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Maria José Contreras¹

**Performative Testimonial Practices:
Teatro Testimonial in Postdictatorship Chile²**

Abstract

In this article, I explore and interrogate from a semiotic point of view the ways embodied practices can potentially provide an expressive, productive and even restorative outlet for the after effects of past trauma. I propose the concept of *testimonial practices* to describe a performative re-elaboration of testimonies that seeks to externalize, share and cope with trauma from an embodiment perspective. I will examine a post-conflict theatre variety developed in postdictatorship Chile called *teatro testimonial* that performs testimonies on scene to problematize if and how these practices externalize painful experiences and construct collective bodily memories. I start by comparing the emblematic Latin-American literary genre, *testimonio*, with European testimonial narratives to distinguish the particular heritage that *testimonio* delivered to *teatro testimonial*. I then critically oppose the semiotic characteristics of testimonial texts and testimonial practices in order to identify the specificity of embodied strategies in the (re)presentation of traumatic experiences. I finally analyze three pieces of Chilean *teatro testimonial* that illustrate distinctive characteristics of testimonial practices, namely the intersubjective re-tracing of traumatic experiences, the resistance to archivalization and the desire for indexicality.

Keywords

testimonial theatre; body; practice; trauma; Chile

0. Introduction

The last decades have been characterized by an explosive increase in academic studies regarding memory and trauma, to an extent that these issues may seem saturated with thoughts, definitions, and controversies. One of the most polemical and, at the same time, popular notions embedded in the study of trauma and memory is that of *testimony*. According to Georg Gugelberger, *testimony* has become a privileged object of analysis because it is situated at the crossroads of what he identifies as “all the institutional battles in recent years”:

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² This article is part of the research work entitled “El cuerpo de la memoria/la memoria del cuerpo: investigación semiótica sobre el teatro testimonial en el Chile de la Postdictadura” (Proyecto FONDECYT de INICIACIÓN n. 11090155, Chile)



... postcolonial and/versus postmodern; genre versus non-genre; interest in autobiography; the function of the canon; authenticity/realism; the debates on subalternity; othering discourse; orature/literature; dual authorship; editorial intervention; margin/center; race/class/gender; feminisms [...]; minority discourse; third World writing; the post-boom novel; Latin Americanism; questions of disciplinarity and so on. (Guggelberger 1996: 7)

Testimony is a pivotal node, where so many of these subjects converge and discern at the same time. One of the theoretical issues that testimony enhances is a crucial semiotic question: the potentialities and limits of semiotic devices to represent the real, particularly when the real is a traumatic event.

The classic perspectives of trauma studies affirm that trauma is ungraspable in the rhythm, forms and structures of textuality. In this context, trauma is defined as “an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. This absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of ‘otherness’, a salience, a timeless and ubiquity outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery.” (Laub 1992: 69). According to Cathy Caruth (1995), trauma remains as an “unclaimed experience”, a “whole in meaning” that cannot be represented but only repeated in forms of nightmares, re-enactments and flashbacks. From this perspective, trauma is not about the surprising and devastating event, but about the structure of the traumatic experience that cannot be shared nor fitted in a larger historical framework, exceeding the individual dimension to become a historical enigma: “... the traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.” (1995: 5).

The notion of trauma as an absolute otherness condemned to illegibility, which spread within the academy during the '90's has slowly allowed other rival conceptions that prefer to look at the operations that actually achieve at translating (some) aspects of the traumatic experience. As LaCapra (2001) warns, refusing any possibility to comprehend the traumatic experience produces a “catastrophism” that raises trauma to the category of “sublime ominous”.

Semiotic studies have engaged with the challenge, on the one hand, of discerning which are the aspects of traumatic experience that hamper its figurativization and modalization, and on the other hand, understanding which are the possible semiotic operations that represent these experiences. Furthermore, as Cristina Demaria (2012) suggests, trauma may be considered an *interpretative model*, allowing us to critically reconsider the politics of interpretation rethinking the category of experience and its potential rewriting. The inherent destabilization of the expressive forms of texts and discourses of trauma has encouraged



semiotic studies to problematize both the possible links and gaps between the real, experience and semiosis.³

The pursuit to find expressive forms that may cope with what Jacques Rancière (2001) has characterized as an “excess of presence” not necessarily results in a narrative that tells trauma, but it usually outsources other kinds of idiosyncratic articulations that expose the illegibility of the experience. Many times the content of a testimony is not the storytelling of what happened, but rather the ostentation of the difficulty to synthesize a temporal and spatial modalization that may place the experience into valorial and passionate stable frames.

To give testimony is to struggle against submitting the real to the rules of narrative, seeking to survive in the paradoxical situation where the boundaries between the textual simulacra and the real become fuzzy. We must carefully understand the status of the author in testimony, both as textual simulacra and as the empirical anchor to the horror the victim suffered in his/her flesh. As I will explain in this article, testimony overlaps the enunciative world and the empirical world in which it is produced and operates, devastating the trap of immanence that sustains the independence of the utterance respect to the trace.⁴

The problem of the trace, the presence and the bodies is of capital importance when trying to understand the narratives of trauma such as testimony. But these issues become even more decisive when we shift our attention from narratives of trauma to the performing of trauma that is from the textual characterization of testimony to its embodied practical dimension. In this article, I concentrate on testimonial practices that articulate and in-form traumatic experiences in a procedural embodied

³ Some of the semiotic studies that have affronted these issues are Jacques Rancière's reflection about the crises of representation that traumatic experiences elicits (2001), Jacques Fontanille's typology of testimony (2004), Denis Bertrand essay about the narratives of extreme experiences (2007), Patrizia Violi's research on oral testimonies (2006), images as testimony (2009) and sites of trauma (2012) as well as Cristina Demaria and Daly McDonald investigation about the genres of post-conflict testimonies (2009) and finally Demaria's recent *Il Trauma, l'archivio e il Testimone* (2012) dedicated to a semiotic lecture of the figure of testimony and the inquiry about the documentary as representation of the “real”.

⁴ The notion of the trace is very complex and has been largely discussed in philosophical and semiotic studies. In this document I will refer to the trace in Jacques Fontanille's conception as the figurative memory of the interaction of the body with other bodies and the world. The semiotic conception of trace does not consider it an original pre-semiotic moment nor a natural mark, but as Derrida points out: “*The trace is the difference which opens appearance [l'apparaître] and signification. Articulating the living upon the non-living in general, origin of all repetition, origin of ideality, the trace is not more ideal than real, not more intelligible than sensible, not more a transparent signification than an opaque energy and no concept of metaphysics can describe it. And as it is a fortiori anterior to the distinction between regions of sensibility, anterior to sound as much as to light, is there a sense in establishing a “natural” hierarchy between the sound-imprint, for example, and the visual (graphic) imprint? The graphic image is not seen; and the acoustic image is not heard. The difference between the full unities of the voice remains unheard. And, the difference in the body of the inscription is also invisible.*” (1967: 95)



in-presence modality. In particular, I will describe performative artistic practices that re-elaborate trauma by the second degree testimonial mediation of artists. Testimonial performative practices add other interesting semiotic complexities to the understanding of the ways a traumatic experience achieves or fails to be externalized, shared and thus coped.

I analyze Chilean *teatro testimonial* as an emblematic testimonial practice studying three examples that illustrate some general characteristics of testimonial practices: the intersubjective re-tracing of traumatic experiences, the resistance to the archivalization and the desire of indexicality. *Teatro testimonial*, as the name indicates is based on testimonies that in its actual uses and forms echo the literary genre of *testimonio* a postconflict narrative that developed in Latin America during the late '60. I expose some interesting differences between *testimonio* and European testimony in order to better describe the pragmatics and politics that Chilean *teatro testimonial* inherited. As I will argue later, *teatro testimonial* actualize some of the distinctive traits of *testimonio* and at the same time produces other particular modalities to re-elaborate, share and retrace the traumatic experience.

1. Latin American testimonio

Different sociopolitical contexts determine diverse pragmatics and uses of testimonial narratives. In this first section I will start by comparing European testimony and Latin America *testimonio*. This comparison will be useful in order to better comprehend the nature of *testimonio* that influenced the performative practices throughout the continent as in the case of Chilean *teatro testimonial*. In what follows I will use the English word *testimony* to indicate the European testimonial narratives mainly associated with the Shoah, and the word *testimonio* in Spanish to refer to the Latin American testimonial narrative. Although in both cases I am grouping heterogeneous texts and occurrences that may have their own particularities into general categories, such homogenization will be used here so as to develop a comparison.

As Cristina Demaria and Daly McDonald explain (2009), the Adolf Eichmann trial in Jerusalem initiated a new form of witnessing that burst onto the public scene, sparking multiple and various testimonial practices in Europe. The discharge of testimonies in this continent was a response to the historical, judicial and ethical imperative of reconstructing a traumatic past. Hence, there was an overarching hope that these new expressions could prevent historical denial and amnesia and, above all, could stave off the risk of repeating the atrocities of the past.

This testimonial drive gradually transformed the postwar period into what Annette Wieviorka (1998) called the “era of witness”, where testimony rapidly became a privileged literary genre of which the works of Primo Levi

and Anne Frank are paradigmatic examples. The recurrence of *testimony* in literature was so strong that Wiesel thought of it as the new artistic product of contemporary culture: “If Greeks invented tragedy, Romans epistle and the Renaissance the sonnet; our generation has invented a new literature, the *testimony*” (Wiesel 1977). In a few decades, *testimony* overcame its marginal condition and became one of the most important types of contemporary discourses, thus shifting from a supposedly individual need to a social imperative (Demaria and McDonald 2009).

While *testimony* emerged as a social imperative to remember the Holocaust in Europe, Latin America’s *testimonio* arose as a counter discourse, which was intrinsically antihierarchical, antisystemic and antihegemonic. Thus, the first distinction between the Holocaust testimonies and Latin American *testimonios* lies in the political role that they bear within the particular sociohistorical contexts in which they are created. *Testimonios* were born and raised in the outskirts of mainstream Latin American culture, originally linked to the left wing revolutionary utopias. They originated in Cuba ignited by *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1966) (*The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*) by Miguel Barnet about Esteban Montejo’s life, the later Che Guevara’s *Pasajes de la Guerra Revolucionaria* (1968) (*Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War*), then develops in Nicaragua with Omar Cabeza’s *La montaña es algo más que una inmensa estepa verde* (1982) (*Fire from the mountain: the making of a Sandinista*) to finally engage Guatemala in the polemic *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1982) (*I, Rigoberta Menchú*) by Elizabeth Burgos-Debray. These *testimonios* served to rescue and articulate a revolutionary horizon by denouncing the suffering of marginal individuals subordinated to economic and cultural domination.

The fact that the Holocaust testimonies had an archival preoccupation that responded to a social prevalent view may explain why these forms of expression didn’t elicit many of the controversies that followed the upraise of *testimonio* in Latin America. The authenticity of Holocaust testimonies was guaranteed both by the testimony givers and by others who could not deny the reality they referred to. *Testimonio*, conversely, has not benefitted from this credibility status since, as I will argue in what follows, not only the truth but also the reality it refers to is put under inspection. Thus, the starting point for both narratives is different, being that one starts from the assumption of the undeniable truth, while the other must constantly struggle for its legitimacy.

Furthermore, the ethical and enunciative positions of the author are different. In *testimony* the author is fundamental, decisive and imperative; a testimony is verifiable, because there is an individual who guarantees it. As Ricouer affirms, (2004) the emblematic formula for *testimony* is: *I was there, believe me*. The author of his or her own life narrative is strong, imperative, onymous and identified, functioning as an anchor to a reality that cannot be questioned or doubted. This trustworthiness dynamic

works in a completely different manner when the voice of the narrative is that of a socially recognized victim or a marginal subaltern.⁵ While in European *testimony* the text is constructed from an individual subjective point of view of a past that nobody dares to deny, Latin America's *testimonio* intends to reconstruct a condition that is characterized by social denial and rejection.

John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman define *testimonio* as follows:

A novel or novella-length narrative, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the actual protagonist witness of the events she or he recounts. The unit narration is usually a life or a significant life episode (e.g. the experience of being a prisoner). Since in many cases the narrator is someone who is either functionally illiterate or, if literate, not a professional writer or intellectual, the production of a *testimonio* generally involves the recording and /or transcription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor who is a journalist, writer or social activist. The word suggests the act of testifying of bearing witness in a legal or religious sense (Beverley and Zimmerman 1990: 173).

As Beverley and Zimmerman highlight, the text written in the first person based on a life experience is mediated by another person who actually edits and arranges the oral account of the testimony giver's memory. The authorship in *testimonio* is usually multiple, full of mediations and re-interpretations. For instance in , *I Rogoberta Menchú* the authorship is ambiguous between Menchú herself and Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, who interviewed Menchú, edited the interviews, published the book and actually figures as the author. Who is claiming to say the truth, Menchú or Burgos-Debray? Whose truth is it? The ambiguity of authorship and the mediation of multiple authorial voices is determinant in *testimonios*. From a semiotic point of view this overlap of authorial voices results in a complex enunciative praxis that not only conjoint multiple enunciators but also conjugate empirical authors that claim different degrees of authorship of the text. The enunciator of *testimonio* disaggregates into multiple authorial voices that function as a kaleidoscopic array, making it difficult to distinguish what comes from the original source and what is generated by the mediations.

As mediation phenomena, *testimonios* cannot aspire to be the textual work of one individual, since it is supported by a sense of collectiveness, as many other expressive devices in Latin America. When David Stoll accuses Menchú of narrating her brother's murder as if she were a direct witness (when actually she was not there), Menchú responds that she wanted to include the collective memory of her people into her own storytelling. This is a pivotal aspect of any *testimonio*, being that it does

⁵ As a matter of fact, the condition of the subaltern as described by Gayatri Spivak implies the subject is scarcely even recognized as an individual and, thus, he/she has no right to speak (1988).



not stand for a community in the sense of having a single spokesperson, but it actually incorporates the collective memories into the storytelling, personifying and multiplying them. Patrizia Violi distinguishes the autobiography from testimonial narratives precisely by the fact that in *testimonios* the narrators inscribe their own singular narratives on the horizon of a broader collective memory (Violi 2009).

A multiple authorial instance, such as the ones in function in *testimonio*, cannot fit within Ricoeur's formula – I was there, believe me – since compound voices not only claim reliability based in the continuity of presence but also on the transversal continuity of collective memories. The operations of legibility and representation that *testimonio* challenges are not only the limits of the economy of narrative but also the Western conception of the experience as personal property. In this sense, *testimonio* is not about representation but about *retracing* experiences, reframing it by collective meaning-making processes.

From a semiotic perspective, *testimonio* is halfway between a text and a practice. As George Yúdice proposes *testimonio* imposes a shift of focus from the literary product, or text, to its consideration as “an act, a tactic by means of which people engage in the process of self –constitution and survival” (1996: 46). Yúdice understood well the nature of *testimonio* that rather than a close organization of utterances is a procedural meaning making intersubjective process.

Testimonio and its critique to literary canons, to the idea of authorship and reliability, to the conception of truth and experience as an individual property somehow prepared the territory for the propagation in Latin America of testimonial practices that use diverse medias and expressive forms in dynamic configurations that exceed the boundaries of textuality. Of course these practices have long existed, and are not exclusive of the Americas, but it's the last four decades (coinciding with the brutal period of dictatorships) were they have decisively become an important tendency in Latin America.

2. From texts to practices

Testimonial practices in Latin America respond to what Diana Taylor identifies as an inherent analogy between the nature of trauma and embodied practices, since trauma is performative in nature: “Before it can be talked out, trauma manifests itself as acting out in both the individual and social body” (2006: 1675). Alluding to Richard Schechner's vision of performance as “twice behaved behaviour”, Taylor states “trauma is never for the first time [...] like performance always makes itself felt viscerally in the here and now. Past blows haunt our present and shake the individual and social body.” (*op. cit.*) Following Taylor's argument, natural responses to trauma can extend to the symptomatic





‘repeats’ experienced on an individual basis right through to the many performances based on trauma which have taken place in a number of countries throughout Latin America over recent years. These practices respond to various types of performances from political demonstrations such as the 35 years old manifestation of Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina to performance art actions such the emblematic drawing of crosses in the highways by CADA in Chile, and also include conventional theatre plays as those of the Peruvian Theatre Company Yuyachkani.⁶ As Taylor suggests “acts – from the uncontrollable acting out to the therapeutic acting through to the political acting up – signal both the symptom and the ‘cure’” (2006: 1676). These practices as materially organized activities among subjects and objects in a particular space and time where the body is the nexus affront trauma in modalities that exceed the economy of textuality and discoursivization.⁷

Semiotic studies have long debated on the common and differential traits of texts respect to practices, as well as on the methodological pertinence to make this distinction. The need to affront practices emerge when the semiotic processes cannot be exhaustively described within any single self-consistent discourse, when diverse materialities and expressive forms articulate with different media in heterogeneous logics forming a composite that are not congruent in scope.⁸

The semiotic study of practices seek to gain insight about configurations that function beyond a classical textual model, whose intelligibility work in multiple levels and does not presuppose any immanence.

As I’ve suggested before (2009), practices may be defined as embodied performances of human actions that configure a local idiosyncratic articulation of different materialities and expressive regimes that

⁶ For an anthology of Latin American theatre and performance engaged with the representation of conflict cfr. D. Taylor & S.J. Townsend (eds) (2008).

⁷ The interest to study practices seems to be transversal to disciplines and not exclusive to semiotic studies. Theodor Schatzki (2001) observed how the Humanities and Social Sciences had experienced a kind of “practice turn” whereby a new ontology and epistemology of the term *social*, based on the first formulations of Wittgenstein, Foucault, Bourdieu, Giddens and De Certeau was now focusing on practices considered “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding” (Schatzki, 2001: 2).

⁸ Some of the most important semiotic approaches to practice are the effort to describe the poetics of everyday life behavior, for example Juri Lotman’s research about the gestures, behaviors and actions of the noble revolutionaries in XVIII Russia along with Uspenskij’s study about laughter (in Sedda (ed.) 2006). Also Ronald Barthes studied different social practices that he initially called significant practices (1985) and contrasted them to the closure typical of texts. More recent the semiotics of the body, like for instance Jacques Fontanille’s semiotic of the trace (2004) looks at esthetic, bodily and passional aspects of semiosis, while Herman Parret study the epiphanies of presence (2006) and sociosemiotics looks at the network of social-driven behaviors as those described by Eric Landowski in *Présences de l’autre* (1997). For a critical account on the notion of practice from a semiotic perspective and a complete bibliography cfr. my article “Il corpo del fare: verso una definizione semiotica di pratica” (2009).





acquire a procedural, dynamic and unstable sense depending on their spatiotemporal context. Semiotic practices are drifting configurations, associated to the know how of bodies and the possibility of interbodily transmission of affects, passions and practical expertise that play in the interstice between materiality and semiotic artifice. This definition has three clue characteristics. In the first place practices are *procedural configurations* that resist any stabilization in rigid expressive forms. Practices involve the action of bodies in heterogeneous signifying regimes that by *ratio difficilis* articulate expressions and contents. This means that practices do not refer to a content that precedes them but each practice itself produces a new system of content. Practices are not the expression of something but they in-shape a content in the process of becoming. Secondly, the meaning making of practices is always dependent to the context, or in other words, practices are deictic: they signify depending on the spatiotemporal coordinates of the cultural scene were they perform. Last but not least practices are performative, they configure by the action of bodies in space and time. Bodies function as semiotic devices that deflagrate enunciational levels, multiply sensorial modes and relate materiality with the viscosity of experience.

Performance studies, a field with which semiotics has scarcely confronted, thinks of practices and repertoires that highlight the potentiality of practices as memory devices. Taylor differentiates the “archive” and the “repertoire” as two ways of accessing the past, elaborating memory and generating knowledge. Archival memory refers to “documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, cds, and all those items supposedly resistant to change.” (Taylor 2003: 19) The repertoire instead:

... enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge. Repertoire, etymologically “a treasury, an inventory” also allows for individual agency, referring also to “the finder, discoverer,” and meaning “to find out.” The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by “being there”, being a part of the transmission. As opposed to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning. (Taylor 2003: 20)

Even if in Western society archiving has become the privileged way to store and transmit memory, considered as the only way to survive and resist time, repertoires have subsisted and constitute a fundamental mode of constructing, accessing and transmitting memories. Performance studies emphasizes that repertoire are capable of making the ‘past’ available as a political resource for the present, constituting an important system for generating and circulating knowledge.

Both notions of practice and repertoire share the commonality



of admitting to the importance and specificity of embodied culture, promoting an epistemic turn from the consideration of fixed resistant objects (texts or archives) to the interest of the agency of subjects in the construction and circulation of sense, a sense that develops in act, in form of what Francescu Sedda (2006) calls “enunci-actions”.

The attention to embodied configurations directly address the relationship between materiality and significance. Semiotics considers these two dimensions as a continuum and not a binary opposition. The embodied dimensions of meaning include the roles that feelings, emotions, and sensory-perceptual elements play in meaning-making processes. Closely parented with phenomenology, semiotics of the body conceives a continuum between the materiality and signification, or in other terms between the regime of presence and that of representation. Patrizia Violi theorize the semiotic potentiality of the body:

Affect and emotion are in the body from the very beginning, in all our sensations and perceptions, which are always permeated by an affective-emotional tone. We do not only feel sensations of warmth or coldness: we feel pleasant, unpleasant, or unbearable temperature levels, and the same also holds for perception: what we see, hear, taste or smell is never ‘neutral’, but always endowed with some sort of emotional reaction along the pleasure-displeasure scale. Body is, in other words, never pure ‘soma’, but always soma animated by certain affective and emotional states, in other words: soma and psyche are always simultaneously co-present. Here we can see that it is precisely the notion of psyche that enables the overcoming of body-mind dualism, unraveling the categorical distinction between the two terms. (Violi 2008: 70-71)

In the context of traumatic experiences this means that the trace of an overwhelming event creates a difference that is already semiotic.⁹ So the crises of representation that the classical trauma studies sustained may be understood as the impossibility to semantize or to discretize the experience, to modalize it in spatial and temporal terms. Nevertheless this does not mean that trauma precludes every possible semiotic articulation. As a matter of fact, the difficulty to semantize a traumatic experience is compensated by other more continuous ways of articulating it through the body, its performances and affects. Embodied practices such as performance allow to cope, to deal, to give meaning and to communicate traumatic experience in multisensory in-presence scenarios, by ways that are not restricted to verbal language.

3. Testimonial practices: the performance of memory

Different testimonial exercises and contexts require a broader formulation

⁹ Again Derrida’s notion of the trace resonates.



of the aesthetics, mediums and politics of *testimony*. These practices have always existed, but curiously seem to propagate in this global and digital era. When can a practice be considered to be testimonial? What kind of embodied practices are testimonial? Is Spielberg's digital archive of videos a testimony? To what extent is a video uploaded to the Internet before a suicide still a testimony? Are social media, like Facebook, producing an archive of daily testimonies?

All these new ways of giving testimony require a shift of focus from the object-text to the practice of giving testimony. *Testimonial practices* are processes that occur in an intersubjective encounter, where an individual gives testimony of a personal experience. In testimonial practices Ricoeur's (2004) emblematic formula for *testimony* is: *I was there, believe me* becomes more complex because it depends not only on the assertion of continuity of the presence of the testimony giver, but also on the presence of the spectator or second degree witness (Felman 1992) that provides a further mediation to the traumatic experience: *I was there, as you are here, believe me and help me co-construct my past*. Testimonial practices are defined by their co-constructive and mediated character, which dynamically fills the gaps between individuals/issues in the pre-discursive moment of facing alterity. More than concentrating on testimony, this notion highlights *the act of giving testimony* and the whole range of embodied possibilities to enact this encounter. Testimonial practices not necessarily dispense of all verbal language (they actually almost always appear simultaneously) but they are rather articulated mainly by bodily procedural operations, putting the word and verbal dimension at the edge of a crisis, striking the hegemonic logics and rationality that prevails in the strongly archive-driven western societies.

Through such practices others memories and experiences become shareable and fall onto the territory of "shared belongings". In this sense, *testimonial practices* allow a constant interaction between the individual and the collectiveness, the private and the public, the subjective and intersubjective, the intercorporeal and intertextual systems. In order to further explain this formulation of *testimonial practices*, I will concentrate on Chilean *teatro testimonial*, as an emblematic example of post-conflict testimonial practice.

4. *Teatro testimonial* as a trauma-driven testimonial practice

Chilean *teatro testimonial* is a specific case of testimonial practice, which developed after the dictatorship into a strong tendency becoming a typical type of trauma-driven performance. As the name indicates, *teatro testimonial* is theatre based or inspired on testimonies that typically respond to the pragmatics and politics of Latin American *testimonio*. The corpus of testimonial plays in Chile is heterogeneous, raising many



different questions and issues that would be too extensive to address in detail in this article. My aim here is to examine some crucial characteristics of Chilean *teatro testimonial* pieces, discussing three examples and pointing out their link to the abovementioned concept of testimonial practices. I hope to enlighten aspects of both the particular cases and the general characterization of other testimonial practices.

Teatro testimonial engages with the (complex) relationship between reality and fiction, by promising that the spectator will participate in a “real representation” of the stories and lives of another (usually a victim, a “voiceless individual” or a repressed community). Janelle Reinelt has referred to this promise as the promise of documentary: “Spectators come to a theatrical event believing that certain aspects of the performance are directly linked to the reality they are trying to experience or understand.” (2009: 9)

Based on a broad range of written and oral testimonies, *teatro testimonial* interweaves different aspects of reality (the real testimonies, the real presence of the actors’ bodies, sometimes even the real bodies of the testimony givers, the ostentation of real proofs – videos, pictures, etc.) with fiction (a mediatised space, a device performance or the dramaturgization of the testimonies). *Teatro testimonial* relates then with other “dramaturgies of the real” (Martin 2010), as documentary theatre, verbatim theatre, docudrama, reality-based theatre, theatre of fact, among others. According to Martin what these different sorts of theatre of “the real” share is that they respond to the postmodern assertion that truth is not entirely verifiable and, thus, use the stage as a communion of what is real and simulated, where fiction and reality melt together.

The numerous histories and legacies of theatre of the real in the twenty-first century share important characteristics with postmodernism including the particularization of subjectivity, the rejection of universality, the acknowledgment of the contradictions of staging the real within the frame of the fictional, and a questioning relationship between facts and truth. (2010: 3)

As in theatre of “the real”, *teatro testimonial* also responds to a postmodern claim and works at the crossroads between reality and fiction, reliability and verisimilitude. It does not intend to document a unique reality, but to problematize the ideology and media through which it is conveyed. *Teatro testimonial* is, however, a very specific and local manifestation that does not coincide in every aspect with Martin’s description. First of all, even considering the heterogeneity of materials and media that *teatro testimonial* uses, we may say that its original source is basically written or oral *testimonios* that are in the first person and based on life experiences that refer to postconflict situations. The testimonial source is usually complemented by other documents and media such as videos, pictures, or secondary historical sources, but the key arbiter of truth continues



to be constituted by the *testimonios* themselves. As a semiotic practice, *teatro testimonial* anchors in the presence of the body that may function both as the proof of presence or as a second degree witness that mediates the original *testimonio* with the spectators. So even if I agree with Martin in the necessity to “abandon the notion that documentary proceeds only from the material documents and that it can be universally defined” (2009: 89), in the case of *teatro testimonial*, *testimonios* broadly defined still remain as the privileged source.

Another key aspect is that although the political endeavors that *teatro testimonial* has embraced throughout the years have changed along with shifts in the political landscape, its original relationship to conflict and trauma still remains vibrant, making it heavily implicated with ethical and political concerns. Consequently, *teatro testimonial* was strongly developed in the scenario of a postconflict culture. The approach to the traumatic past of *teatro testimonial* does not respond to the pretension of accessing a unique version of the past, but rather to engage with how we reconstruct it from the present. In this sense *teatro testimonial* has acknowledged what Alison Forsyth calls the dislocating unpredictability of traumatic memory

testimony relating to traumatic events can transform over the years, as mnemonic perspective is altered by, for example, nostalgia, regret and grief which may supersede earlier sensations of shock, anger, indignation or fear. In this respect, it is well to be cognizant of the fluidity and instability of trauma testimony, whilst still respecting its sincerity, credibility and validity. (2009: 149)

This is the reason why to my mind, rather than referring to “the real”, *teatro testimonial* refers to memory, both in its individual and collective forms. In fact, *teatro testimonial* has no general pretension of reflecting or representing reality or whatever this may be, but rather engages with the political need of interpreting reality to resist and re-invent what the amnesiac hegemonic Chilean culture considers to be the present and the past.

5. The intersubjective re-tracing of trauma

Teatro testimonial is a co-constructed fluid and procedural attempt to cope with trauma, where mediation is crucial and occurs at different levels, generating a multilayered expressive device supported by collective work. To some extent, mediation is always important for any kind of testimony, but what is different in *teatro testimonial* is that it is essentially dialogic and mediated it exceeds the typical dyadic configuration of the oral testimony to include multiple voices and bodies, thus being truly polyphonic, multi-bodied and multimaterial.



In 1989, after 17 years of dictatorship, Chile effortfully transitioned into democracy. In the same year, the Teatro la Memoria theater group, directed by Alfredo Castro, presented the first play of *La Trilogía Testimonial* called *La manzana de Adán* (*Adam's Apple*, 1989-90) based on testimonies of socially vulnerable and marginal drag artists living under dictatorship. Like many other testimonial pieces in Chile during the first years after the dictatorship, this piece did not directly address the dictatorship or the violence of the State, even though it was about the dictatorship, as the director explains, since it posed a profound political critique about how the dictatorship repressed every kind of difference. *La Manzana de Adán* is about “the segregations of segregations” (personal communication of the Director) which is an experience that echoes in the life and memory of many Chileans. As Castro points out, “We didn’t consider these *testimonios* to be other people’s texts, but as we were able to embody them, we began to recognize ourselves in them, that is, they also belonged to us. Their testimony was ours” (personal communication)

The original material consisted of interviews by the journalist Claudia Donoso and photos by the artist Paz Errazúriz, which were collected with the purpose of presenting a photograph exhibition including fragments of the interviews. The collective authorship and multi-layered mediation here is very interesting, since the *testimonios* traveled nomadically until they were finally performed on stage. This journey included different successive testimonial practices: the first encounter of the journalist and the testimony givers, the journalist meeting with the director, the director selecting and giving the material to the actors, the actors performing the *testimonios*, and finally, the arrival of spectators. After all of these handovers, who is the author of *La Manzana de Adán*? Even if the actors spoke the words of the original *testimonios* on stage in a verbatim mode, that is exactly as they written, they couldn’t actually know how these words were initially said, since they only accessed the transcriptions. Who is actually speaking in *La Manzana de Adán*?

One of the distinctive characteristics of *teatro testimonial* is the chain of enunciative games that amalgamate voices and bodies in different camps of presence to an extent that it is hard to distinguish the authorial instance. The authorial instance is not only a textual simulacrum but responds to an embodied enunciation that departs from the body that perceives (the non-subject actant in terms of Coquet, 1997) and constructs concentric camps of presence that function as interweaving enunciative levels. It that occurs in *teatro testimonial* is then a transitional ambit between reality and the formalism. It develops in successive camps of presence: from the figurative memory of the me-flesh that contains the traces of the traumatic experience, to the interactions with other bodies as the one of the mediator or second degree testimony to finally constructing bodies that function as figures of the performative discourse.



In a traumatized culture used to defend itself from State violence by silencing opinions and criticisms, *La manzana de Adán* served to expand the capacity of witnessing during the early transitional years. Freddie Rokem describes the actor that performs history as hyper-historian: “The way in which the witness appears on the stage and communicates with the spectators – the aesthetic dimension of his or her appearance – is also of central importance for the creation of a theatrical discourse performing history.” (2000: 202). Something analogous happens in the dimension of testimony: actors become witnesses on stage and the way they appear signs a particular ethics and politics of remembrance.

But the expansion of the presence of the witnesses does not end in the actors; it also impinges upon the spectators. In *La Manzana de Adán* the artists (director and actors) not only function as second degree witnesses but also as active testimony givers that co-construct a shared multi-layered memory. The authorial instance in this piece re-invented the past by performing the other’s narrative. As a practice, the creation process implied the acknowledgment of a double “other”: the testimony giver and the spectator. The final performance is created in a collaborative handling of memories: the original testimony giver tells a story shaped by his/her consciousness of the listener, and the actors also transform the other’s discourse in an embodied practice that somehow prepares for the future presence of the spectators.

This is a general characteristic of *teatro testimonial*: the expansion of the witnessing position is multiple and powerful since it involves not only the cognitive capacity to see and know something new but also the embodied capacity to engage with passional dimension. So testimonial theatre not only “informs” but it also provides a space and time to share in co-presence the patemic valorization of testimony givers and second degree witnesses, thereby providing a possibility to deal with trauma collaboratively by re-tracing the original trauma. The presence in *teatro testimonial* becomes an agent for political effectiveness: the spectator of *La Manzana de Adán* could continue to deny the existence of *detenidos desaparecidos* (as a portion of Chilean population did at that time), but could not deny the presence of the actors that both metonymically and metaphorically represented the presence of this segregated and repressed population. The bodies of the actors unite the aesthetics of the play with the political reaction it intends to elicit from the spectators. The physical presence of the actors may create a heightened sense of responsibility, as witnesses spectators engage to respond to what they acknowledge.

Collaborative co-creation and local meaning-making that result in a retracing of trauma is a general characteristic of testimonial practices; as embodied sequences of actions performed simultaneously by multiple bodies, testimonial practices are collective “occurrences” that develop in a particular intersubjective “here and now”.



6. Resisting the archive

Artistic work with post-conflict memories opens two important issues related to the problem of the archive: the first refers to the appropriation of others' memories by artists and their "use" in artistic contexts. From an ethical and political perspective, the artistic "appropriation" of others' traumatic memories is very problematic. Is it legitimate for a theater company to collect testimonies of victims and then frame them in an artistic project? Is it different when the same testimony givers perform their own memories than when they are performed by actors who actually earn something (money, status, recognition) by doing so? If the testimony givers perform themselves, are they exploiting their own memories and pain?

The second issue related to the problem of archive refers to the cannibalism of political and dominant institutions to patrimonialize and historicize these memories. As Forsyth alerts: "Another aspect of oral testimony, particularly testimony related to the memory of traumatic events, is its potential to fall victim to ideologically driven sequestration and distortion." (2009: 149) *Teatro testimonial* is somehow aware of this risk and resists archivalization, its ephemeral nature eludes the patrimonialization of such traumatic memory. This may also apply to any case of theatre or embodied practice, but it acquires more value and relevance in testimonial practices. Archiving depends on the ideology of curators, institutions and politics, while *teatro testimonial* can only aspire to survive as a future (bodily) memory for the actors and audiences. When the traumatic *testimonio* is performed in the theatre, they may circulate and access other bodies (actors and spectators) that can actually signify them.

Pajarito Nuevo la Lleva (2008) (*The sounds of the coup*) is a performance that I directed and that confronted these particular issues. The piece is based on testimonies of people who were 5 to 10 years old during the 1973 State coup in Chile, or during the resistance protests in the 80's. The performance addresses the difficult position that children experienced during the dictatorship; children usually wouldn't receive any explanation from adults concerning the horrors they witnessed, they were compelled to suffer the effects of the State's violence without any possible organization of this in a meaningful frame. The *mise-en-scene* of these *testimonios* intended to express the struggle of children who lacked a language to interpret and speak of their own version of trauma. This is why we thought of the following particular format: spectators attend the performance with an individual audio device and earphones, so while they watch the actors' actions they can hear an edited soundtrack with fragments of the original voices of the testimony givers. Through this format, we intended to reproduce the fracture existing between the adults' words (in the performance embodied in the adult testimony givers' voices reproduced in the audio devices) and the children's isolated perspective (in the performance represented by the sensory position of the actors who



couldn't hear the soundtracks that the spectators were listening to). On stage, actors perform physical scores that allude to and non-mimetically relate to testimonies. We use different soundtracks that include fragments of different testimonies, so that the spectators experience and interpret the performance as it develops according to the soundtrack they randomly receive. What you hear influences what you interpret, just as the case of the children who lived under the dictatorship.

Pajarito Nuevo la Lleva is based on the gap between the testimonial word and the actors' bodies, in a way that envisions the mediation-artistic-multiple-authorial-instance, and also resists its archivization. The resistance to archivization become evident when we had to transcribe the piece. This process was significantly difficult since it required a different format script, unlike a conventional theatre play. The movement and the text run in independent parallel trails, but at the same time they simultaneously influence the spectators, experience. The piece ephemerally interwove the words of the testimony givers and the actions of the actors and at the same time multiplied the experience of the spectators. In order to write the script we finally decided to use three columns: the first contained the action script and the other two exposed different versions of the soundtrack. To fix and fit the piece in a written text, the format of the script had to be adapted to show what seemed to be the definite non-inscribable nature of *Pajarito*. The difficulty in transcribing the piece, which, in this case, was radical, indicates a general way of organizing *teatro testimonial* that emphasizes the ephemeral, co-presence dimension over the textual one. Even if *teatro testimonial* is based on a discourse (oral or written), its performance forcedly implies other senses and meanings that exceed the verbal: the word remains orphan if not contextualized in a scenic embodied frame.

Every testimonial practice responds, as I mentioned before when reviewing Taylor's notion of repertoire, to a resistance vocation: a resistance toward the archive, the archival obsession and the hegemony of written language. From this point of view testimonial practices are essentially political, no matter to what politics it refers to and they always oppose to the power struggle of the fixation of memories.

7. The desire for indexicality

Another crucial aspect of *teatro testimonial* as testimonial practice is the role and status of the body. Even if all theatrical representations are supported by the co-presence of actors and spectators, in Chilean *teatro testimonial* the body assumes a foundational role by accomplishing a double function that is engaged in a synergic system.

The first function of the body on stage is to serve as an index of the presence. The body installs a testimonial indexicality by pointing the



continuity of presence with the original victims in an immediate level (when the victims are the ones performing their own testimonies) or a mediated level (when the performers have personally met the victims). This continuum distinguishes different ways to perform *testimonio* but what is common to all of these modes is the desire for indexicality capable of recapturing the traumatic original experience. *Teatro testimonial* produces a sense effect of immediacy, a promise that the spectator is seeing a body in action that simply “is” what it presents covering up all the other semiotic operations that influence the spectator’s experience of the performance. What results of this enunciative game of indexical embodiment is autoreferentialization that conjoins materiality and significance.

The second function of the body is that of being a deictic point of reference. While signs stand in place of something else, the body is unavoidably in the place of itself, even when fictionalized in a theatrical personage. Therefore, from this particular position and temporality, the body functions as a deictic point of reference that gives meaning to its context. The body-in-presence functions as the temporal and spatial anchor to the situation and context where it is produced and from which it produces.

The role of the body is crucial to re-invent a temporality allowing trauma to become a past memory. The ever- returning temporality of trauma is irrupted by a body (be it the body of the original witness or the body of an actor as a second degree witness) that is “now and here” and that symbolically raises a “then and there”. The liminal status of a body in scene interpellates the status of the body of trauma and, by doing so, offers a way to re-invent and historicize it.

Ñi pu tremens, mis antepasados (2008) (*My ancestors*) created and directed by Paula González is a piece performed by five Mapuche elderly women and five young Mapuche girls. González worked for four months collecting testimonies and then created the piece that tells the stories of women that had moved from the countryside to the city and now live in the margins of society because of their gender and ethnic origins, and who. During the first three minutes of the performance, a woman speaks in Mapudungún, which is the native language of the Mapuche people that is not spoken or understood by most of the Chilean spectators. This initial provocation strips the audience of any instrument to understand the other’s world. The piece starts by declaring the impossibility to speak, to represent and to communicate. Thus, Spivack’s thesis of the subaltern is reversed: the hegemonic is banded of the language of the Other, which in the performance acquires the right to speak in his or her own language.

From the spectator’s point of view there is a powerful reality effect that binds the reality of life with the reality of the stage. The possible world is not elsewhere, but is created in the “here and now” of the evanescent event. As Ana Elena Puga comments:



When *testimonio* is performed, rather than presented through a text, the sense of the Real is heightened. If textual *testimonio* derives some of its resistant potential from its strong link to oral tradition, then the performative *testimonio* has even more resistant potential. The oral, and ephemeral nature of performance creates the illusion that one is actually face to face with a previously voiceless voice, unedited and unencumbered by anthropologists or novelists or other intellectual helpers. (Puga 2008: 197-198)

However, even if the spectator sees real bodies on stage, there is a mediation and “theatricalization” that actually allows the emergence of a fictional temporality. The way the performance is constructed, from its technical devices to what was selected to be shown, determines a semiotic construction that is not neutral and that aims to produce this “other time” and “other space” effect. The bodies that appear in *Ñi pu tremen* are bodies that retain the right to speak and show their own reality by functioning as a link with a traumatic past and at the same time the high continuity of presence allows us to access another time and another space: that of a traumatic past.

The exacerbation of the liminal status of the body in *teatro testimonial* facilitates interweaving different incommensurable dimensions, endorsing interbody communication that functions independently from the word, which results in a visceral and compelling spectatorship. *Ñi pu Tremen* requires a bodily spectator willing to activate his/her senses and, above all, his/her own corporal memory, which through hypoiconic movement can interpret and make sense of the “other body”.

8. Afterthoughts

The aesthetics, ethics and politics of *teatro testimonial* in Chile have varied throughout the years. Immediately after the end to Pinochet’s regime, *teatro testimonial* avoided a direct approach to the dictatorship and preferred an allusive and metaphorical approach. Unlike other Latin American cases, such as Argentina, few exceptions in theatre dared to work with direct victims of the dictatorship. In the past two decades though, *teatro testimonial* has diversified its themes and tropes, not only to directly address the dictatorship but also to include other kinds of issues, such as the segregation of the Mapuche people from the hegemonic system. The common factor is that such theatrical pieces continue to take account of a cultural trauma that comes from the dictatorship but now absorbs other issues such as national identity, gender and ethnic discrimination. The strength of national trauma in Chile has been such that every later conflict, despite its nature, is retrieved back to the wounds of the dictatorship, the dictatorship has become a foundational trauma. This may be why *teatro testimonial*



survives the artistic trends and remain as a difficult, but necessary, theatre endeavour.

Most of *teatro testimonial* problematizes the role of the witness, the mediation process and the dichotomy between reality and fiction on stage, by avoiding the use of conventional dramaturgical structures and preferring multiple temporalities rather than a unique and discrete time lapse. This may constitute a clear post-resistance to the dictatorship, where censorship only allowed theater companies to perform politically “neutral” classics that respected every single theatrical convention. But at the same time it reflects how post-dictatorship *teatro testimonial* engaged in more complex self-reflexive “meta” operations that could put what was intended as theatre on the verge of a crisis. *Teatro testimonial* works in the boundaries and crossroads of the canon of both testimony and theatre.

The creative processes that characterize *teatro testimonial* are full of translations and mediations that multiply the perspectives that finally affect how the spectator approaches the piece. Usually they offer alternative “paths of interpretation” without providing a concrete particular message. A multiple authorship also results in a multiple spectatorship, hence producing an encounter that is outsourced by a collaborative meaning-making process. This is from my point of view, the political effectiveness of *teatro testimonial* that by multiplying the witnesses expands the potential for political responsibility.

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