentence of the passage Kozameh writes, "You still belong to that group of people who wake up at four o'clock in the morning with some idea and decide to snap on the light and write it down..."(Ibid). In this instance the protagonist is characterizing herself as a writer; she is redefining herself through the act of writing about herself and which speaks to the empowerment that writing gives individuals who have struggled to connect to a sense of self they held before experiencing trauma.

Kozameh then writes,

“ Remember that you enjoy certain privileges: a nice face, a good sense of humor. Take advantage of them. A lively and alert brain. Exploit it. Now you can see the

world. You can put yourself right in the middle of it...Don't get caught up in the silence, or against it. Speak and don't speak. Listen and blow off whatever you don't want to hear. Laugh and don't laugh. And don't screw around. Do whatever you feel like doing and don't do it"(Kozameh, 149).

In this part of the passage Sara takes control through self-affirmation; she tells herself that there are steps, such as reminding herself of her privileges, that she has to take in order to heal and in order to feel grounded and whole in her new reality of freedom. She consoles herself by reminding herself to take advantage of her privileges such as having a "nice face," "a good sense of humor" and "a lively and alert brain." Not only does she remind herself of these positive characteristics but she also tells herself to "exploit" these advantages in order to help her "see the world." Before this chapter Kozameh writes about Sara's great struggle to "see clearly," to feel connected to herself in her new reality of freedom. It's evident that in this chapter, Sara reminds herself of her positive attributes in order to feel more grounded and in control of her reality. Moreover, Sara also takes control by telling herself not to get "caught up in the silence" arguably, the silence surrounding the horrific experiences of those who the Argentinean government imprisoned and kept hidden from the public. Ultimately, *Steps Under Water* represents the advice that Sara, otherwise, Kozameh gave herself; it represents how she did not get caught up in the silence, she told her story and the stories of others that illustrate the great horrors disappeared victims faced.

In the concluding lines of *Steps Under Water* Kozameh writes, "Take a deep breath. Come on. Let the air enter. Enter. That's what I told myself...On my way back"(Ibid). Within these last few lines the protagonist soothes herself by encouraging

herself to assume a state of acceptance: letting “the air enter.” This sentence specifically reflects how Sara attempts to find “a way back” to her past self; the way she does so is by “letting the air in,” accepting some of the overwhelming feelings she has, accepting the fact that she does not feel whole, and she does not feel free. In addition, by telling herself to “let the air enter” Sara is reminding herself of the normalcy of breathing, the normalcy of being alive and having the freedom to breathe. Ultimately, the concluding lines of *Steps Under Water* is hopeful. Although throughout the entire text Kozameh has shown how hard it was to transition back to her life before prison, and although she finds herself unrecognizable to herself, she nevertheless is in the process of finding her “way back” to herself through writing *Steps Under Water*. Through telling her story and the story of disappearance that countless individuals experienced, Kozameh is able to pave a path towards healing and towards reclaiming a sense of self that was severely damaged in prison.

Conclusion

For Alicia Partnoy, Alicia Kozameh and Nora Strejilevich, their words and their memories are their weapons. They use language to reinvent a world full of fear and silence. The act of translating their memories into words becomes a strategy to denounce the violation of human rights, to pay tribute to the disappeared victims, and to cope with both individual and collective trauma. All three survivors represented in this study wrote their narratives in order to bear witness to horror and make sure that the voices of those who could not speak for themselves were heard. In this way they have redefined their individual selfhoods in terms of a collective struggle. Through these texts readers see that the process of writing can be a way to create a path for potential healing from trauma and through writing these survivors are able to affirm their existence despite memories that are consumed by the presence of imminent death.

As Majorie Agosin eloquently states in *Inhabiting Memory*: “Memory is also linked to what connects and identifies us, such as the language we speak... Memory envelopes everything, especially in those societies that have been so often denied their own humanity by abusing their dignity”(Agosin, xix). All four texts engage in a dialogue with memory. The way that each author identifies and recovers memory in order to reconstruct the past is an extension of their own personhood and unique identity. In *Steps Under Water* for example, the process of letter writing highlights the need to write in order to connect directly with others as a way to cope with the past as a shared process. The only way to begin to fill the gaps of individual memory is through dialogue with others who have also endured pain and loss. Although the act of reconstructing memory through writing is painful, it becomes necessary for the way in which the narrator

processes the tragic events of her past. The end of *A Single Numberless Death* also confirms Strejilevich's belief in the power of writing: "We lost of version of who we were and rewrite ourselves in order to survive"(Strejilevich, 171). Likewise, Partnoy in her introduction to *Revenge of the Apple* claims that writing down all poems she had ever written led to the recover of her soul (Partnoy, 12).

Ultimately the stories told by these three survivors are stories of loss and renewal. Although their wounds may never be completely healed, and their mourning will never come to a complete end, they use literature to create a path for potential healing. Through these texts, the authors express a commitment to the future. As Strejilevich claims in her article, "Testimony: Beyond the Language of Truth," "Testimony is not only a means for working through, but also a means for social and cultural continuity (Strejilevich, "Beyond the Language of Truth", 707). These three authors represent the notion of testimony as a platform to mourn the disappeared while simultaneously creating memory from a collective experience of disappearance. In this way Alicia Partnoy, Alicia Kozameh and Nora Strejilevich have shown how the act of remembering and the use of fiction and imagination are essential for demanding justice in the name of human rights.

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