

1-1-2009

# Disclaimer Intraducible: My Life / Is Based / on a Real Story

Alicia Partnoy

Loyola Marymount University, [apartnoy@lmu.edu](mailto:apartnoy@lmu.edu)

---

## Repository Citation

Partnoy, Alicia, "Disclaimer Intraducible: My Life / Is Based / on a Real Story" (2009). *Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty Works*. 3.

[http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/modernlang\\_fac/3](http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/modernlang_fac/3)

## Recommended Citation

Partnoy, Alicia. "My Life / Is Based/ on a Real Story." *Biography* 32.1 (2009): 16-25. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/bio.0.0070>

## **DISCLAIMER INTRADUCIBLE: MY LIFE / IS BASED / ON A REAL STORY**

ALICIA PARTNOY

### **DISCLAIMER**

Little can I write these days without experiencing severe pain. I am not referring to the emotional distress of recording my life as a disappeared person, a prisoner of the Argentine dictatorship back in the 70s. This is just physical pain. A work-related neck injury and carpal tunnel syndrome are the culprits. Some worker's compensation arrangement had a Dragon<sup>1</sup> installed in my computer. This electronic fellow is supposed to type what I dictate. The problem is that when I say "Alicia," it dutifully transcribes "I'll see you," and when I pronounce "Guatemala," the Dragon scribes "what a mama." I was, at first, enthusiastic and invested in training myself and the Dragon to understand each other, but ran out of patience when realizing that a consistent pronunciation of that country's name eludes me. Perhaps the rage and impotence in my voice confuses the Dragon. How can I produce businesslike standard utterances while dictating e-mails to Rosa Franco, or when discussing with Victoria Sanford the translation of her book? Franco wants me to help her publish María Isabel's poetry. A sixteen-year-old high school girl, Rosa's daughter is one of over three thousand women killed in her country in the past five years. Sanford analyzes the situation of total impunity in her new book *Guatemala: Del genocidio al feminicidio*, translated into Spanish by two of my students.<sup>2</sup>

The preceding explanation is a disclaimer that begs for lenience and understanding on the part of the reader. It also serves as a pretext to denounce current human rights violations through the *testimonio* mode of writing about our life—a strategy that many survivors of state terrorism in Latin America have embraced. For us, to remember and to tell might be useless if it does not

help to stop the violence, put an end to impunity, and protect the dignity of victims. Therefore, our testimonial texts do not rely on what Philippe Lejeune has called the autobiographical pact, but on a solidarity pact.<sup>3</sup>

Consistent with my praxis for the past twenty years, my keynote speech at the IABA conference was a testimonial performance that runs the risk of falling flat on the page unless I carefully describe it. Neither the Dragon nor my pain would allow me to indulge in that lengthy exercise. But, even if they did, the end result would be an incomplete picture. It might be impossible to render in writing the myriad of relationships at a semiotic<sup>4</sup> level that provided a safe space, a space to share the story on which my life is now based. My first disclaimer is then: This is not my keynote speech. I will however discuss here the same issues and proposals I presented at the Sixth Biennial IABA Conference in Hawai'i.

### **A CONCRETE ABSTRACT**

The title poem showcases the tensions between the need of survivors to tell our life stories, and the constraints exercised by publishers, translators, scholars, and human rights professionals. Since the killing spree is over in Argentina, I can afford to problematize the process of disseminating our testimonial texts. I will then argue against two common assumptions: that intellectuals give voice to those who do not have one, and that truth should be the central concern for survivors when engaging in the production of testimonial texts. Nurtured by scholars and writers, and comforting to the society at large, both premises can dis-empower survivors while claiming the opposite effect.

Through the mirage set by the title poem, I seek to illustrate Gail Wronsky's assertion that, contrary to Robert Frost's words, what often gets lost in translation is not poetry, but politics. In the case of highly politicized texts such as *testimonios*, the risks are magnified.<sup>5</sup> I will conclude by discussing two potentially empowering strategies: a call to an affirmative action position with regards to survivors, and a proposal to continue engaging in alternative forms of research and action that I call co/labor/actions.

### **DISCLAIMER INTRADUCIBLE**

Both the heavy legal connotations of the word "disclaimer," and the fascination in the US with actual life stories of redemptive value, are so hard to translate into Latin American cultural parameters that the word "untranslatable" does not begin to address the task. The Spanish term "intraducible" enacts that difficulty on the page, while asserting my US Latina identity as a poet and scholar who thrives in crossing borders.<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, a Spanish version of this poem would keep the word “disclaimer” in English, which responds to Gail Wronsky’s call. She urges translators to focus on the political, which ultimately tends to get lost in translation:

All writing is political, therefore it is essential for a translator to understand in profound and sophisticated fashion the politics of the poet she’s translating. I’m not simply talking about left and right, liberal or conservative, although that is certainly part of it, I’m talking about the social contractual meanings of the words used by the poet—what her words mean politically within her culture and also what the relationship is between her use of these words and her culture’s—how much distance, how much irony, exists between these two.

My short title poem is drenched in irony, a reaction to the current mass media interest in “real” stories, and their obsessing over the truth when dealing with survivors’ life accounts. My tongue in cheek approach echoes Phillipe Lejeune’s confession in “The Autobiographical Pact (bis).” Lejeune wrote, “I believe in the Holy Ghost of the first person. And who doesn’t believe in it? But of course it also happens that I believe the contrary, or at least claim to believe it” (131).

#### MY LIFE / IS BASED / ON A REAL STORY

Globalization has influenced cultural responses in Latin America. However, the monetary and moral consequences of misrepresenting in writing our life experiences are insignificant compared to those confronted by our counterparts in the United States. The financial rewards and name recognition, should survivors adjust to the demands of publishers and tailor their memories accordingly, are also unimaginable for Latin Americans. For them, the cases of Margaret Jones/Seltzer’s book *Consequences* and of James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*, sound totally blown out of proportion. Both Seltzer and Frey were clever enough to manufacture the merchandise, but underestimated the level of investment that publishing corporations place on the truth value of life stories. Carol Memmot, a book reviewer for the newspaper *USA Today*, highlights the main reasons behind the industry’s furious reaction,

A similar scandal rocked the publishing world two years ago when it was discovered that *A Million Little Pieces*, James Frey’s memoir of addiction, was only partly true. The difference now: Jones’ book is entirely false. “This appears to be more of a deliberate, if naive, attempt at a hoax rather than a memoir that went too far,” says Sara Nelson of *Publishers Weekly*, “I haven’t read the book, but it worries me that this young woman’s apparent hoax is going to have reverberations in the public’s mind about the publishing industry.” Bruce Tracy, a Random House editor who has worked with numerous memorists, also worries that tainted memoirs hurt the

genre overall. “Unfortunately, when things like this happen, it attracts so much more attention than the admiring press for memoirs that aren’t fabrications,” Tracy says. “It makes you fear that the reading public thinks ‘They’re all putting one over on me.’”

The publishing industry should rightly fear that outcome, for it is “putting” not one but many “over on” us. Since the truths it wants from survivors are restricted to certain recipes for mass consumption, and aiming for the coveted movie deal, they are the kind of truths most easily produced by fiction writers. The industry should not be surprised, therefore, when the works it finds appealing and publishable are totally fabricated, as in the case of *Consequences*.

The backlash of Frey’s scandal was soon felt by no other than Elie Wiesel. It was painful to watch the spectacle of his wife and translator justifying the changes in her own translation of *Night*. Marion Wiesel told *The New York Times* that her husband had made a mistake in the first version of his memoir: he had stated that he was almost fifteen when entering the Birkenau concentration camp, while in reality he was about to turn sixteen. “At no point did this change the meaning and the fact of anything in the book,” Ms. Wiesel said. “When I worked on the book, I kidded Elie and told him, ‘I don’t think you can add’” (Wyatt).

Deborah Lipstadt and other scholars have analyzed the ways Holocaust deniers have seized those kinds of mistakes as opportunities. The attempts to tarnish the reputation of Nobel Prize Laureate and survivor Rigoberta Menchú, and the subsequent debate in the academic world, are carefully outlined by Guatemalan writer and scholar Arturo Arias in *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*.

One might spend long pages speculating on the reasons for Elie Wiesel and other survivors to make what the publishing world and academia perceive as unforgivable mistakes in the recollection of their stories. Those imprecisions just illustrate that the care for certain details demanded before a court of law is not exercised by former victims when producing testimonial texts. Memories can be freer as they circulate in friendlier territories populated by sympathetic listeners and potential allies. Those listeners and readers enter a solidarity pact with the narrators: they trust their sincerity, which is different from expecting the truth. More often than not, a narrator’s main allegiance is with the victims, seeking to protect their dignity and agency. Some truths may not need disclosure in order to accomplish these goals.

Publishers and scholars have constantly failed to see that the reader of *testimonios* does not fit the description of the reader of autobiographies so cleverly presented by Phillipe Lejeune in “The Autobiographical Pact.” Back in 1975, Lejeune had alerted us to the fact that

Confronted with what looks like an autobiographical narrative, the reader often tends to think of himself as a detective, that is to say, to look for breaches of contract. It is here that the myth of the novel being “truer” than the autobiography originates: when we think we have discovered something through the text, in spite of the author, we always accord it more truth and more profundity. (14)

Testimonial texts direct this “detectivesque” impulse toward the perpetrators of the crimes, and away from the narrator. This solidarity pact, in which the reader places higher degrees of trust on survivors than on scholars, journalists, or human rights professionals, is puzzling and often disturbing to those traditionally vested with authority to speak on behalf of others. They tend to be quite assertive while explaining the words of others within the theoretical frameworks and parameters of their respective fields.

The ready access to scholarship on testimonial texts that I enjoy as an expert in the field places me in a privileged position. For example, the real story on which “my life is based” was written as a response to Mary Jane Treacy, a scholar I highly respect. In retrospect, a conversation on her analysis prior to the publication of “Double binds: Latin American women’s prison memories” would have been beneficial. In October 2002, several years after reading the quote that follows, I wrote a text that deals with the deep memories that she had reported missing in her article. Among the many reasons to avoid dealing with those in my previous work was my need as a survivor to build an extremely inclusive discourse of solidarity,

Although Martinez, Diaz, Partnoy, and Celiberti use their narratives to bear witness in the public sphere, they do not refashion a post-traumatic identity for themselves in their texts. . . . Partnoy struggles with the personal to make sense of her experiences but her efforts remain at least partially thwarted by adherence to the genre’s demands for rebirth and the lesson of solidarity. Far from offering opportunities for women to transform gender relations, as Harlow suggests and Celiberti hopes, those memoirs deny that gendered torture has much impact on the women involved and do not recognize that it may provide insights into social relations to be used for subsequent political activity. The narrators’ presentation of their experiences as women seem to lead neither to social changes nor to their subsequent well-being. (135)

Today, cuando ya no vienen matando—when the killing spree is over, at least in the case of Argentina—I can indulge in addressing our concerns as scholars, in a text that takes other kinds of risks. “Rosa, I Disowned You” highlights a moment when my academic and creative worlds exist apart from my family life. Paradoxically, this discordance takes place around the telling of intimate personal memories. I have published this story, read it in public, and

discussed it here; however, I have yet to find the courage, el momento perfecto, for my closest relatives to learn about these memories. In that sense, my life now is based on this real story. I have produced a set of circumstances that will force me to find that momento. “Rosa, I Disowned You” is a tale dedicated “to all my sisters who are still silent.”

The story I was going to write today before my daughter called and told me of her horrible dream, was supposed to start with the image of my husband’s back. I could not see it in the darkness of our bedroom. His voice, I did hear, through his tears and mine. “Soy una mierda!” he screamed. “I’m a piece of shit! Twenty years living with you and I just realize that you don’t know it: You were raped! Por dios, Flaca, you were raped!”

But then, this morning my big kid called and she told me that in her dream blood came out of my mouth. She warned me, “Be careful with what you eat.” “Or maybe with what I say?” I retorted. But since she did not know about the story I was going to tell you here, she just repeated, “No, mom, seriously, mind what you eat.” And I answered, “Gracias brujita, invoice me for the reading,” and we both laughed and that was that.

Still, at the airport, dutifully in line at some security check-point, my mind could not stop pondering the story, “What good will the telling do? Whom will it help? After all, it was not a simple rape. I would have recognized a simple rape and I would have reported it already, like I did with the torture, the killings of my friends, the birth of Graciela’s child at that concentration camp back in 1977.” (253)

And later, I stood waiting for my turn at the Frontier Airlines check-in counter still trying to organize my thoughts, when this man I had hardly noticed pointed to a red, shiny, fat drop of blood on the floor between us.

.....

And since I do not know what this drop is telling me, and the flier is already out, and the women from the seminar will for sure come tomorrow to listen to my story “Rosa, I Disowned You,” I cannot be such a coward.

.....

“That was not consensual, you were blindfolded, helpless, you were a kid, he took advantage of you,” says my husband. He tells me these things in Spanish. We speak Spanish at home, but I’m only talking about this in English so you do not take over my bedroom. (254)

.....

Rosa was not afraid of blood. She had joined the resistance movement. The challenge, should she be caught by the Army, was to give her blood in lieu of names, information about the others. Rosa was arrested and I think of her now while I watch Nenita's documentary. On the screen the woman listens to the radio and furiously writes her name, her pencil tears the paper. While the newscaster tells of testimonies by women forced into sexual slavery during the Japanese occupation, the Filipino woman on the screen is lost in her memories. They parade in front of the audience. It pains me to watch the teenage girl raped over and over, the line of soldiers outside her dirty cubicle, the tortured bodies of those who try to escape, the tormented eyes of the woman in the kitchen.

But I am not the woman in the kitchen, and Rosa was not like these young victims of World War II either. She was not enslaved by force. She shed neither her blood nor the information that the enemy demanded. However, imprisoned and deeply humiliated, she wanted to believe that by pleasing the guards, she would get information, food to share with her friends, time without her blindfold, a chance to talk without being hit with the rubber stick, access to the bathroom when needed, a shower more than the one monthly allotted to her, unlimited contact with water while doing the dishes. She wanted to believe that instead of a prisoner, a slave, she was a sort of *Mata Hari*, that her body did not make her vulnerable but allowed her to control the situation. (255)

Our telling, our writing, can and will make us vulnerable unless a discourse of solidarity is built around our words. Too often, personal research agendas and professional or financial demands prevent the best intentioned people from truly listening to survivors. However, the former victims' participation in the advanced stages of discussion and dissemination of their words could foster higher ethical standards while offering new avenues to advance knowledge. Sociologist Juanita Díaz-Cotto illuminates this problematic in her article "Chicana(o)/Latina(o) Prisoners: Ethical and Methodological Considerations, Collaborative Research Methods and Case Studies." Díaz-Cotto writes, "Ultimately, scholars would do well to keep in mind that it is research that addresses the concerns of those being studied, incorporates them into the research design, and is carried out in an egalitarian manner, that is more likely to gain the trust and support of sources and, hence, provide the most reliable information and practical applications" (155).

It is in that spirit that I propose we continue engaging in *co/labor/actions*: innovative, non-logocentric, non-hierarchical models of research, creative production, and action. *Co/labor/actions* might be messy. We no longer will be able to filter a survivor's input when presenting our research at a conference. *Pero ha corrido ya mucha agua bajo este puente para que sigamos profesando inocencia*. If we cannot afford the risks that the model poses to our professional advancement, we should, at least, be aware of the risks that



our research subjects face in our hands. The same technology that allows us to feel—borrowing Elayne Zalis’s words—“at home in cyberspace” (84), might help us bring to the discussion table many potential partners in co/labor/action projects. An alternative but complementary approach that could empower survivors, as it empowered women and minorities in this country, would be an affirmative action position. According to the US Department of Labor, “Affirmative action refers to the aggressive recruitment programs, mentoring, training, and family programs that work to recruit and retain qualified individuals.” The qualified individuals, survivors of state terrorism in this particular case, have already engaged in training, have enlisted the help of mentors, have tried and sometimes succeeded in working in the fields that study, serve, and claim to advocate for them. Unfortunately, survivors frequently hide their background, fearing that their employers will perceive them as too invested in the problem, too subjective to be effective on the job. This affirmative action approach can allow them to circulate freely in the professional worlds that feed on their telling.

#### AT PEACE WITH THE DRAGON

Anything based on a true story, and written within the proximity of the Hollywood Hills, risks a happy ending: A trainer came to my office yesterday to teach both the Dragon and myself to communicate with each other. As proof of the event, I am dictating this last paragraph to the Dragon.

There were some amusing but unsettling moments. When the beast refused to accept my last name as a new word to be incorporated in its dictionary, claiming that such a word could not be programmed, I concluded that the Dragon was not fond of Russian sounds. The trainer came to my rescue, and reassured me that machines do not think but follow orders. I must confess that after reading Chuck Rosenthal’s novel, *My Mistress, Humanity*, I have great difficulty conceiving the existence of a Dragon that lacks will power. These reflections only prove that parts of my life are based on fiction, and therefore, they are irrelevant here. They might, as well, be fitting matter for future dictation.

#### NOTES

1. I am referring to a voice recognition software program called Dragon NaturallySpeaking.<sup>®</sup>
2. Sanford has published a short article on the subject in *ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America*. For further information on the Guatemalan femicide, see Costantino.

3. While using this expression for the first time, I have discussed elsewhere what I consider to be the main feature of testimonial texts: the construction of a discourse of solidarity.
4. See Hodge and Kress's definition of semiotic plane. For them, "Semiotic phenomena always have both social and referential dimensions, and must therefore be described in terms of both the *mimetic plane*, implying some version(s) of reality as a possible referent, and also the *semiotic plane*, implying some semiotic event(s), linking producers and receivers and signifiers and signifieds into a significant relationship" (261–62).
5. For a thorough discussion of *testimonio* and the issues around it that have been debated in the US academic world for the past two decades, see Beverley.
6. Examples of shifting languages in my academic writing can be found in prefaces to *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* (Davalos and Partnoy). See also the PMLA article "Cuando Vienen Matando: On Prepositional Shifts and the Struggle of Testimonial Subjects for Agency." I am grateful to Marianne Hirsch for allowing me to leave portions of the article in Spanish. At first, she was under the impression that I had forgotten to translate those paragraphs. Hirsch quickly understood my political reasons. Hers was a courageous gesture while in charge of editing a journal that traditionally publishes only in English.

#### WORKS CITED

- Arias, Arturo, ed. *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001.
- Beverley, John. *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004.
- Costantino, Roselyn. "Femicide, Impunity, and Citizenship: The Old and New in the Struggle for Justice In Guatemala." *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* 6.1 (2006): 108–121.
- Davalos, Karen Mary, and Alicia Partnoy. "Editor's Commentary: Translating the Backlash." *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* 4.1 (2004): 6–18.
- Díaz-Cotto, Juanita. "Chicana(o)/Latina(o) Prisoners: Ethical and Methodological Considerations, Collaborative Research Methods and Case Studies." *Latino Studies* 6 (2008): 137–59.
- Frey, James. *A Million Little Pieces*. New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2003.
- Hirsch, Marianne. Emails to author. 10 May 2006.
- Hodge, Robert, and Gunther Kress. *Social Semiotics*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988.
- Jones/Seltzer, Margaret B. *Love and Consequences: A Memoir of Hope and Survival*. New York: Penguin Riverhead, 2008.
- Lejeune, Philippe. *On Autobiography*. Ed. Paul John Eakin. Trans. Katherine M. Leary. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989.
- Lipstadt, Deborah. *Denying the Holocaust*. New York: Free Press, 1993.
- Memmott, Carol. "'Consequences' memoir untrue." *USA Today* 5 Mar. 2008: D2.
- Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs. US Department of Labor. "Facts on Executive Order 11246. Affirmative Action. Revised Jan. 4, 2002." 27 Mar. 2009. <<http://www.dol.gov/esa/ofccp/regs/compliance/aa.htm>>.

- Partnoy, Alicia. "Cuando Vienen Matando: On Prepositional Shifts and the Struggle of Testimonial Subjects for Agency." *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*. 121.5 (Oct. 2006): 1665–69.
- . "Rosa, I Disowned You." *If Salt Has Memory: Jewish Exiled Writers from Africa, Latin America, Europe and the Middle East*. Ed. Jennifer Langer. Nottingham: Five Leaves, 2008. 253–56.
- . "On Being Shorter, How Our Testimonial Texts Defy the Academy." *Women Writing Resistance. Essays on Latin America and the Caribbean*. Ed. Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez. Cambridge: South End, 2003. 173–92.
- Rosenthal, Chuck. *My Mistress, Humanity*. California: Hollyridge, 2004.
- Sanford, Victoria. *Guatemala: Del Genocidio al Femicidio*. Trans. Claudia Godinez and Cynthia C. Harrison. Guatemala City: F y G Editores, 2008.
- . "Femicide in Guatemala." *ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America* Winter 2008: 20–22.
- Treacy, Mary Jane. "Double binds: Latin American women's prison memories." *Hypatia* 11.4 (Fall 1996): 130–45.
- Wronsky, Gail. "Ten Thoughts on Translation." Unpublished Lecture. Panel discussion with poet Jorge Esquinca. Sponsored by Middlebury College. Librería del Fondo de Cultura Económica. Guadalajara, Mexico. 29 July 2008.
- Wyatt, Edward. "The Translation of Wiesel's *Night* is New, but Old Questions Are Raised." *New York Times* 19 Jan. 2006. 27 Mar. 2008. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/19/books/19nigh.html>>.
- Zalis, Elayne. "At Home in Cyberspace: Staging Autobiographical Scenes." *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 26.1 (Winter 2003): 84–119.