

**And They Didn't Shut Up:
Prison Narratives of the Mexican Dirty War**

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Diles que se callen...
—Luis Echeverría

Over thirty years after the massacres of Tlatelolco on October 2nd 1968 and Corpus Christi on June 10th 1971, former President Luis Echeverría Álvarez (1970-1976) was called to testify before the Special Prosecutors Office (FEMOSPP). “Tell them to shut up,” were the words of Echeverría in July 2002 to reporters when facing the packed crowd demanding justice and calling him a murderer.

Former President Vicente Fox Quezada (2000-2006) stated that, following the recommendation of Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, the creation of FEMOSPP would go beyond the prevailing expectations of a Truth Commission—which usually limits itself to clarifying past actions and omissions—and would also seek to punish them. The final report of the Special Prosecutor Office, however, stresses that the

inquiries may serve only as a basis for judicial prosecution.¹ As Kate Doyle points out, the role of FEMOSPP seems to have only been a political move calculated to create an appearance of transparency without reaching any judicial action.² Despite decades of long efforts carried out by various NGO's and relatives of disappeared persons and the two attempts in 2004 and 2006 to bring Luis Echeverría—among other former officials—to justice, it has not been possible to prosecute authorities responsible for government counterinsurgent operations in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Mexican government has generally succeeded in avoiding its obligation to civil society by giving a public apology and particularly prosecuting the officials who sponsored the Dirty War. Nonetheless, grassroots movements demonstrate how political violence does not remain in the past. After the dissolution of FEMOSPP in 2006, relatives of the disappeared are still fighting a battle to become visible and get recognition as a true act of reparation that goes beyond meeting the formal requirements: i.e., to end impunity.³

As Carlos Monsiváis states, the student movement of 1968 became the foundational myth because, above of all, the demand for justice always emerges to point out the offender's impunity ("Persistencia de la memoria" 35). Indeed the memory of Tlatelolco remains the most visible act of repression and has become a symbol of resistance anchored in the collective memory of civil society, as observed in the annual march in Tlatelolco Square claiming "2 de octubre no se olvida". It also has functioned as an umbrella sheltering a wide range of social demands that goes from youth, feminist and gay movements to the demonstrations

¹ Cf. FEMOSPP *Informe histórico a la sociedad*, 29-33. Available online: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB209/index.htm> A draft of this report is also available online at the National Security Archives website: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB180/index.htm>

² See Kate Doyle, "Una verdad en construcción" *Proceso*, 1545, 2006; available online http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB180/doyle_una_verdad_construccion.pdf.

³ Relatives of the disappeared guerrilla fighter Rosendo Radilla stated that the public apology offered by Mexican government does not represent a meaningful act of reparation since none of the officials involved in his disappearance has been brought to trial (Gloria Leticia Díaz, "Exigen desagravio en caso Radilla con presencia de Calderón", *Proceso*, Nov 18, 2011). For an analysis on the Mexican Dirty War, the temporality of memory and democracy see PJ Brendese, "Remembering Democratic Time: Specters of Mexico's Past and Democracy's Future".

against the war on drugs. Nonetheless, the visibility of Tlatelolco's repression has unintentionally placed a smokescreen on the systematic state violence perpetuated by the Mexican government against social movements, particularly on guerrilla warfare. This "invisibility" can be observed in the government's denial of existing guerrilla units as well as the uneven attention intellectuals have paid to the guerrilla warfare and counterinsurgent operations during the 1970's.

This article explores the reception of guerrilla warfare by the *lettered city* and analyzes the first literary works written by former guerrilla fighters that portray their experiences in official and clandestine prisons.⁴ I argue that these texts, though published, occupy what Homi Bhabha calls "in-between" space, since the guerrilla warfare was not amply discussed at that time, and the guerrilla fighters were not considered to be professional writers.

The first section describes the uneven attention paid by Mexican intellectuals to the guerrilla warfare and counterinsurgent programs, compared to the repression of Tlatelolco on October 2nd, 1968. This section also discusses the harsh conditions for writing, the projects that emerged during prison confinement and how, even as they are published, these texts remain relatively marginal and understudied. The second section analyses a handful of poems from the anthology *Sobreviviremos al hielo. Literatura de los presos políticos* (1988) by Manuel Anzaldo and David Zaragoza, compiled in prison but published only ten years after amnesty was granted. The third section focuses on the award-winning novel *¿Por qué no dijiste todo?* (1980), by Salvador Castañeda, former guerrilla fighter of the group Movimiento Acción Revolucionaria (MAR).

⁴ In recent years participants of guerrilla movements of 1970s have published testimonies, memories and essays describing their experiences during the Dirty War. Nonetheless, this article will focus only on the first literary texts. Recent works include *Morir de sed junto a la fuente* (2001) by Minerva Armendáriz, *La negación del número* (2006) by Salvador Castañeda, *Memoria de la guerra de los justos* (1996) by Gustavo Hírales Morán, *Pensar la guerrilla en México* (2006) by Héctor Ibarra, *El color de las amapas* (2007) by Ignacio Lagarda, *Héroes y fantasmas* (2009) by Benjamín Palacios, *Diary of a guerrilla* (1999) by Ramón Pérez (translated by Dick Reavis), *En las profundidades del MAR* (2003) by Fernando Pineda, and *Sendero en tinieblas* (2004) by Alberto Ulloa translated into English as *Surviving Mexico's Dirty War* (2007) by Aurora Camacho de Schmidt and Arthur Schmidt.

Although the reception of these texts by literary critics was uneven, both texts are embedded in the literary field that aims to make visible the category of the political prisoner, and also to represent violence and prison power through the use of testimonial, poetic and fictional elements. Studying the emergence of these texts and their use of literary expression to represent a silenced past intends to fill a gap in Mexican literary criticism.

I. The 1968 Student Movement and Guerrilla Warfare

The backlash against the Tlatelolco massacre by the *lettered city* was absolute, not only via Octavio Paz's resignation of his diplomatic post in India, but also through the production of literature and testimony from various generations of writers and poets, as well as members of the Consejo Nacional de Huelga (CNH).⁵ In fact, it could be said in later decades that there was no text that did not mention or make a vague reference to the 1968 movement.

Although the student movement did not represent a threat to the hegemonic party (PRI), the repression had great impact at a social and political level and within the intellectual sphere it resurrected old arguments around the specific role of literature and the function of the writer. The Mexican avant-garde held a similar dispute during the post-revolutionary period, but in the context of the Cold War and the Cuban Revolution, the issue of commitment *versus* autonomy of literature was revitalized.

On one hand, indignation and the particular immediacy of making repression visible—that the media and government had otherwise censured—placed the social commitment of intellectuals on the table for discussion. On the other hand, the issue of the intellectuals' autonomy was strongly manifested particularly after the anti-intellectual campaign carried out by the government in response to statements by Socrates Campos Lemus (member of the Central Committee of the CNH), and by writer

⁵ Noteworthy examples in essay form are *Postdata* (1970) by Octavio Paz, *Tiempo mexicano* (1971) by Carlos Fuentes, and the texts by José Revueltas subsequently collected in *Mexico 68: Juventud y revolución* (1978). Poems and narratives from the period can be found in anthologies edited by Miguel Arroche Parra, Marco Antonio Campos, Ivonne Gutiérrez, among others.

Elena Garro on the participation of a group of intellectuals in an anti-government plot.⁶

In the wake of the boom of the Latin American narrative and the emergence of new generations of writers, literary criticism in itself rearticulated the dispute under opposite categories such as tradition/ breakthrough, content/ form, onda/ escritura, trying to define the trends or paths which Mexican literature has taken after the 1968 student movement.

Broadly speaking, while some critics have explained the impact of 1968 on Mexican narrative as a return to the novel of social commitment inherited from the narrative of the Mexican Revolution (e.g. Leal, López and Sefchovich), others have stressed how its innovative use of meta-fiction, mistrust of referential language, plurality of narrative voices, along with the break from defined literary genres were able to revitalize Mexican literature after 1968 (e.g. Brushwood, Franco, Herz, Medina, among others). As Theda Herz points out, literary criticism proposed a fresh set of dualities (e.g. escritura/ onda, creación verbal/crítica social, conciencia escapatoria/conciencia crítica, la mafia/lo nuevo), recycling old disputes and “again implying a gap between artistry and social relevancy” (Herz 71). The literary texts produced, however, reached across genre boundaries combining testimony, chronicle, as in Elena Poniatowska's *La noche de Tlatelolco*, or even the novel, as the case of Luis González de Alba's *Los días y los años*, just to mention the better-known works.⁷

Of major importance in this debate is the fact that the reaction of intellectuals and civil society at large toward the guerrillas of the 1970s was different from the one caused by the suppression of the 1968 movement. Despite the media and government censorship, the Tlatelolco massacre was very visible, because the attack was directed against members of the university community, most of them from the urban middle class, which is

⁶ Intellectual statements were published in *La Cultura en México*, edited by Fernando Benítez. Cf. Patricia Cabrera *Una inquietud de amanecer* (163-69) and Jorge Volpi, *La imaginación y el poder*, (Chapter V: “La conjura de los intelectuales”).

⁷ Other less well-known texts that stand somewhere between testimonio, autobiographical reflection, and essay are *Tres culturas en agonía* (1969), by Jorge Carrión and Daniel Cazés; *Tiempo de hablar* (1970), by Arturo Álvarez Garín, José Revueltas and Eduardo Valle; *T-68* (1971) by Juan Miguel de Mora; and *El movimiento estudiantil del 68* (1972) by Ramón Ramírez, to cite some examples.

a much more visible sector than the rural population. While the 1968 repression was unleashed against a peaceful demonstration, which even cancelled the planned march to the Casco de Santo Tomás, the guerrilla movement was rejected due to its violent means of action.

The armed struggle of the 1970s is remembered as the outgrowth of Tlatelolco and Corpus Christi massacres, as a radical turn of the participants of the student movements and members of the left organizations and parties. Indeed, after the violent response of the Mexican government to the student movement, many participants, mostly young people influenced by the Cuban Revolution and South American guerrilla movements, opted for armed struggle after democratic means had been thwarted. Nonetheless, general discontent, increasing protests by workers and students in urban areas, as well as frequent guerrilla outbreaks in localized regions (e.g. Chihuahua, Guerrero and Morelos) can be traced back even to early 1940s.

As Carlos Montemayor has pointed out, in analyzing twentieth-century social movements in Mexico it is a common mistake to regard social discontent as a form of violence that the state should halt or resolve. The way in which these movements have been characterized by the government already portrays a combative strategy, rather than analyzing how they are part of social processes responding to institutionalized social violence. Separating the armed core of the guerrilla from the social conditions out of which they emerged, and annihilating their social foundations, establishes the conditions for the recurrence of guerrilla movements (*La violencia de estado*, 179-83).

Widespread rejection of violent tactics such as expropriation (bank robberies) and kidnappings, along with management of the media by the government, which classified the guerrillas as terrorists, put a smokescreen over the social and political conditions that caused them to arise in the first place.⁸

⁸ Unlike the rural guerrillas who had more grassroots support, the actions and the agenda of urban guerrilla movement, did not find large echo in the urban population, despite the large monthly circulation of the magazine *Madera*. This magazine published by Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre, had a print run of 40,000 copies a month between 1975 and 1976 (Jorge Luis Sierra, "Fuerzas armadas y contrainsurgencia," 392).

The issue of the urban guerrilla movement and state violence only began to be visible thanks to demonstrations by the mothers and relatives of the disappeared, as Elena Poniatowska recounts in *Fuerte es el Silencio* (1980).⁹ With the exception of Carlos Montemayor and eventually Carlos Fuentes' insights of Rubén Jaramillo in *Tiempo mexicano* (1971), few writers devoted themselves to telling the story and understanding the phenomenon of the guerrillas in Mexico, and the few novels that did take it up were considered to be within the cycle of the Tlatelolco narrative.¹⁰ Despite this relative vacuum, some guerrilla participants began writing in prison, and their texts, with wider or more limited circulation, are relevant not only because they contribute to the testimony of an ignored past, but also because they raise the issue of who possesses the legitimacy to speak and what is considered literature.

According to Rafael Saumell Muñoz, the *locus* of the prison is a space where transgressive discourses converge and, as anti-discourses, their purpose would be to question the validity of the court's verdict. Through use of persuasion which plays upon the readers' sympathies, prison discourse places the reader as a virtual member of a second jury looking for a "platform of solidarity" to mobilize public opinion ("El otro testimonio: literatura carcelaria en América Latina" 499). Nevertheless, it seems that in Anzaldo and Zaragoza's anthology as well as in Salvador Castañeda's works the political prisoners do not deny their past actions but instead denounce the brutality of state violence, repression against political dissidents as well as torture and punishment in official and clandestine

⁹ Rosario Ibarra de Piedra started the Eureka Committee in 1977 as Committee for Defense of Persecuted Prisoners, the Disappeared, and Political Exiles, and in 1978 Felipe Martínez Soriano started the Independent Committee for the Defense of Persecuted Prisoners, the Disappeared and Political Exiles, which subsequently changed its name to AFADEM.

¹⁰ Such is the case of the novels *La línea dura* (1971), by Gerardo de la Torre; *Al cielo por asalto* (1979), by Agustín Ramos; or *¿Por qué no dijese todo?* (1980), by Salvador Castañeda. On the other hand, Patricia Cabrera states that the Tlatelolco narrative in the early seventies made it possible to publish novels that addressed and configured the imagery of the armed struggle as a means to reach revolutionary change. These novels include *La fórmula* (1971), *Si tienes miedo* (1973) and *Gallo rojo* (1975), by Juan Miguel de Mora; as well as *El infierno de todos tan temido* (1975), by Luis Carrión Beltrán (Cabrera and Estrada *Con las armas de la ficción*). However, these novels sank into oblivion and guerrilla warfare did not reappear until 1991 with the novels *Guerra en el paraíso* by Carlos Montemayor and *La guerra de Galio* by Héctor Aguilar Camín.

prisons. These texts are transgressive not for claiming innocence but for exposing an issue of legitimacy.

Due to its double character as both testimonial and literary, these texts are in a limbo or an “in-between” space because they have to deal with government censorship as well as acceptance of the *lettered city*.¹¹ Both the topic and the authority of the writers were delicate issues. In the prologue to the anthology, the editors state that the goal in publishing the volume is to contribute to the modern literary expressions in Mexico as well as the need to acknowledge their comrades. Statements such as “dejar constancia de su paso por el mundo” or “rescate de algunas cuartillas” (Anzaldo 13-18) emphasize their testimonial role, while explanations of the criteria to select the poems bring up the fact that they do not belong to the intellectual sphere.

Los textos que se difunden no contienen necesariamente una enmarcación rigorista que pudiera satisfacer al fino gusto literario de muchos y posiblemente algunas páginas presenten graves dolencias que delaten al que escribió como un mero aficionado al delicado arte de escribir, pero la intención de esta casi antología es otra. La obra se publica, pues se cree representativa de una clase especial en nuestra sociedad: el preso político; y la forma literaria sería también un apartado especial en las letras: literatura carcelaria. (Anzaldo 11)

Their demand for political and literary recognition points out precisely how these texts emerged from the margins and took over the literary field to affirm the political existence of dissidents and political prisoners, but also as cultural producers. For guerrilla fighters, literature represented the last resource for denouncing state violence, and for asserting or even reflecting on the revolutionary change and its means. As observed in the anthology's prologue, writing is considered more as a practice and a matter of political representation than an aesthetic achievement. This fact illustrates a changing view that converges with the debate around literature as a creative process *versus* the social commitments it had held at that time. However, on the one hand it exposes the vacuum of intellectual attention with regard to guerrilla warfare and its

¹¹ I borrow the term “in-between” space from Bhabha. He proposes the crucial need “to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (*Location of culture* 2).

political prisoners, and on the other, it reveals how conditions for writing became more than a testimony of survival and denunciation. They became a path to empowerment for those emerging from prison confines.

Even though the topic of prison is not new in twentieth-century Mexican literature, the prison texts of the Dirty War present a change in the place from which they emerge. That is, the focus of the narration or the poetic voice is presented from the viewpoint of the political prisoner, where the conditions of production cease to merely have an extra-textual or referential function and become an intrinsic element of the text. Thus, these narratives do not have an external perspective; they are not an anthropological account, nor are they written from an intellectual's perspective—as in the cases of Judith Martínez Ortega's *La isla* (1938), Martín Luis Guzmán's *Islas Mariás* (1959), José Revueltas' *Los muros de agua* (1941), or Álvaro Mutis' *Diario de Lecumberri* (1960).¹²

These texts contain a testimonial dimension that is intrinsic to their conditions of production even though they use elements from the poetic or narrative genre. It is interesting to note, moreover, that the first texts published were not testimonials and had to borrow from other genres to evade censorship. Besides denouncing the repression of an authoritarian and corrupt government, these texts also criticize prison conditions and the ambiguous *status* of the guerrilla fighter and political prisoner. Since the government denied the existence of guerrilla warfare and political prisoners, these narratives literally survived state repression and were produced under conditions of extreme surveillance, persecution, torture, beatings, and constant searches during the incursions of the political police in Lecumberri and in the North and East penitentiaries. For example, as Anzaldo and Zaragoza describe, the anthology project was almost ready to be printed in the penitentiary shops in 1977, but a sudden transfer halted it,

¹² In *Los muros de agua*, Revueltas takes up the issue of the political prisoner and the narration has an external perspective, like a didactic novel. It is worth noting that in contrast, *El apando* (1969) explores the perspective of the common prisoner, leaving the topic of political prisoners aside. Among other prison narratives, standout include Revueltas' short story "Hegel y yo", included in *Material de los sueños* (1974), the play *Círculo vicioso* (1974), by José Agustín. Other testimonies of the political prisoners of 1968 are *Los días y los años* (1971) by Luis González de Alba or *Testimonios de la cárcel. De la libertad y el encierro* (1998) by Roberta Avendaño ("la Tita").

which also meant starting over from scratch and losing what had been achieved on the basis of subtle and constant, tough negotiations: “todo se perdió, placas, negativos, pruebas, papel, tiempo de máquinas y sobornos pagados, todo se perdió menos el original aunque incompleto” (Anzaldo 13-14).

Likewise, Salvador Castañeda stresses how complicated it was to write in jail, under such adverse circumstances, from getting pen and paper to hiding the text whenever they entered to search the cells:

Lo que se registra corresponde tal vez a una séptima parte del tiempo que duró nuestro encierro. Encajonados por tal circunstancia, tomar notas aquí dentro exigía inflexibles medidas de seguridad no tanto por la vigilancia interna o los registros repentinos celda por celda espulgando todos los rincones (incluso en nuestros pliegues) en busca de cualquier cosa por escrito; no tanto por eso como por las incursiones que hacen a la cárcel tanto la Judicial Federal como los cuerpos antiguerrilleros, que no se limitan a la búsqueda sino a la tortura... (*Los diques del tiempo* 9)

Writing in prison was persecuted, and Castañeda's notes were scattered among various comrades during the political police searches. As it happened with comrades who were killed or disappeared, a significant part of his prison diary was never recovered. In this sense, texts and bodies are interwoven beyond the metaphorical. Both share fates as surviving bodies-texts.

Despite these hostile conditions, writing constituted a means of empowerment. Castañeda's novel had a successful entry into the realm of letters by receiving the Grijalbo Prize in 1979. In contrast, Anzaldo and Zaragoza's anthology, as well as Castañeda's prison diaries were at some point overlooked by critics.¹³ Nonetheless, being published does not necessarily mean that these texts became part of the *canon*, nor that the guerilla's issue was openly discussed at that time. Thus, these texts are located in an in-between space, and marginality constitutes not only the

¹³ Castañeda's novel had a large run of publication and was republished by Sep Setentas in 1986 with a print run of 30,000 and 10,000 copies respectively, while the prison diaries, *Los diques del tiempo*, were published later on in 1991 and republished in 2004 under the title of *Diario bastardo*. Both publications had a print run of 1,000 copies. In contrast, Anzaldo and Zaragoza's anthology was published in 1988 by Costa Amic after two previous attempts and had a print run of 2,000 copies.

raw material with which they work, but also the conditions for their writing, their publication, and later their general reception.

II. Writings From the Prison

Testimonial nature is an intrinsic part of these texts, and thus their authors' experience in prison such as isolation, loneliness, separation from their family, and their desire for freedom are recurrent topics. Torture, punishment, the reasons for taking up arms, the memory of fallen comrades, along with tensions between fellow militants due to internal splits in the group or due to suspicion of betrayal are addressed in more detail in Castañeda's novel and prison diaries.

It must be noted that guerrilla fighters' experience in prison was very different from that of the political prisoners from the labor movement in 1958, or from the student movement in 1968. Although prisoners involved in the latter did also suffer intimidation and attacks orchestrated by officials running the Lecumberri Penitentiary, the abuse and punishment of guerrilla prisoners was far more ruthless, as guerrillas were 'recommended' to political police (DFS).¹⁴ Despite these rough experiences, official imprisonment did offer, at some point, a relative safe haven for guerrillas for it meant they had survived the clandestine prisons as well as the risk of dying during torture sessions. Secondly, being presented as terrorists in press conferences in the presence of government officials gave prisoners visibility, and to some extent security. In short, their status changed from that of disappeared to that of prisoner. "Al fin estaban fuera de aquel lugar, *nacidos otra vez al mundo*, salidos de los espacios de tortura líquida, de cables de corriente alterna y directa, de caucho sintético; listos para entrar otra vez en la oscuridad de otras paredes" (*¿Por qué no dijiste todo?*, 79).

Compared to the inhumane conditions they faced in clandestine and illegal detention, the official prison is described as being give a possibility

¹⁴ José Revueltas' letter to Henry Miller narrates the attack against political prisoners, which was set up by prison authorities to breaking the hunger strike on December 31, 1970. He also addresses the duplicity of the Mexican government in handling issues such as censorship in the press and media as well the negating the existence of the political prisoners ("Año nuevo en Lecumberri", 223-44).

for rebirth. Although political police did engage in systematic harassment, intimidation, searches, and torture in official prisons, as is narrated in detail in Castañeda's writings, the prison also meant a space where guerrilla fighters could reflect on repression, state violence, the reasons why guerrilla warfare was being defeated and particularly on representing the prison experience.

The anthology compiles poems and narrations of former guerrilla fighters as well as engravings made by a political prisoner and one of his relatives.¹⁵ Poetry—rather than testimonial narrative—was the first genre that former guerrilla fighters used as a way to express their subjectivity by stressing the internalization of punishment as well as the effects that the prison system had on them: “La cárcel se me ha metido en mis huesos / para despojarme de voz y saliva” (Saúl López de la Torre, *Sobreviviremos*, 113).

Rather than a physical space, prison represents a mechanism of surveillance and punishment whose aim is to reform the prisoner. For example, David Zaragoza's untitled poem evokes what prison is like by describing the effects that the power to punish has on the subject: “Opacadora de soles / sol de los opacados (...) / Degeneradora de dioses / Diosa de los degenerados” (*Sobreviviremos*, 29).

As a social mechanism of discipline, prison is defined by the interactions between punishment and the individual. Via a play of words, the first line offers a description of the effects on the individual, while the second line depicts what the prison has become: a sun for the darkened (i.e. the oppressed). The rhythm of this wordplay throughout the poem resembles a religious prayer or mantra that consistently aspires to a definition of prison, without ever reaching it precisely, for the experience of prison can't be narrated.

Paridora de hombres / Hacedora de despojos
Lugar de las masturbaciones / Creadora de neuróticos
Gran panacea. (*Sobreviviremos* 29)

¹⁵ The authors participated in groups such as MAR, Grupo Lacandones, Unión del Pueblo, Frente Urbano Zapatista, Partido de los Pobres, Asociación Cívica Nacional Revolucionaria and Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre. Although not all guerrilla groups are included, it represents a substantial attempt to address their voices in the literary and political field.

Nevertheless, the enumeration of the prison's horrors is far from being a prayer and depicts the coercive power and violence inflicted on the subject. Far from its corrective goal, prison strips the prisoner of his humanity and transforms him into human wreckage. Moreover, this poem denounces how the power of prison interrupts and takes away from the prisoner his or her potential for development, and, therefore, rather than integrating or correcting criminal behavior, the prison system reinforces oppression.

Clausuradora de gargantas / Domadora impotente
Semillero de degenerados / Soledad de soledades
Encauce de desvíos / Artículo de primera necesidad (...)
Hierro candente que nos marcas / de orgullo o vergüenza
Ramillete de barrotes / Finamente amurallada. (*Sobreviviremos* 30)

By describing prison as “closer of throats” or “corrector of deviations” the poem exposes the function of prison as a constraining force. By describing it as “great panacea,” “impotent tamer,” or even “staple good,” the poem not only criticizes with a biting tone how prison indeed fails as a corrective social institution—“los males de la humanidad siguen afuera” (131)—but also that prison is a fundamental part of the state's apparatus of coercion. This poem, as well as others from the anthology, represents the oppression of the prison system by standing up to it in defiance. For example, the poem “Carcelero,” by Agustín Hernández Rosales, incisively points out how the power of prison has effects on both the inmates and on the those with the power to punish: the guards.

Dime pinche carcelero / entre tus llaves / ¿hay alguna
para abrir flores? (...)
¿o que cerrando los ojos y las puertas / cierras el venero
de las primaveras?
¡Pobres mañanas! / ¡qué grises serían / si fueras tú el
encargado de abrirlas! (*Sobreviviremos* 190)

This poem underlines the limits of jailer's power, comparing it to the biological rhythm of nature. The breaking of dawn, the blossoming of a flower, or the coming of springtime cannot be controlled by anyone or anything. By contrasting vibrant elements and nature's process with the coldness of steel and concrete, the poem nearly establishes an analogy with

the coming of revolution that cannot be repressed. Additionally the guerrilla fighter is represented as the counterpart of the jailer. The political prisoner appears as a morally coherent individual that has paid his debts and completed the requirements for a revolutionary change.

He agotado ya / los trámites para un amanecer:
he ido desde el puño crispado / hasta la mirada oblicua
(*Sobreviviremos* 190)

The political prisoner has achieved knowledge of the human condition and of nature through brutal experience, while the jailer is disempowered and depicted as one more bar on the cell of the prison system. Reification has taken away his humanity and his power diminishes when it is compared to a broader force such as natural changes, justice, freedom and—even though it is not explicit—revolutionary change.

No encabronan / tu mirada aceitosa / ni tu andar domesticado.
Lo que encabrona / es que un barrote como tú / pueda andar por
ahí
esparciendo miradas / como si de veras comprendiera/
la alegría de las pendientes / y la reverencia de los árboles.
(*Sobreviviremos* 191)

In contrast to natural elements cherished by the political prisoner, the jailer inhabits the inanimate world of jails and padlocks that already stands alienated from a human and natural world:

A los de tu estirpe (...) / solo les queda el placer/ del
acoplamiento de metales /
el regocijo enfermo de acariciar orificios y candados / y
ondularse maricones /
con el penetrar morboso / de las llaves. (*Sobreviviremos*
191)

The analogy between the act of penetration and the power to control the opening or closing of a lock turns the tables on the jailer's masculinity by questioning the traditional category of the active role of penetration. Contrary to the political prisoner who appraises the value of life and nature, the jailer is constrained from feel pleasure other than what he obtains through the exercise of power.

Although imprisoned guerrilla members could not escape from torture and confinement, their writings are a path to resistance because they unmask penal mechanisms in prison as the state apparatus of coercion

and violence aimed to break down government dissidents. By capturing the effects of prison on the subjectivity of political prisoners, and their ability to develop the anthology project inside bars, the works affirm their authors' struggle in opposition to the government's denial of the existence of political prisoners in Mexico during that time.

III. Breaking the Siege of Silence

As mentioned above, Castañeda's novel *¿Por qué no dijiste todo?* was better received than the anthology of poetry or the prison diaries. It is noteworthy that these texts were published after amnesty was granted to guerrilla fighters toward the end of Echeverría's term, in 1978. The entrance of the novel into the literary field can be explained by the so-called "democratic opening" during which the government invested in papering over its image as repressor. This conjuncture definitely benefited the publication of the novel. In addition to its literary merit, the fact that the text denouncing state violence was fictional and not testimonial, gave it a greater chances of success compared to the explicit statements of the anthology or the openly exposed truth in the diaries.

¿Por qué no dijiste todo? narrates the story of the last six militants of the Movimiento Acción Revolucionaria (MAR) as they are about to leave the Santa Martha Acatitla prison after six years of confinement, mostly without undergoing any legal process and after having gone through various official and clandestine prisons. The narrative follows the release process, during which political prisoners are sitting on a bench waiting to be called. However, the narration is constantly interrupted by flashbacks, which alternate between time in prison and the guerrilla struggle, reproducing an effect of expectation of the already announced release.

The flashbacks address the contexts from which the guerrillas come, the reasons for the uprising, the creation of the group in the former Soviet Union unbeknownst to the officials at the Patrice Lumumba People's Friendship University, the ideological differences within the group, and the punishment of other comrades for their betrayal after torture sessions. The flashbacks also spell out the marginal conditions of life in the countryside

and the city, as well as the confinement, measures of discipline, and prison violence suffered by political prisoners.

The narration utilizes metanarrative, making constant allusions to the act of writing in prison. The narrator's observations on how to write these experiences and his desire to write a "true novel"—rather than a device of a first-time writer, which he actually is—expose the tension between testimonio and fiction. The appearance of the pseudonyms Joaquín and Jaime does not function simply to split the protagonist and narrator, as a literary technique, but rather illustrates the clandestine structure of guerrilla groups in which members must often acquire several identities. The collected notes to which the novel alludes are ultimately lost at the moment political prisoners are released. These two layers of narration—the notes and the novel—are juxtaposed as part of a literary game that stresses the double character of the text: testimonio and fiction.

Although it received the prize for a novel, the jury's comments emphasized its testimonial value. As Jaime Labastida states: "Por encima de su valor literario, una cicatriz en nuestra conciencia. Un testimonio, un documento vivo" (*¿Por qué no dijiste todo?*, 11). It is precisely the tension between a testimonial radix and the literary interpretation to transform what was experienced and witnessed into a fictional narrative that makes this text very interesting because it seems to solve, on one hand, the issue of censorship, and on the other, to address the issue of the representation of violence.

One of the crossroads that testimonial texts have to face when addressing violence and the infliction of pain during torture is the tension between trauma and narration. As Elaine Scarry notes, one of the effects of torture is the destruction of the subject and the imposition of the voice of the torturer, which assures the silence of the tortured. For Scarry pain either remains inarticulate or, once articulated in language, it silences everything else: "the moment language bodies forth reality of pain, it makes all further statements and interpretations seem ludicrous and inappropriate, as hollow as the world content that disappears in the head of the person suffering" (*The body in pain*, 60).

This creates a problem between language and torture, which has been explored by Idelber Avelar in the post-dictatorship period in Chile. In the work of mourning, narration is an essential part of the psychological process of healing the wounds and, importantly, the preparation of the documents on the dictatorship. As Avelar observes, there are two phenomena during the process of converting the traumatic experience into a narrative. Firstly, there is an inherent resistance to the narration of the events. Language seems to be perceived by the tortured subject as insufficient, and the construction of a narrative as a betrayal of the singularity and ineffability of the traumatic experience.

El sujeto torturado percibe que la experiencia ha ocasionado una implosión en el lenguaje, lo ha manchado irreversiblemente. (...) Uno de los efectos calculados de la tortura es hacer de la experiencia una no experiencia—negarle a ella una morada en el lenguaje. (Avelar 184)

Secondly, anchored in Žižek's work, Avelar warns us about the dangers of producing a coherent narrative that dissolves inherent contradictions and antagonisms of the traumatic experience, controlling or making the experience unmentionable. In other words, the construction of a narrative, rather than focusing on the diegetic sequence of past events, should be understood as a possibility to reconstitute the *locus* of the witnessing. As Avelar states: "La manufacturación de una narrativa no cómplice de la perpetuación del trauma incluye como uno de sus momentos, de nuevo, una guerra al interior del lenguaje, alrededor del acto de nombrar" (Avelar 185).

This brings up several questions: How should violence be represented? How should a narrative be constructed that does not reproduce victimization, stitches up contradictions or neutralizes deviations under a harmonious discourse?

The novel *¿Por qué no dijiste todo?* breaks the siege of silence imposed on the period of the Dirty War not only by addressing repression and state violence—including the one exercised in prison—but also by assembling a narrative that goes beyond mimetic realism.

Emerging from a testimonial radix, the narrative abandons the testimonial genre. Fictionalization enters as a fundamental key to

representing violence. Although the novel is based on the experience of the author as a guerrilla fighter and political prisoner, violence appears in the narration at a referential level, exemplified by absurd and inhumane prison punishments like the *fajina* or *chocho*, searches and tortures carried out by political police.¹⁶ The language itself is also permeated by violence and narrative breaks that create the extended effect of an oppressive environment. Prison guards and political police agents are ridiculed and described as having animal features. Along these lines, it is worth noting that in the chapter entitled “Involución” members of the guerrilla group become animalized themselves when deciding to punish comrades who gave information during torture sessions:

Al caer, todos se echaron instintivamente sobre él como animales hambrientos, destrozando a su víctima en una confusión irreal y primitiva de golpes que sonaban fofos, desgarrando tejidos gelatinosos de las vísceras. (...) Después de cada golpe o mordida, *levantaban la cabeza como sacándola de la oscuridad de algún vientre destrozado*, viendo hacia todas partes, moviendo los ojos sin control alguno, fuera de sus depósitos; como si esos movimientos alternados fueran alguna reminiscencia del pasado desconocido del hombre, cuando éste se sentía acosado por todos los demás animales en una lucha permanente por sobrevivir. (*¿Por qué no dijiste todo?*, 55-56, emphasis mine)

Continually in the novel there appear images alluding to birth, the fetal position, the womb, and—though they are related to prison confinement—violence and death. In this case the transformation of guerrilla comrades into animal predators highlights the process of devolution. The description of the guerrillas moving their heads up as if they were emerging from the womb reveals not only the internalization of violence, but also the primal pulsations of animality of the human condition. Certainly, Castañeda’s writings were influenced by the works of José Revueltas. Particularly in *El apando*, Revueltas explores the connections between the prison and the womb as spaces that hold and constrain the individual.

¹⁶ Any new inmate at Lecumberri prison was expected to do cleaning activities, called *fajina* and *chocho*, which could be avoided by subtle. However far from cleaning, its aim was to punish and denigrate prisoners through uncomfortable positions like scraping bathroom floors with a stone while guards poured water on prisoners.

Following a Deleuzian reading, while in *El apando* El Carajo transgresses and breaks the maternal bond by informing that her mother is the one carrying the drug in her womb. In *¿Por qué no dijiste todo?* the guerrillas transgress the group solidarity, already broken by torture, and replicate the punishment done to their comrade. In both cases, transgression appears as an explosion of primal pulsations that severs the individual from his/her anchor (mother, prison, solidarity, humanity).¹⁷

Moreover, the torture sessions are always juxtaposed with images that allude to orgasms—both having to do with intense bodily experiences and the loss of control of the body:

Le vendaron los ojos con algo que no supo qué era, y también le ataron las manos. Al terminar esto último, repentinamente fue asaltado por un temblor desconocido que lo cimbró de pies a cabeza, lo mismo que en un ataque de epilepsia, sin poder controlar nada y con los músculos extrañamente endurecidos, como los de un muerto, con un dolor en la cintura que le dividía el cuerpo en dos, al igual que si acabara de masturbarse en la litera o en medio de las paredes frías del baño. (*¿Por qué no dijiste todo?*, 140-41)

As in other passages of the novel, the reconstruction of the torture experience is mediated by the analogy to orgasm as a destabilizing device that disrupts expectations of a narrative of pain. The analogy of orgasm alludes to the body as remains or waste, rather than pleasure. However in all its sordidness and violence the narrative highlights that there is still latent life. As observed in the novel, and in the recurrent bodily images related to animal behavior, body fluids and primal pulsations point out that the narrative resists the referential level of language. On the contrary, narrative is the search to put words to the experience of violence and infliction of pain.

In addition, the appearance of rats alone or in hordes is another disquieting recurrent image in the novel that is related to the underworld of violence and marginality. Rats are an unstable image in the text. In different passages the rats appears edible when inmates are preparing a stew called “pollo fino” (fine chicken), as a nomad band that manages to slip away through the cells of prison, and as a horde that attacks one of the

¹⁷ For a Deleuzian reading of José Revueltas see Evodio Escalante's *José Revueltas: una literatura del lado moridor*.

guerrilla members lying down after beatings. Even judges and guards are described with rodent-like features.

Chapter 10 “Alguien que tú no conoces, pero que te conoce” narrates the accidental detention of El Cananeo—one of the guerrillas—for selling illegally on the streets. His clandestine mission was to contact another member and get more instructions. However, the mission was aimed at deliberately isolating him from the rest of the group. This chapter describes marginal urban scenes in the area of La Merced market, also known as Santa Escuela Square, which the guerrilla cannot leave until he reaches his contact. The narrative interweaves homeless children inhaling glue, drunken beggars having sex, the febrile activity on the market with police raids, the detention of El Cananeo and a horde of rats attacking him in jail:

Con su cuerpo de piedra [la rata] avanzaba cuidadosa, igual que si pensara bien antes de dar el siguiente paso. [...] Parecía saber que así era más seguro su avance al cubrirle la pared el flanco izquierdo de ida y el flanco derecho de regreso. [...] Se asomó una vez más pero ya no sola, sino con otras que se le sumaron y parecían muy decididas. [...] No quería dormir pero lo hizo, y cuando las ratas advirtieron que finalmente cerraba los ojos, entonces triunfantes avanzaron un despliegue táctico; llegaron por la retaguardia. Sintió las mordidas en las piernas y sobre los pómulos, sobre la sangre seca. [...] Sintió pisadas de muchas patas al subir y bajar en tropel a lo largo de la espalda, que le producían un estremecimiento inmóvil. “Tienes que esperar siempre en Santa Escuela, pase lo que pase...” (*¿Por qué no dijiste todo?*, 92-96)

Contrary to the descriptions of political police agents, guards, inmates, and the crowd in the market—all of which are described as becoming animal-like—in this passage the rats, described as an organized military group, allude the violence of both the police raids and the guerrilla itself, and in this case head toward Cananeo as he is forcibly isolated from the group.

Furthermore, rats function as a body on which violence is objectified in a race called the “rat raceway.” This fictional scene—one of the most sordid ones—encompasses the violence that has not been able to be narrated in the reconstruction of the torture sessions. The mutilation, cannibalism, and inflicting of pain that one of the inmates employs on the rats, to train them for and subject them to the race, points to the brutality wielded on the body of the torture victim:

Las ratas eran colocadas en carriles separados y cubiertos para que no se vieran entre sí, y sólo se les dejaba la salida al final. En la meta colocaba, subrepticamente, bajo las tablas del canal, un trozo de carne. Al ponerlas en el partidero, con una sorprendente habilidad en las manos—que le envidiaría el mejor de los ilusionistas—se humedecía con la lengua la punta del dedo índice de la derecha, la metía en el bolsillo del pantalón y acto seguido, una vez que lo había untado de chile, lo restregaba en el ano de la rata y la dejaba revolcándose. En tanto abría las puertas, él corría también hasta la meta y, tomándola de la cola, la golpeaba contra el piso y la remataba de un pisotón en la cabeza. No dejaba una con vida; sabía que sin dientes morirían al poco tiempo. A Agustín le decían el *Gato*, por eso de las ratas. (*¿Por qué no dijiste todo?*, 102)

As in episodes of torture, narration is always mediated through images that disrupt and destabilize it and call into question the transparency of language. The image of rats refers to their several functions in the text: they appear edible, inflictors of pain or victims, or evoke police attacks and guerrilla tactics. It seems that the unstable and contiguous connection of rats with violence and marginality highlights the complexities of how violence permeates society and the human condition. On the other hand, instead of relying on a more consistent testimonial narrative—a narrator in first person claiming what happened to him or her—the place of the witness is recovered through fictionalization and different layers of narration: an omniscient narrator, Jaime-Joaquín, writing in prison and flashbacks of different characters.

The use of sordidness throughout the novel—the punishment of a comrade, the torture sessions and the contingent image of the rats—recalls what José Revueltas defined as the “lado moridor de la realidad” (the dying side of reality). Revueltas’ expression establishes a method for working on literary representation of reality that goes beyond photographic realism or reportage of the horrendous. Instead of mirroring repressive reality or utilizing the formula of socialist realism, Revueltas points out the need to observe internal movements of reality and to follow the trends in the construction of the narrative:

Dejarse la realidad que la seleccionemos. ¿Qué significa esto? Significa que la realidad tiene un movimiento *interno* propio, que no es ese torbellino que se nos muestra en su apariencia inmediata, donde todo parece tirar en mil direcciones a la vez. [...] Este *lado moridor* de la realidad, en el que se la ha aprehende, en el que se la

somete, no es otro que su lado *dialéctico*: donde la realidad obedece a un devenir sujeto a leyes, en que otros elementos contrarios se interpenetran y la acumulación cuantitativa se transforma cualitativamente. (*Los muros de agua*, 19)

For *Revueltas*, the dialectical movement is not necessarily resolved in a positive way. Rather, observing and apprehending the reality from its *dying side*—i.e. its negation—“enables him to pursue its internal movements of this world, discover its perspective lines, its movements of descent and degradation, and find in this degradation, in this apparent corruption, not a manifestation of evil in absolute terms, but a moment on the path of the dialectical overcoming of reality” (Escalante 23).

In the prologue of *Los muros de agua* (1978 edition), the main question for *Revueltas*, when visiting a leper colony in Guadalajara, was how to represent the terrible, and how to apprehend the living suffering matter of the leper: “Tomar a los leprosos en lo que no tienen de leprosos, porque, en efecto, la vida no es la lepra, pero más aún, sin que dejen de ser leprosos, porque la vida *todavía* está en riesgo de caer en la lepra” (*Los muros de agua* 19). In other words, that apprehension of the unthinkable or the sordid does not rely on mimicking reality but in pointing it out as a process of becoming. Here we find affinity with Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of minor literature: “Writing like a dog digging a hole, a rat digging its burrow. And to do that, finding his own point of underdevelopment, his own *patois*, his own third world, his own desert” (18).

Baseness, violence and marginality are captured as the *dying side of reality*. Castañeda transforms borderline experiences into a fictional narrative that imprints violence as much as it registers the struggle inside language to name that very violence. The novel does not mimic a language of violence, nor does it fall into a pattern of victimization, complacency, or try to stitch up contradictions to present a harmonious narrative. Through the animalization of characters—be they guards or political prisoners—and through the juxtaposition of torture and orgasm as bodily limit experiences, the novel succeeds in denouncing state violence during the period of the Dirty War. Additionally, the image of the rats is used as a contingent image that permeates the novel and mediates the representation of violence. It also destabilizes the duality of good *versus* evil. Rats are inflectors of pain

when they attack as a horde, as well as when they are victims of torture. The contingency of this image to sordidness and violence is definitely related to the power of prison mechanisms and state violence, but it also alludes to violence and divisions among guerrilla members, which are provoked either by the suspicion of betrayal after torture sessions or by previous issues of leadership and abuse of power.

Final Reflections

In comparison to the narratives that addressed the Tlatelolco massacre, guerrilla warfare was a delicate issue that Mexican civil society in general did not discuss at the time. It only became relatively visible after the relatives of disappeared people started demonstrating and demanding justice in late 1970's.

The emergence of these texts, as well as the fact that they were produced by political prisoners, poses the problem of representation in its dual character, as both political and literary. On one hand, these texts dislocate the Mexican government's discourse during the so-called democratic opening during the 1970's. On the other hand, by using literature as a path for empowerment implicitly, these texts propose a shift in what is considered to be literature. Instead of conceiving literature as an aesthetic endeavor, it is seen as a practice that these authors venture to take on despite the political stigma they carry and despite not being part of the *lettered city*.

The poetry analyzed here portrays the experience of political prisoners by highlighting the concept of prison not as merely a physical space but as an apparatus of punishment and confinement that has had profound effects on them. Moreover, the poems stand for defiance against the power of the penal system by turning the tables on the guard's power to punish by contrasting images of steel and concrete with the irrepressible breaking of the dawn or the blooming of flowers. Likewise, the fictionalization of prison experience allowed Casañeda's novel to have a better critical reception and also to pose the issue of representing violence as an unnarratable experience that has to be mediated.

Many years after these texts were produced in prison confinement, former President Echeverría demanded reporters quiet the crowd. He has not been brought to trial for sponsoring state violence against political dissidents and suspected supporters of guerrilla warfare. Although the Mexican government has not yet confronted the ghosts of the past to move towards a meaningful act of reparation, current grassroots movements are still raising their voices, as did these texts in the 1980s. These prison narratives revealed the conditions political prisoners faced and elaborated counter-discourses that unmasked repressions and state violence during the Mexican Dirty War. These texts of the underdogs sought to destabilize the hegemonic discourse of Mexican democracy. Given their discomforting existence, they make it imperative to revisit a past that has been avoided.

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