

# (Re)Placing Testimony: Symptom and Poetry

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This article draws a structural analogy between symptom and poetry: between symptoms reported by Freud's patients in psychoanalysis's early years, the silencing effect of violence on language registered in contemporary trauma neuroscience, and poetry written by women during the Chilean dictatorship. The analogy is structural rather than clinical. It rests on a shared relation to the silencing effect of violence on language—a relation that psychoanalytic case material (Freud), neurobiological research on PTSD (van der Kolk and corroborating studies), and the testimonial poetry of the dictatorship each register in their own evidentiary regime. The article does not claim equivalence between these registers; it tracks the distinct ways each one inscribes that silencing.

Bringing Freud's account of repression and inscription into conversation with contemporary trauma neuroimaging, clinical and cognitive psychology, and trauma psychiatry, the article reads poems by Eugenia Brito, Carmen Berenguer, Verónica Zondek, Elvira Hernández, Soledad Fariña, Teresa Calderón, Marina Arrate, Alejandra Basualto, and Violeta Camerati, among others, as affective testimony: poems that respond to the disabling of speech in the scene of justice and document the co-implication of two regimes of violence, the patriarchal and the dictatorial. By theorizing poetry as symptom and testimony at once, and by holding the interpretive-clinical, the empirical-clinical, and the literary-affective registers methodologically distinct while tracing the formal kinship that lets them be read side by side, the article repositions Chilean women's poetry as a privileged site for apprehending the psychological effects of violence and understanding the historical importance of this poetry.

**Keywords:** testimony, symptom, affective archive, Chilean dictatorship, women's poetry, gender and sexual violence

Este artículo establece una analogía estructural entre síntoma y poesía: entre los síntomas reportados por los pacientes de Freud en los primeros años del psicoanálisis, el efecto silenciador de la violencia sobre el lenguaje registrado en la neurociencia del trauma contemporánea y la poesía escrita por mujeres durante la dictadura chilena. La analogía es estructural más que clínica. Se basa en una relación compartida con el efecto silenciador de la violencia sobre el lenguaje —una relación que el material psicoanalítico de casos (Freud), la investigación neurobiológica sobre el TEPT (van der Kolk y estudios corroborativos) y la poesía testimonial de la dictadura registran cada uno en su propio régimen probatorio. El artículo no afirma equivalencia entre estos registros; rastrea las formas distintas en que cada uno inscribe ese silencio.

Integrando la visión freudiana de la represión y la inscripción con la neuroimagen contemporánea del trauma, la psicología clínica y cognitiva, y la psiquiatría del trauma, el artículo lee poemas de Eugenia Brito, Carmen Berenguer, Verónica Zondek, Elvira Hernández, Soledad Fariña, Teresa Calderón, Marina Arrate, Alejandra Basualto y Violeta

Camerati, entre otras, como testimonio afectivo: poemas que responden a la incapacidad del habla en escenario de la justicia y documentan la co-implicación de dos regímenes de violencia: el patriarcal y el dictatorial. Al teorizar la poesía como síntoma y testimonio a la vez, y al mantener los registros interpretativo-clínico, empírico-clínico y literario-afectivo metodológicamente distintos, mientras traza el parentesco formal que permite leerlos lado a lado, el artículo reposiciona la poesía femenina chilena como un lugar privilegiado para comprender los efectos psicológicos de la violencia y comprender la importancia histórica de esta poesía.

**Palabras clave:** testimonio, síntoma, archivo afectivo, dictadura chilena, poesía femenina, violencia de género y sexual

## Introduction

In August 1988, the Chilean dictatorship lifted the state of exception and dismantled its censorship apparatus. The states of emergency (in force since 1973) and of internal disturbance (since March 11, 1981) were repealed (Vicaría de la Solidaridad, n.d.); the National Division of Social Communication (DINACOS), which had intervened in the press, was abolished. Meanwhile, the intelligence services—the DINA (Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional) and the CNI (Centro Nacional de Información)—continued to implement censorship as terror (Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile, n.d.).

Censorship was no longer the principal obstacle to the denunciation of human rights violations; nevertheless, the amnesty law of 1978 foreclosed any investigation of human rights violations committed during the dictatorship. Even after 1990, at the beginning of the transition, this law was ratified in practice by the courts through their insistence on not investigating amnestied cases; by applying this law even before investigating the cases, the validity of civic rights was thereby eliminated. In other countries, the courts have legislated to set limits on amnesty. In Argentina, a case close to the Chilean one, Law No. 23.040 (in 1983) was enacted with the purpose of repealing the self-amnesty law (Galdámez Zelada 2010, 202). Chile is a regrettable exception.

As testimony, the records compiled by the two truth Commissions, Rettig and Valech, are impotent. The Rettig Report by the National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation (Comisión Nacional de Verdad y Reconciliación 1991) was circumscribed solely to cases of death and disappearance, excluding torture and nonfatal violations; it lacked the juridical power to sanction individual responsibilities; the dissemination and legal use of its testimonies were restricted. And the Valech Report by the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture is constrained by the fifty-year law (Comisión Nacional sobre Prisión Política y Tortura, 2005), which prevents the dissemination and legal use of its archives. Lacking judicial efficacy, these testimonies continue to be conceived and circumscribed outside of justice. If naming the horror of the violences implemented by state terrorism presents its own difficulties, the institutional deactivation

of the ethical and political potential of testimony amounts to a new censorship—the extension of censorship even after the dictatorship.

The task I propose in this essay is to combat this institutional impulse toward what I call the emptying-out of testimony, by way of an understanding of the testimonial function of the poetry written during the Chilean dictatorship.

In what follows, I develop an analogy between the symptom—the psychoanalytic concept—and poetry, on the basis of the relation each establishes with language under violence. Research in psychoanalysis and psychiatry traces the blockage and disstructuring of language to the psychic aftereffects of violence, particularly violence that must be concealed by strengthening the effect of repression on symptom formation. Following this analogy, insofar as it is symptomatic, the poetry of the dictatorship is a document of the psychological experience of violence at the hands of the dictatorial state—an experience that creates the conditions for its somatization through repression. The poetic genre, in this sense, validates testimonially through expressive force and not through referential clarity, which makes it methodologically suited to material that violence—the confluence of regimes of violence that includes sexual violence—has stripped of clarity.

## **Affective Testimony of Gendered/Dictatorial Violence**

*How is violence experienced?* Astrid Fugellie answers in an interview: “to the degree that one writes one’s own pain, one exorcises it” (Fugellie 2013).<sup>1</sup> Teresa Calderón’s “Mayor cuantía” (1984) gives the exorcism a body:

Your unremembering scratches my face.  
I probe my memories.  
Just an old  
letter comes forth, folded  
like me, from pain. (Calderón 1984, 20)

Teresa Calderón, Lila Calderón, and Tomás Harris anthologized the dictatorship period’s poetry, acknowledging that its testimonial register “recounts the process through which customary relations are destroyed . . . introducing horror into them” (Calderón et al. 2013, 31), with Aristóteles España’s *Dawson* (1985) as paradigm, a book of poems written during the author’s incarceration at the Dawson Island concentration camp. España’s poetry could well be part of a poetic affective archive, but the affective archive I will be referring to in this essay speaks of the confluence of two kinds of violence, patriarchal and

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<sup>1</sup> My translations from the Spanish throughout.

dictatorial, one of which pre-exists and is exacerbated by the Chilean dictatorship.<sup>2</sup> Silencing, unpunished violence, and the control of bodies are socially acceptable practices that pervade gender discrimination under the dictatorship and well before it.<sup>3</sup> And yet women's testimony regarding them hardly finds expression in poetry before the dictatorship. The reasons can be—partly—attributed to women's exclusion from cultural production,<sup>4</sup> yet, the political equivalent of this “expressionlessness”—to use Julieta Kirkwood's term to refer to women's political silence regarding their oppression—flows from women's relegation to the private, domestic sphere and the authoritarianism that structures the private sphere (Kirkwood 2019, 167).<sup>5</sup>

Despite the intensification of authoritarian structures in the private and public spheres, and despite the implementation of censorship and terror, this political silence began to change in the 1980s. The Valech report (2005) documents the testimony of 27,255 victims of political imprisonment. Of that number—which is simply the confirmed number: the actual number of political prisoners is no doubt much greater—about 94 percent stated that they had been tortured, and sexual violence had a prominent place. The infamous torture establishment “Venda Sexy” in Santiago was known for the systematic rape and sexual abuse of women and men.

During the dictatorship, censorship targeted not only the denunciation of human rights abuses and political persecution but any form of social critique that exposed the regime violence's psychological, physical, and moral effects on the population. Against this, an alternative infrastructure of cultural and literary publications—with restricted circulation and precarious means of production (mimeograph, artisanal print runs, no institutional support)—took shape and circumvented the official channels. The figures are striking:

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<sup>2</sup> See also Paula Cucurella, *Mapa literario de poesía escrita por mujeres en Chile (1973–1990)* (2026). The full digital archive, with searchable metadata for the women poets, magazines, and workshops is documented for the period 1973–1990.

<sup>3</sup> The legal infrastructure of impunity preceded the coup. Chile did not legally recognize domestic violence until the Ley de Violencia Intrafamiliar (Law No. 19.325) of 1994 (Larraín et al. 2009, 7); before that, family violence could be addressed only under general Penal Code provisions, rarely applied to domestic situations. The Chilean Civil Code maintained *potestad marital*—granting the husband broad authority over his wife's person and property—until 1989 (Law No. 18.802; see Lepin Molina 2016, 84). On the dictatorship's reinforcement of patriarchal family models grounded in Catholic ecclesiastical authority over the private sphere, see Lepin Molina (2016, 77). On the feminist reframing of authoritarianism as already pervasive in Chilean civil society—“in fathers, husbands, and partners, in schools and churches, in parties and associations”—see Gaviola Artiga et al. (1994, 137).

<sup>4</sup> By the early twentieth century, the body had already begun to mediate women's entry into Chilean poetry—together with what had been relegated to the private sphere: sensuality, affect, eroticism, sexual and domestic violence. Take the case of Gabriela Mistral's poetry on rural poverty and child welfare in *Recados* (1957) and *Tala* (1938). See, also María Urzúa and Ximena Adriasola, eds., *La mujer en la poesía chilena, 1784–1961* (1963).

<sup>5</sup> Kirkwood also refers to this division of spheres in *El feminismo como negación del autoritarismo* (1983). From a feminist perspective, Chilean authoritarianism does not emerge with the rise of militarism: it was already prevalent across social classes, including the middle class and the proletariat. It inheres in the patriarchal structuring of the Chilean family.

roughly ten new literary journals were founded in Chile between 1960 and 1973, but under the dictatorship that number quadrupled—two new journals appeared in 1974, five more in 1975, at least nineteen by the early 1980s, and around forty by 1985. Without this material counter archive, the affective archive would not exist.<sup>6</sup> The momentary suspension of canonical control—the tacit norm that, under the alibi of “excellence,” has excluded women from cultural production—opens the possibility of what Raquel Olea calls a “cultural feminism” (Olea 2000, 58) in poetry.

There is more than one cause for this cultural transformation. First, this shift correlates with changes in gender awareness in 1980s Chile. Among those most affected by the precarity that mass unemployment brought, this awareness triggered new forms of organization. Second-wave feminist concerns run through the work of many women poets who published in the 1970s and 80s<sup>7</sup>—concerns embedded in a broader social critique of state crimes and institutional neglect. Second, the expansion of poetry during the dictatorship emerges as a result of the cultural adaptation to the “cultural blackout”<sup>8</sup> effect of dictatorial censorship, the intervention of publishing houses and media, and the restrictions on assembly that dismantled spaces of encounter and exchange, displacing discursive, social, and cultural practice toward less visible sites (e.g., workshops) (Ochsenius 1983, 1–2; Eloy 2014, 13). In this framework, poetry expanded as a not-exclusively-literary practice, tied to political and social needs of communal recomposition and enunciation, and for that reason did not adopt the gendered restrictions or the mechanisms of authorization sedimented in the Chilean literary tradition.

Third, women’s social role in funerary and mourning rites. These rites have long-standing roots, of course, in conservative and sexist traditions that link women with emotion, public displays of pain, sorrow, and “weakness.” But these associations take on different force and different symbolic value under state violence, murder, and disappearance. The work of mourning primarily interpellates women: traditionally called to fulfill social and

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<sup>6</sup> For an updated database of these figures, see Cucurella 2026. The comparison with the 1960–1973 period draws on two digital resources from the Memoria Chilena portal of the Biblioteca Nacional de Chile: the synoptic record *Masiva proliferación de revistas literarias*, which tracks the transformation of the field during the dictatorship, and the minisite *Revistas y publicaciones literarias (1960–1990)*, which catalogues university, editorial, and Sociedad de Escritores publications individually. There are no systematic quantitative studies of the pre-1973 period; the figures of annual journal foundings (1.1–1.3) are derived from this qualitative inventory following a conservative count.

<sup>7</sup> The return of women writers and intellectuals from exile, beginning in 1984, and continuing through the late 1980s as the regime relaxed the restrictions of Decree-Law 81 (1973) (Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile n.d.), brought into the Chilean scene the ideas of continental feminism, in addition to the testimonial-archival work that women in exile had developed in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere in Latin America. On the silenced specificity of women’s exile and detention testimony, see Espinoza Cartes (2024, 142).

<sup>8</sup> On the *apagón cultural*, see Donoso Fritz (2013, 104–129; 2019).

familial roles, they transformed acts of mourning for state crimes into instruments of critique of the dictatorship.<sup>9</sup>

Among the purposes of this literary “resistance” was to reclaim the personal and social script while concealing the gesture from the Fascist officialdom. This tension leads to uses of language which, unable to “describe” (*describir*) pain and point out its causes, must “write it” (*escribirlo*), to echo Fugellie (2013).

Writing, for the women poets of the dictatorship period, can, and often does, become a condition of possibility for experience, Verónica Zondek put it this way, in an *ars poetica*: “To write is to undress, to expose ... to be voice, to dress oneself and survive ... I am, to the extent that I write” (Zondek 2021, 306). What Zondek formulates as an *ars poetica*, the affective archive performs as method: a way to read the testimonial dimension of poetry. Her “I am, to the extent that I write” restates in the poet’s own register what I have argued elsewhere, drawing on Käte Hamburger: the speaker-author identity is logical rather than factual, and this generic identity is what authorizes the poem’s testimonial force ([1957] 1973, 9).<sup>10</sup>

## How to Experience Violence?

*How to experience violence?* Violence is disconcerting; there is no moderation, no middle ground when it comes to living it. According to Zondek, the voice we clothe ourselves in when we write helps us do just that: survive. Even so, it is not clear, when speaking of violence, that we have survived, that we have *experienced* it entirely.

We do not undergo violence as we might in another event. Our sensibility itself is immediately affected, quite irrespective of any physical damage we may suffer. And so, the psychologist and activist Elizabeth Lira, reflecting on her psychosocial and therapeutic work with victims of human rights violations during the military dictatorship, explains that “experiencing threats to one’s life . . . alter the functioning of memory and generate, in many cases, massive forgetting—of the totality of the experience, which becomes inaccessible to consciousness; or, conversely, it may manifest itself as an intensification and amplifying of the memory, making what was experienced literally

<sup>9</sup> On women’s role as bearers of the wounded nation’s collective memory through mourning practices, see Peñaloza Palma (2015, 969). On the risks of grounding memory work exclusively in personal suffering and family ties, see Jelin’s work on the “familism” of memory (2021, 140) that excludes citizenship-based public debate over the violent past.

<sup>10</sup> I develop this argument at greater length in Cucurella (forthcoming), “Cada cuerpo tiene derecho a su prótesis: testimonio afectivo en poesía de mujeres (Chile: 1973–1990).” Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the 2026 American Comparative Literature Association Annual Meeting, in the seminar “Poetry and the Choreography of the Body” organized by Elizabeth Fowler and Carmen Faye Mathes (Montreal, February 27–March 1, 2026), and at the So Cal Critical Theory Group symposium “Synchronous and Asynchronous Latin Americanism,” UC Irvine (April 3–4, 2026).

unforgettable in every detail and every sense” (2010, 23). Unforgettable and—as Jaume Peris Blanes argues in *Historia del testimonio chileno*—also *impossible to remember*: state violence changes subjectivity and memory, and the harm it causes manifests itself in fragmentary narrative, interrupted by a “phantasmagoric residue” (2008, 54–59).

The narrative discontinuity produced by trauma means that its historicization—fundamental to the reconstruction of personhood—must be mediated by what Peris Blanes calls the “phantasm”: elements within the testimony that, like a form of memory, attempt to repair the broken temporal continuity of life. This discontinuity is accompanied by a corporeal disconnection characteristic of the testimonies of the Chilean concentration camps. With the loss of the “corporeal anchorage” that is the “matrix of perceptions and sensations” (2005, 305), the subjective correlate of these narratives is traversed by a contradiction—an impossible position, that can be constructed only through the “phantasm”.<sup>11</sup>

## Psychoanalysis and the Narrative of Violence

Freudian psychoanalysis offers elements for interpreting the psychic outcome that follows repressed violence. In the early (1895) manuscript titled “Project for a Scientific Psychology” [“Entwurf einer Psychologie”] Freud writes that “consciousness is the subjective side of one part of the physical processes in the nervous system. . . ; and the omission of consciousness does not leave psychical events unaltered” (Freud 1966, 311; 1950, 396). In 1896, Freud suggested that the difference between conscious and unconscious perceptions flows from their being inscriptions in different psychic locations (Freud 1986, 218; 1985, 207–208), and uses the word “writing” (*Schrift*, in compound forms: *Umschrift*, *Niederschrift*, *Niederschriften*) to refer to the way in which stimuli are registered so as to be later recalled.

Following this idea, Freud identifies four types of neurons according to their functions: W{P} [*Wahrnehmungen*], or neurons that perceive but do not remember; Wz {Ps} [*Wahrnehmungszeichen*], neurons where perception is inscribed; Ub {Ic} [*Unbewusstsein*], what would later be understood as the unconscious; and Vb {Pr} (preconsciousness) [*Vorbewusstsein*] (Freud 1986, 218–219; 1985, 207–209). For an experience to be remembered, the perceptual neurons W {P} are first stimulated together with Wz {Ps} (where the first inscription is traced); this mark, however, cannot be recalled because it is not conscious. We can remember only by virtue of the third inscription—that is, only if a stimulus manages to register in the “layer” of the preconscious system (where inscriptions are apperceived), since these Vb neurons are linked to word-presentations.

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<sup>11</sup> For a study of the relation between processes of subjectivation and the position of the witness in trauma narratives from the Chilean dictatorship, see Peris Blanes (2005).

In 1896, Freud sketches these models of the psychic apparatus while trying to explain—and cure—the neurological and psychological causes of what at the time he diagnosed as hysteria, obsessional neurosis, and phobias, which at least until 1897 he attributed to sexual violence suffered in infancy (1985, 207). The first “symptom” across these presentations is the inability to form a verbal representation: a form of repression that impedes recall.<sup>12</sup>

A century later, the model Freud lays out in the works and correspondence between 1894 and 1897 finds material confirmation in Bessel van der Kolk’s fMRI neuroimaging: the deactivation of language-processing regions during traumatic recall corroborates the same pathway in a different evidentiary register.

## Broca’s Silence: Neuroimaging the Symptom

In 1994, psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk—known for his work on post-traumatic stress—published the results of an fMRI study tracking the brain activity of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) patients as they recalled past events.<sup>13</sup> The findings showed that even three years after the traumatic event, victims responded to the memory with a coordinated set of somatic reactions: activation of the amygdala (the brain’s danger-evaluation center), deactivation of the thalamus (which synthesizes sensory information into coherent narrative), intensified activity in right-hemispheric zones involved in nonverbal and emotional communication, and a corresponding drop in left-hemispheric activity—the brain function that mediates verbal communication and sequential thought. Most telling for the symptomatology of trauma is the marked dysfunction in Broca’s area, the region that processes language (van der Kolk 2015, 43).

Van der Kolk’s results confirm Freud’s account of the mechanisms of repression, recollection, and symptom formation, and a large body of subsequent research has

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<sup>12</sup> Freud maintains this schema in “The Unconscious” (1915), where he distinguishes the conscious presentation, which comprises both thing-presentation and word-presentation, from the unconscious presentation, which is the thing-presentation alone (Freud 1957, 20; 1946, 300). Bringing a memory into consciousness thus requires a unitary reconstruction of two elements: the verbal image [*Wortvorstellung*] and the cathectic mnemonic trace [*Sachvorstellung*].

<sup>13</sup> Van der Kolk’s neuroimaging work builds on Bremner et al. (1995), the first study to demonstrate measurable hippocampal volume reduction in combat-related PTSD, and was extended by his 1996 PET collaboration with Rauch (Rauch, van der Kolk, et al. 1996) into functional imaging of language-processing deactivation. Subsequent studies have corroborated and refined this account: on amygdalar hyperreactivity, see Rauch, Whalen, et al. (2000) and Shin et al. (2005); on cortico-limbic disconnection and fragmentation, Lanius, Williamson, et al. (2001), Lanius, Vermetten, et al. (2010), and Nicholson et al. (2015); on the verbal-versus-sensory memory distinction, Brewin et al. (1996), Ehlers and Clark (2000), and Hellawell and Brewin (2004); on contextual amnesia coupled with emotional hypermnnesia, Charretier et al. (2021); and for recent syntheses, Yehuda et al. (2015), van Rooij and Holtzheimer (2022), and Stoklosa et al. (2025). For a dissenting view—that traumatic memories are not intrinsically more fragmented than ordinary autobiographical memory—see Rubin (2011).



continued to support his findings. Together, Freud's observations and the neuroimaging evidence explain what the testimony of women poets writing under the dictatorship makes legible at the level of the poem itself. Consider these lines from Violeta Camerati's "Se completó el silencio" (1984), where silence is the elusive object of the poem:

Silence was completed:  
it left its mesh among the leaves' humid shade  
and it emerged as a nocturnal flower.  
All at once attempts a swift flight  
around the old lamp:  
it wants to reach that blinding eye  
that attracts it like an obscure river.  
The mirrors have set a trap:  
it climbs, it turns, and is confused.  
It reaches for the exit. (Camerati 1984, 50)<sup>14</sup>

How to describe with words what only in silence we can begin to approach? Each in its own evidentiary regime—neuroimaging in the empirical-clinical, psychoanalysis in the interpretive-clinical, the poets' testimonies in the literary-affective—registers the difficulty of incorporating violent and traumatic<sup>15</sup> experiences into language. These three registers are not interchangeable: each operates with its own criteria of validity. What they share, and what authorizes the analogy I draw, is a common object—the way violence interferes with language—and a common formal feature—the production of an inscription whose meaning cannot be exhausted by direct reference.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For a reading of these testimonies that links them to the affective trace and linguistic effects of dictatorship's violence, see Cucurella 2024.

<sup>15</sup> A terminological clarification is in order. The word "traumatic" in van der Kolk corresponds to the diagnostic category of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), characterized by intrusive re-experiencing, avoidance, hyperarousal, and over-modulation of affect and depersonalization—symptoms whose neurobiological correlates include hippocampal volume reduction, amygdalar hyperreactivity, deactivation of Broca's area during traumatic recall, and altered cortico-limbic connectivity. Freud, by contrast, does not use the term "trauma" with this diagnostic specificity. The clinical-pathological vocabulary of his pre-Studies-on-Dreams period (i.e., before 1899/1900) centers on hysteria of conversion, the "repression hysterias," phobias and obsessions, and the neuro-psychoses of defense. The categorical synthesis with PTSD belongs to twentieth-century psychiatry, not to Freud's own usage.

<sup>16</sup> The poetry of the affective archive registers silencing in both form and content. Calderón's "BODAS" (1984) condenses domestic violence into two lines of unrelenting brevity: "Until death do us part. And how it gleamed in his hand / The dagger" (Calderón 1984, 57). Hernández's *La Bandera de Chile*, written in 1981 and circulated clandestinely until its 1991 publication, names the gag explicitly: "The Chilean Flag is used as a gag / and that is why surely that is why / no one says anything" (Hernández 1991, 70–71). Berenguer's *A media asta* (1988) makes the imposition of secrecy itself the poem's address: "This that I'm writing shhh, don't tell anyone" (33). Fariña's *Pide la lengua* (2017, reprinting of *El primer libro*, 1985) repeatedly demands from writing the beginning of communication: "ALPHA ... SPEAK" ["ALFA ... HABLA"] (22–23). Malú Urriola's *Piedras rodantes* (1988) interiorizes the silencing by turning the poetic voice against the poet, attacking and humiliating her.

If the function of the brain is to detect, amplify, and analyze our external and internal environment in order to ensure and optimize our survival (van der Kolk 2000, 13), then it is safe to say that the kind of damage caused by traumatic violence affects essential functions of human life by altering the psychological capacity to integrate experience into the flow of life (van der Kolk 2015, 47). Freud addressed this blockage at different moments in his early work a century before van der Kolk, seeking by means of therapy to bring into speech what resisted articulation. This was the basis of his reputation as both theorist and clinician.

Nevertheless, of the two it is Freud who develops a theory based on the observation of and experimentation with victims of sexual violence: women, in the great majority. The development of psychoanalysis as a therapy to treat these patients, who were not only suffering from the silencing effects of traumatic experiences but also had to negotiate the censoring effects of the taboo of sexual violence, makes Freudian psychoanalysis a unique antecedent for the type of repression, censorship, and silencing that constitutes Chile's affective archive.<sup>17</sup>

Under the dictatorship, sexual violence functioned as a punishment directed at women who transgressed the roles of patriarchal culture. It fell not on a political subject but on a body that had disobeyed its condition of property—of the husband, the home, the gender order—and torture forcibly reinstated those terms of belonging. The testimony collected in *Mujeres en rojo y negro: Reconstrucción de la memoria de tres mujeres miristas* makes the moralizing register of this punishment unmistakable: “They beat me for being a whore. They beat me for abandoning my child, they beat me for getting involved in men's affairs” (Vidaurrázaga Aránguiz 2006, 400). Sexual torture drew its codes from patriarchal culture, operating at once as political punishment and gender discipline.<sup>18</sup> Most testimonies of this violence, however, emerged only after the dictatorship had ended. As Margarita Díaz observes, the sexual violence inflicted on women detainees only began to be acknowledged decades later, when “the ‘non-disappeared’ women detainees allow themselves to denounce and therefore to recognize the harm they suffered” (Díaz 2005, 17). This delay makes all the more significant the poetry that registered these violences in real time. Berenguer's *A media asta* (1988) is the case in point:

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<sup>17</sup> The omission of the seduction theory from Freud's corpus, which documented the psychic impact of sexual abuse, was institutional. After Freud's death, the Fliess correspondence was kept out of the *Standard Edition* and the *Gesammelte Werke* at Anna Freud's request, and the unabridged letters did not appear—in either German or English—until 1985 (Freud 1985, ed. Masson; Freud 1986, ed. Masson and Schröter). Masson's *The Assault on Truth* (1984) argues the suppression of the seduction theory could not be separated from the suppression of the documents that recorded it. The case material on which Freud built—and then renounced—his earliest theory of trauma was thus literally absent from the corpus that defined twentieth-century psychoanalysis.

<sup>18</sup> About rape under the dictatorship and the testimonial difficulty it imposed, women's accounts of rape as gender-specific violence, and other testimonies have been gathered in the Informe Valech (Comisión Nacional sobre Prisión Política y Tortura 2005), Hiner and Azócar (2015), and Gaviola Artiga et al. (1994).

She told me  
They used it all and then...  
What did I say  
They left it so others could have it  
The spoils those same ones  
She stirred the embers and set off her eyes  
But everything wasn't resolved there  
Was left stiff in the ground  
With her arms open  
All pale  
Amelia covering her with the blanket  
Spread the word through the borders  
The abused one They abused her. (Berenguer 1988, 21)

The verses stutter—"She told me / They used it all and then... / What did I say"—and only with difficulty approach their object, which they can name only through pronouns and deictics: *lo, esos mismos* (it, they), signs that point without saying. Poetry's freedom from grammatical norm registers what the testimony-as-genre cannot: the interruption itself, the index of damage that is at once psychic and institutional.

Censorship, physical violence, and terror produced a silencing that exceeds direct interdiction: it affected the very mechanisms of representation required both to articulate denunciation and to integrate experience into conscious memory. Poetry metabolizes that repressed affect and operates, on that basis, as a partially unconscious testimony elaborated upon repression. This is corroborated by the poet's testimonies,<sup>19</sup> and by the many poems that probe their own conditions of enunciation. The evidence here is materially indexical: a measurable effect in language of a measurable cause. The psychoanalytic register offers a parallel object of proof—the symptom as somatic conversion of repressed material. In both registers the evidence is interpretively

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<sup>19</sup> Reflecting on the genesis of *La Bandera de Chile*—written in 1981, circulated clandestinely, and not formally published until 1991—Elvira Hernández recalls that she would not have found the words for it had she not felt it was the last thing she could do (Hernández 2023). She describes a seven-year delay between her detention and the moment she could begin to write, adding that one holds the word back and releases it slowly, and that takes time (Hernández 2023). Soledad Fariña testifies in similar terms about 1985, one of the worst years of the dictatorship: through language she wanted to name a horror so vast that one could barely speak of it (Fariña n.d.). Returning from exile in 1984, she remembers a country where most people had been struck mute and where they hardly spoke at all (Fariña n.d.). Carmen Berenguer describes the lexical erosion that shaped *Bobby Sands desfallece en el muro* (1983): words in Chile in those years had begun to wear thin—*compañero* was forbidden, many words were forbidden, *democracia* hung suspended—so one had to find another way to say anything to one another (Berenguer n.d.). Astrid Fugellie, for her part, postponed the publication of *Las jornadas del silencio* for ten years rather than submit her poems to DINACOS censorship, inscribing in the very title of the book the silencing she refused to erase (Fugellie 1984).

indexical: a sign of a hidden cause whose recognition is part of what makes the cure possible.

## Repressed Testimony and Feminism

Rape was consistently used before the dictatorship, and is still used today, to punish and inflict terror. Sexual violence is a special form of gender violence: it establishes and claims women's bodies and feminized bodies as property *for* and *in* a patriarchal scheme, controlling their roles to preserve that scheme. Raquel Olea's *Escrituras de la diferencia sexual* analyzes how the dictatorship controlled and administered women's bodies with the intention of promoting a political-economic agenda that made women's biological function essential as the vessel for the reproduction of an (exploitable) labor-force (2000, 58). This may be why making the body an extension of language, or language an extension of the body, is affirmed as one of the first, and decisive, moves of "women's" writing by feminists like Olea. Women's writings were each "anti-Edipal, illegitimate, unrecognized by father or mother, oscillating between multiple (dis)identities, seeking its self in the darkness of a sign that questions the dominant truths and genealogies" (2000, 58). If we attend to Olea's insights, then, it would be an error to read these poets according to traditional criteria.

## Poetry as Testimony: The Body

The poetry of the affective archive can serve as affective testimony precisely because it doubles as document: evidence of how violence was lived under the dictatorship without ceasing to be poetry. Käte Hamburger's *The Logic of Literature* proposes understanding poetry as "the reality-statement of an authentic enunciating subject that can only be referred back to [the author] himself" ([1957] 1973, 9). Applied to the affective archive, Hamburger's framework allows me to reframe these poems as testimonies because they bear on a real world that can only derive from the writer's own. Unverifiable, they testify to the psychological dimension of an experience patriarchal and dictatorial violence wholly shaped.

This poetry registers the body's centrality in resymbolization—the work of assimilating fragmentary perceptions and opaque representations. Eugenia Brito's *Filiaciones* (1986) catalogues this work with an inventory of failure: "What should I write this wasted spittle with / what hand will grasp the moan that whispers / in a breath's wholeness" (Brito 1986, 20). Each part and function of the body is named and withdrawn in this poem—hands "heavy, weighted," feet whose weight will not lighten, drops that are neither sweat "much less tears." The verses inventory material means that share in common what they cannot do. Call this "the baroque of absence": complexity of detail in service of the fragility of the trace; a style where a detail does not add. It subtracts.

If violence is inscribed preverbally, how do we trace it into writing? What persists as preverbal trace surfaces in the poem as body, as grief for the language the body could not shape, yet that ineluctably shapes it, because all violence is written onto the body, on bodies, on some particular body. The violence during the dictatorship focused with particular ferocity on “marginal bodies,” “dragged into embracing improductivity as an escape . . . assaulted till they disappeared, bodies exiled from their native country” (Eltit 1990, 18).

The poetry of Diamela Eltit’s generation is marked by this impotence. I see it in Marina Arrate’s poetry, for instance in these verses from her poem “Este lujo de ser,” published in 1986:

this sort  
of being  
this pilgrimage  
this vertigo  
this lion  
this cage  
this time  
tending  
this mold on the ribs  
this God replete with ghosts  
this fierce beast  
slumbering in the throat  
this heavenly emptiness . . . (Arrate 2013, 47)

I recognize it in these verses from “Pájaros,” a 1983 poem by Alejandra Basualto:

The sky is bleeding birds.  
Many birds, of rare colors,  
weak-disjointed,  
their wings rigid.  
Their beaks sad-undone  
...  
Hundreds of birds  
with a cry broken in their throat  
and eyes turned back. (Basualto 1983, 49)

A similar impotence leaves its trace in these beautiful lines by Eugenia Brito, from 1986:

Mother Medusa  
her hair red  
and in each there's a resting bird  
its voice is an unmeaning squawk  
it recites for me, ah!  
Recites speech  
and though I will never see its face in mine  
I know I have that voice though it slices in me effects  
as its slit is skillful and draws my lips tight  
I know I have it overspilling, sounding  
split in its blind-lookout's scenography  
its body is a volcano its lava sketched me a map  
I cannot come to terms with my misfortune. (Brito 1986, 88)

I could go on...

## The Affective Archive

“Memory is a trace / and torment in the crystal of language, the tongue” writes Verónica Zondek in her poem “Desaparecida” (2019, 75).<sup>20</sup> Delicate and enigmatic, memory is engraved in language like a trace in glass: tenuous, ephemeral. The affective archive documents the work undertaken in language to make legible—we are staying with Zondek’s metaphor—memory as trace, that is, as a mark persisting in the living medium of language / the tongue. Memory finds in poetic writing a sort of dynamic conceptualization: a *saying*.

In 1998, Nelly Richard discussed the representation of memory in the arts after the dictatorship. She refers to the shape the work of mourning takes, noting the recurrence of “absence, loss, suppression and disappearance” (2021, 32). Denialism with regard to state crimes, and censorship of almost every means of reporting them, make erasure and repression common operations that the arts then repeat aesthetically. Here, mourning—an essentially symbolic act—echoes and multiplies. If the erasure and censorship of state crimes sought to dissolve them entirely, the aesthetic modulation of mourning reveals something very different: just as an unquiet ghost cannot leave off haunting the home it knew when it lived, so incomplete mourning “leaves subject and object grieving and uncertain, wandering without rest around the unfound and unfindable body, and absent, missing, needful truth [*que falta, hace falta*]” (Richard 2021, 32).

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<sup>20</sup> Originally published in 2008 in *Por gracia de hombre*.

The afterlife of dictatorial violence expressed as unremembering, explains the return to the wound in poetry even decades after the end of the dictatorship. For all repression is followed by a somatization—by the becoming wound of the body, and the becoming body of the word. Take this sequence of short poems published by Verónica Zondek in 1988:

Nesting waste  
on the rock  
I CALCULATE THE MEANING OF THE WORD  
Devouring an instant

I SCREAM (Zondek 1988, 25)

In this poem “waste” (rejected material, *desecho*) is shown in its likeness to a scream; the action that produced both amounts to a “calculation” that by factoring in the meaning of the word, gave as a result the scream. Such is the economy of expression. The impotence that produces it is embodied: “My flesh / the shirt that sighs in suffocation” (28), and thus also *wounded*:

A SCREAM PAPERS MY THROAT.  
Empty  
Under the rock

MY HOWL.

In my word  
YOUR SORE. (71)

## Repression, Repetition, Trauma

We know that during the Chilean military dictatorship, the “discrediting” factor that allowed testimony to survive was its “literary” character. However, even if this element made testimony possible, traces of the impotence that comes from having to withdraw the claim to the veridical—and to seek refuge in literariness—are everywhere in this poetry. Recall Basualto’s “Pájaros,” quoted earlier, but read its closing lines, which I held back: “All will be shades. / So we will forget” (Basualto 1983, 49). The traces of what could not be said—and of what was sacrificed for testimony’s survival—of this repression, are everywhere in this poetry.

For Freud, a healthy psychic apparatus is a well-repressed one: pathology arises when repression fails, when material seeking expression cannot be translated through condensation and displacement. The economic principle of the apparatus—its drive

toward homeostasis—requires that stimulus be expressed without throwing the system out of balance, and so repressing a memory’s expression, whether consciously under censorship or unconsciously as in PTSD, guarantees its return. Unwanted self-silencing is, in either register, sickening.

The cathartic method Freud adopted from Josef Breuer (his senior mentor at the Vienna General Hospital, and collaborator in *Studies on Hysteria*, 1895) channels the symptom’s need for discharge and restores to conscious life what was repressed due to its association with an incompatible idea. The symptom functions as a somatic compromise—an attempt at psychic equilibrium—completed by conscious verbalization.

As early as 1892, Freud proposed to Breuer that the hysterical crisis is a repetition whose content is the affective trace of the experience itself (Kris 1986, 539). In “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through” (1914), repetition appears as unconscious remembering: enactment replaces presence: “The patient repeats instead of remembering”—specifically, “everything that has already made its way from the sources of the repressed into his manifest personality” (Freud 1958, 151). By 1920, repetition becomes central in the Freudian corpus and acquires a measure of conceptual independence.

In his 1920 *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (1955) develops the concept of repetition compulsion (*Wiederholungszwang*): a form of behavior that overrides even the pleasure principle. Freud offers two examples. The first: soldiers returning from the First World War, burdened with nightmares that relive battle’s near-death. The second: the young boy whose game—throwing a wooden spool away with “*Fort!*” and reeling it back with “*Da!*”—symbolized for Freud both the child’s effort to master his mother’s absence by producing it himself, and the satisfaction of an originary masochistic pleasure.<sup>21</sup> In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, both repetitions are pathological. The soldiers compulsively reenact an experience the psyche was not ready to receive at the time, expressing the masochistic tendency of the death drive—as natural in any organism as the drive to live—and making patent the I’s pathological division.

Repetition, however, is not purely pathological. If, as Cathy Caruth argues in *Unclaimed Experience*, “repetition is never simply a representation nor its absence but rather the reenactment—and potential erasure—of a history that refuses recognition” (1996, 132), what should we make of Freud’s “response” to the imperative of the testimonies that prompted his earliest theory of trauma? What do they tell us when we realize that the

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<sup>21</sup> For more about Freud’s assumptions in his interpretation of the meaning of the game, see Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience*: “To be precise, Freud says that the child uttered the sound ‘o-o-o-,’ which he interpreted as *fort*, and the word *da*; in his presentation he eliminates the sound ‘a-a-a-a’ and immediately assumes its interpretation” (1996, 162).



centrality of infantile fantasy on which psychoanalysis rests ultimately depends on discrediting testimonies that Freud was apparently unable to listen to as testimonies?

## **Final Thoughts**

In the early years of his clinical practice, Freud's patients led him to recognize the widespread sexual abuse of children—predominantly girls—by fathers, uncles, brothers, and nurses, at a frequency that struck him as clinically unprecedented in middle-class Viennese society. Freud's formulation is documented in a significant portion of his correspondence with Wilhelm Fliess was excluded from the *Gesammelte Werke* at Anna Freud's request until its publication in German (Freud 1986) and English (Freud 1985) by Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson.

Freud's patients suffered not only from abuse but from a system of gender and power that rendered the perpetrators immune. Freud maintained that recovery required integrating traumatic experience into a conscious narrative; yet the abuser's identity was in itself an impediment to achieving this. It is in this context that I propose understanding the displacement of these patients' repressed testimony as a search for a new genre and a new scene found in the psychoanalytic narrative within the consulting room. A century later, under the Chilean dictatorship, a parallel displacement occurred as legal testimony relocated into poetry.

In both contexts, the suspension of rights triggered the displacement of testimony: in fin-de-siècle Vienna, women's legal and social protections were inextant; under the Chilean dictatorship, testimony lost its juridical force when impunity became a privilege of the military dictatorship and its supporters. Deprived of legal force, testimony sought new outlets. Telling one's story became an act of justice: even when its content was not legally actionable, even when poetry had to condense and displace the narrative, its very existence inscribed justice outside the law.

Words attesting to the pain in the streets, the spilled blood, and the disappearances were necessary to account for the dictatorship's violence; yet they could only be openly proclaimed as poetry. Take Verónica Zondek's 1988 poem:

The color howls  
THE STREETS HOWL  
The carmine river  
howls  
The without-border color  
THE FEET DISAPPEARED (Zondek 1988, 22)

But if, as Dori Laub notes, “bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener” (1992, 69), what changes in testimony’s healing potential when the attentive listener does not believe you? What changes when that person believes you but decides your testimony is not actionable or, better, kept secret? Testimony’s arrival into poetry during the 1970s and 1980s effectively addressed the need for expression and dissent shaped by repression and censorship, the need to mourn, to tell one’s story, and to articulate the experience lived by the collective. However, while poetry made possible for these poets to bring into language experiences otherwise resistant to verbalization, these testimonies and affective archive are still waiting to take their place in our history.

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