

The Intersection between Art and Human Rights

A Poetics of Remembering and Memory

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Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image.

Pierre Nora

For several decades, the primary focus of human rights has been limited to issues around politics without a concentrated focus on the human face of the victimized. What have the arts in general and literature in particular contributed to social justice and human rights? When literature specifically has been singled out for its contribution to the human rights theme, the discussion has generally centered on narrative and the didactic power of storytelling to give witness to the past, memorialize its victims, and rebuild a more just future. The current multidisciplinary focus on human rights seeks to broaden and strengthen the dialogue on the concept of human rights to include other literary genres. The humanities and social sciences have become an engaging dialogic encounter between political, historical, legal, and ethical discourses on human rights and cultural texts including literature (poetry, memoir, testimony, and its particular Latin American form – *testimonio* – as well as narrative), the visual and performing arts, film, and popular culture. Human rights issues have a primary relevance to literary studies

inasmuch as they capture and address significant human experience. But they also have a heightened relevance to the political and social conscience of literary studies, something inseparable from an aesthetic concern. In the most powerful literary pieces on human rights themes – neither their aesthetic appeal, nor their political urgency is imaginable without the other. In *Human Rights and Narrated Lives* (2004), Kay Schaeffer and Sidonie Smith refer to an “ethics of recognition” that the narratives enact not only through the recounting of suffering but also through powerful and empowering moments of self-assertion and implicit claims to human rights, thereby recognizing the victim’s humanity. In Kimberly Nance’s study *Can Literature Promote Justice? Trauma Narrative and Social Action in Latin American Testimonio* (2006), there is even the assertion that the *testimonio* does not simply give voice and a human face to the collective community through a representative individual. The genre is also a call to reader acknowledgement and subsequent action.

Over the years, scholars have explored the work of truth commissions, the effects of apologies, debates over reparations, and trials of individual perpetrators in a plethora of case studies. At the same time, there has been a burgeoning of studies about how past injustice is remembered (or forgotten) and memorialized. To what extent is historical justice predicated on particular memories, on particular forms of remembering or on the forgetting of a particular past? How do the more aesthetic forms of literary production impact on memory in societies striving for historical justice and the restoration of human rights? How does the artistry of a single poetic voice represent a silenced collective of voices by aesthetic form, function, and content and thus influence the contours of history in a healing, restorative way?

The Chilean-American poet and human rights activist Marjorie Agosín negates forgetfulness and oblivion and honors memory in her haunting lyrical works. Her heart-wrenching words call upon readers to remember the atrocities of Chile’s recent past and honor those who fought against them. A descendant of European Jews who escaped the Holocaust and settled in Chile in 1939, she was born in Bethesda, Maryland, and raised in Santiago, Chile. The family settled in Athens, Georgia, after fleeing Chile under Pinochet’s violent rise to power. Coming from a South American country and being Jewish, Agosín’s writings demonstrate a unique

blending of these cultures. She writes about the Holocaust as well as anti-Semitic events that occurred in her native land. Her poetry exemplifies poignancy as an immanent aesthetic around which to organize a concrete response to human suffering. It is a testimony to the deep affect needed to reorient human rights around human experience. Agosín's concept of reconciliation is dependent on a notion of loss that defies a temporal construct – it connects the past, the present, and the future. To that end, this essay will be concerned with emotional, spiritual, or physical loss in its many manifestations, particularly as it relates to time – ways the past and the future have a bearing on the direct present.

Collective Memory, Contested Histories: Historical Justice and Memory

"To be a member of any human community," wrote the historian Eric Hobsbawm, "is to situate oneself with regard to one's [its] past" (Hobsbawm 1997, 206). The suggestion is that individuals, and the communities in which they reside, come together as singular units under an overarching "past" that informs the essence of an internally exclusive, yet mutually constituted social identity. Implicit within Hobsbawm's statement is the idea that the "past" is somehow formalized – that is, people actively remember the past while simultaneously orienting themselves to the institutionalized and symbolic structures that bind the "community" together. Building the collective consciousness often requires memorializing the particular people and events that ostensibly constructed present social conditions. A sense of collective memory ultimately provides political, economic, and cultural institutions with legitimacy while containing the spread of dissent. But individual and collective consciousness operate both within and outside of these formalized and often prefabricated frameworks. As such, the political and economic issues surrounding the idea of collective memory are complicated by the discontinuities and silences that often characterize the construction and circulation of memory across space and time. Representing the past thus becomes a contested and dissonant process. The promotion of particular voices and stories within history in line with the simultaneous suppression of others is an action which is both directed by and influences the politics of identity. Alongside authoritative and officially endorsed versions of the past are instanc-

es of cultural resistance which seek to challenge the agreed conventions and fill silences, often giving voice to the voiceless in literary forms. Artistic reactions to dominant historical narratives endure the proverbial test of time due to their poignancy and aesthetic caliber. What is the legacy of such aesthetic productions? What are the boundaries and limitations of such literary pieces of other, resistant voices to authoritative versions of the past? Who are the audiences for these resistant voices and how are they received?

As a “guardian of memory” in this collective sense, Marjorie Agosín engages in the act of remembering as a sacred ritual in which the horrors of the past are infused with the courageous acts of the present. As the poem “Recordar” (“Remembering”) asserts, memory is far from a passive act. Memory is an active interaction with impressions left by external stimuli. Remembering historical acts of domination and abuse can therefore have a range of affective consequences on the individual and social consciousness, from trauma to shame to anger to cathartic self-recognition, even willful oblivion. Acts of remembering are most meaningful when they help those recalling such memories develop understanding of the process and consequences of the atrocity committed. At a pragmatic level, this is historical self-awareness. On a more affective level, such memories act as they would with any private trauma, to develop emotional, intellectual, and psychic control over oppressive memories, to preserve those memories, and to honor those remembered. Memory in history thus becomes part of a creative imagination, inscribing a memory of the past in the literary piece whether or not the characters are fictionalized or named at all. Memory in Agosín’s poetry has a specific role to play in preserving / manipulating, forming remembrances (collective memories), informing meta-narratives (cultural memory) through the retelling of personal stories (remembering). Such creative production and interpretation can also play a vital role in the practice of forgiveness—the surrendering of resentment toward another for a wrongdoing. This forgiveness is a healing measure without “closure” or forgetting, for it frees the victim to experience anew love, compassion, and sympathy unhindered by negative feelings of rancor and revenge. And the poetry of Marjorie Agosín presents us with such a healing aesthetic of politically oriented texts that coexist with “ethical” or thought-provoking poetry committed

to an examination of philosophical concerns. The poet remembers the human face of those victimized by a repressive dictatorship whose survival depended upon the obliteration from memory of its victims. It is a poetry that gives these victims voice and thus life while it restores hope, for it contributes to a human rights culture, a lived awareness of human rights principles in one's mind and heart, incorporated into one's everyday life.

Marjorie Agosín: The Aesthetics of Remembering, the Power of Memory

Is memory the key to deterrence? How is the lived traumatic experience transformed into memory? Who are its trustees? In what ways does a society forget and remember? In spite of all that has been written on the history of human rights, these questions remain an enigma. When we say a society "recalls," a past is actively transmitted to the current generation through the channels and repositories of memory and this transmitted past is received with a definite meaning. Consequently, a society "forgets" when the generation possessing that past does not transmit it to the next, or when the latter rejects what it has received, or when it ceases to transmit it in turn.

Marjorie Agosín's poetic volume *An Absence of Shadows* (1998), a collection of her best known works *Circles of Madness and Zones of Pain* (1988), is an act of deliberate memory. The collection enhances the very meaning of human rights by unveiling the emotive tracks left on the victims of human rights abuses and on the victims' relatives. "Disappearance" is one of the cruelest forms of murder, in which the victim has not even a tomb. This form of human rights abuse was widely practiced by police and the military in several Latin American countries (including Agosín's native Chile). Too often relatives and friends of the "disappeared" are left yearning for an impossible return. The tragedy of this "hopeless hope" outlines the enormity and absurdity of every disappearance. A heart-breaking depiction is given in Agosín's poem in memory of René Epelbaum, one of the founding members of the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the mothers of Argentina's "disappeared":

She just approaches
this photograph

and says that
she will take her for a walk.

They will gather chestnuts,
dead and living leaves,
and suddenly she will show her to others,
not to ask about her
but to say
that she was her daughter ... (Agosín 1998, 67)

This poem not only contains the texts of the aforementioned published volumes, but it also presents her new work, focusing on the preservation of the historical memory of a nation's painful past through the act of remembering the individual lives of its victimized citizens. In her preface, the poet explains that this book commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. She notes that poets "have become the voices that ask for compassion for voiceless victims. They see beauty amidst the horror and find the courage to speak against injustice" (1995, 11). The poems in this book exemplify this mission, including the most striking selections: "The Obedient Girl," about a girl who encounters the general who tortured her family; "The President," a bitter satire of military dictatorship; "El Salvador," the story of a Jewish woman from that troubled nation; and "Anne Frank and Us," in which the speaker notes that the iconic title figure "visits me often."

"One is born with human rights, thus one is sacredly connected to all living things," (1995, 11) writes Marjorie Agosín in the preface to this bilingual collection of eighty poems. This sense of sacred connection seeks to inspire compassion for victims of political oppression while, at the same time, creating solidarity with peaceful struggles against violence and injustice. Agosín underscores her passionate concern for the Other with the simple statement "when human rights are violated, so is the sacredness of the world" (1995, 11). For her, a poetry of witness "believes that memory, courage and the right to remember and give voice are also human rights" (1995, 13).

In the title poem of the volume, "An Absence of Shadows," Agosín grapples with our limited ability to capture the meaning of

painful and traumatic events—the absence of the disappeared. Using metaphors, she evokes feelings and images associated with the missing and with the torturous uncertainty surrounding the end of their lives. Her poem encourages recognition and communication with the disappeared, to bring them closer (if only in our thoughts). The poem struggles to find words where only fear, uncertainty, and anger exist, words that express the status of people neither dead nor alive. Words fill this empty space, to anchor this experience in our hearts, and, in a way, to reintroduce the disappeared back into our communities.

Beyond the shadows
where the wind dwells
among strangers,
in faraway kingdoms
clouded in fear,
the disappeared
are among the shadows
in the intervals of dream.

It's possible to hear them among
the dead branches,
they caress and recognize each other,
having left behind the burning
lights of the forest
and the tapers of dawn and love.

Beyond the province
there is an absence,
a presence of shadows
and histories.

Don't fear them,
approach them
with gentle peacefulness,
without vehemence and senseless rage.
Beyond the shadows
in the streaming gusts
of wind,

they and we dwell
in the kingdom of absences (Agosín 1998, 17-19).

Agosín's *An Absence of Shadows* responds to the most basic question concerning societies struggling with dictatorship, in the throes of democracy – how to respond to the lingering presence of the disappeared and the dead absent yet so very present among the living? Peace, love, recognition, warmth, thoughtful reflection, and above all, remembrance are the response. These poems were composed in the solitude of exile, a foreign land devoid of the language of the poet's homeland, distant from the violence of repression, absent from the horror stories of the voices they represent. Yet, they make the voices of others very much our own, thus rescuing the victims from the oblivion of forgetfulness and assuring the Mothers of the Disappeared that their voices will continue to be heard. The absence of fear and the presence of a steadfast mother's love prevail. Several themes coalesce from powerful depictions of women's agency and from illuminations of structural barriers. These include women's adept transformations of crises into redeeming opportunities.

Look,
these are the photographs
of my children;
this one here has an arm
I don't know if it's my son's,
but I think it might be
that this is his sweet little arm,
Look, here are the legs,
severed, cut
and torn
but they are his legs
or perhaps the legs of another.
Don't be afraid.
They are only photographs.
They say it is a form of identification
and if at best they show them
to you
you will be able to help me find him.

Look at these photographs
and record them in the albums of life (Agosín 1998, 81-82).

Chile, an isolated and remote country, once characterized as an exemplary Western democracy submerged in legality and respect for civil laws, collapsed into a society with a phantasmagorical atmosphere of fear and silence. How could this happen? But it is not this question that haunts Agosín's poetry, rather it is the voices of women muzzled in dark and silent torture chambers and those who desperately searched for them. In this sense, poetry becomes a vehicle of both giving voice to the voiceless and rescuing those same voices from oblivion, from forgetting, by reminding future generations of a deep and authentic human kinship with the displaced, the oppressed, the silenced of the past. The poet reminds us that remembrance and justice are intimately connected to lived experiences of individuals with whom the reader recipient feels a deeply felt human attachment devoid of abstract universalisms.

Polyphonic Memories and the Collective Imagination in Traumatic Experiences

Emblematic memories circulate in public or semi-public domains and offer broad frameworks into which individuals can inscribe their personal experiences. Such narrative schematics, which purport to capture essential truths about the collective experience of society, are broad and flexible enough to encompass an array of sufficiently differentiated, though generally related stories. They serve either as overarching scripts for writing history, or can be used as starting points for debates about the very construction of historical meaning. In contrast to emblematic memory, "loose" memory is lore that floats diffusely on the cultural scene and cannot be easily assimilated into any of the major emblematic frameworks. Ambiguous cases of narratives that rupture emblematic molds abound in post-traumatic scenarios where "radical evil" has occurred. What, for example, can be done with certain "gray" cases like those of former left-wing militants who collaborated under torture or who, under duress, were co-opted by the dictatorial state's bureaucratic apparatus? Where does the figure of the non-heroic, non-martyred victim fit into the "memory box" of Pinochet's Chile? Historian Steve J. Stern (2004) rightly notes that many uncomfortable and

bothersome “loose” memories such as these get silenced or pushed to the bottom of the box.¹ Stern’s theoretical model discusses the formation of “memory knots” on the social body. The metaphor of the “knot” is multifaceted: it refers to “sites of humanity, sites in time, and sites of physical matter or geography” that serve as detonators or conduits to facilitate the connection of loose lore to emblematic memory frames (Stern 2004, 121). Human beings who actively promote specific memory scripts, symbolic and controversial dates like September 11, unanticipated events like Pinochet’s London arrest, the creation of memorial spaces like the “Park for Peace” at Villa Grimaldi, or the re-naming of the Chilean Stadium after folk singer Víctor Jara (murdered by the military on that site in 1974), all serve as examples of knots that “[project] memory and polemics about memory into public space or imagination” (Stern 2004, 121). Identifying “memory knots” is precisely what allows us to isolate critically the moments and manners in which emblematic frames are made and unmade. Knots, in essence, are dynamic sites of change around which memories are both propagated and evolve. From the notion of memory knots, it becomes clear that the making of memory is an uneven process that unfolds “in fits and starts” (Stern 2004, 147). Sometimes when change is least expected, new memories can emerge onto the political and cultural scene, thus amending how the past is viewed in the present. And so, historian and poet alike Stern and Agosín surmise that it is their ethical responsibility to bear witness “by proxy” to the disappeared victims (and survivors) whose stories they recount. Both historian and poet find themselves playing the role of “empathic listener” (Laub 1992, 57-74) to those giving testimony to their personal remembrances, traumatic experiences of limitless grief.² Marjorie Agosín has provided us with a journey into the soul of victim and victimizer alike for whom she is a willing and

1 Stern identifies four major emblematic memory scripts in Chile prior to Pinochet’s arrest: memory as “salvation,” memory as “unresolved rupture,” memory as “persecution and awakening,” and memory as a “closed box.”

2 Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela served on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission as coordinator of victims’ public hearings in the Western Cape. Her role was to participate in and facilitate encounters between family members of gross human rights and perpetrators responsible for these human rights abuses. She shares the phrase “empathic repair” with Stern when discussing the themes of remorse and forgiveness. Her book *A Human Being Died that Night: A South Africa Story of Forgiveness* deals with history, memory, reconciliation and empathic repair.

empathic listener. Just as the historian Stern uses a “hearts and minds” approach to his recounting of Chilean history, Marjorie Agosín gives voice to the dead and the living, uniting the spirit with the mind in a “thinking heart” – a heightened consciousness, a demand that we take notice – in her poetic reflections on the past, drawing people together in remembrance into a public domain.

Some Final Thoughts on Reconciliation, Memory and the Broader Dialogue: An Aesthetics of Human Rights

In Jill Scott’s *A Poetics of Forgiveness. Cultural Responses to Loss and Wrongdoing* (2010), she identifies three essential components of the poetic: ambiguity, creativity, and aesthetic qualities. A humanist perspective on the topic of memory is particularly valuable because memory is a way of processing and conveying the human experience, and memory reaches beyond printed records and dated documents. The humanities are interested in the significance of how and what people remember, even when memory is sometimes unconsciously flawed, or in cases where people have different or conflicting memories of the same event. What matters most is how events and their consequences have impacted personal individual or collective lives—the basis of aesthetic experience. Poems and plays, films and artwork, are all unique receptacles of personal and collective cultural memory. Personal and collective memories are inseparably intertwined with each other, and the study of aesthetics offers a unique perspective on this complex entanglement. The poignancy of Marjorie Agosín’s poetry contributes to the long and varied legacy of the aesthetics of human rights. Its pervasive questions resonate with critical awareness, as she asks how she can find comfort for the dead (and the living) with a poet’s voice. How, she ponders, is one able to utter that which is far too painful to speak? How is it possible to break the silence of forgetting within the context of unspeakable criminal acts against humanity? And, ultimately, how can the deep sensitivity of poetic language reconstruct the memory of the vanished with a lexicon that is both consoling and socially committed? Restoration and a healing of memory are arguably the self-appointed tasks of Marjorie Agosín and her generation of Chilean writers, so the voices of the voiceless (disappeared and deceased) may be heard, so that their lives have a wider meaning.

The ways in which people choose to memorialize hardship offer illuminating insights into the human psyche and post-conflict justice and also provide valuable information about a society, government or culture. Humanists are most likely to be interested in memory as a document of culture, especially the way such documents form the basis of aesthetic experience. Poems and plays, films and artwork, are all unique receptacles of personal and collective cultural memory. Personal and collective memories are inseparably intertwined with each other, and the study of aesthetics offers a unique perspective on this complex entanglement. While the humanities and social sciences approach the topic of “memory” differently, a humanist perspective is valuable because memory becomes a way of processing and conveying the human experience, reaching beyond printed records and dated documents. Additionally, literature and the arts explore how and what people remember, even when memory is sometimes unconsciously flawed, or in cases where people have different or conflicting memories of the same event. And the poetry of Marjorie Agosín gives voice to the dead and the living, an aesthetics of memory and memorialization, returning us to what is profoundly human: art.

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