

INTRODUCTION

WRITING TOWARD HOPE

Translated by Monica Bruno Galmozzi

Certain dates have permanent significance in the cultural and historical imagination of the Americas. One is September 11, 1973, the day the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende was toppled by Chilean military forces, backed by the intervention of the CIA. Peter Kornbluh's book *The Pinochet Files* (2003) is the most effective proof of this dark moment in U.S. policy toward Chile. Relevant documents have finally been opened for scrutiny so that we may begin to understand what happened. For many Chileans it is impossible to forget that spring morning in Santiago when all radio programs were interrupted with military marches, and the city skies filled with black smoke from the bombing of La Moneda, the national palace where President Allende governed and gave his last and moving speech, in which he said, "History is made by the people." That day's attack was unprecedented in Chilean history, and it interrupted for seventeen years what had been one of the Southern Hemisphere's most stable democracies. In Allende's place, the coup installed dictator Augusto Pinochet and a military junta that controlled the country through fear and silence.

Almost a million Chileans chose or were forced to live in exile in foreign countries where they longed for the uncertain return—because once you abandon your native country, the return is never the same. Both the individual and the country change within the convoluted political history of nations. Many Chileans disappeared in broad daylight during the military regime. Others were forcibly dragged from their homes to never return. Torture became common practice, but it was always secret, and the torture centers like Villa Grimaldi and Londres 22 are part of the everyday language of Chile today.

Villa Grimaldi was in its heyday a beautiful park filled with Chilean and

European fauna and flora. Then the villa was mysteriously abandoned by its owners and became a sinister torture and detention center. It is difficult to obtain testimony from those who were detained there because what happened is too painful to remember and few survived their stay. Villa Grimaldi is now a memorial park called El Parque del Recuerdo. Visitors walk along the same paths where many Chileans were subjected to infamous treatments.

Gladys Díaz Armijo, one of the authors included in this anthology, was tortured at Villa Grimaldi and today she shares her experience with us. Hers is one of very few texts written by an imprisoned and tortured woman. The clarity of her language conveys the pain of putting into words the most degrading acts imaginable.

During the 1970s, some of Chile's neighbors—Uruguay and Argentina—were also subjected to military dictatorships; during the 1960s Brazil endured the same. In the 1980s El Salvador and Nicaragua suffered a resurgence of authoritarian regimes. Anastasio Somoza was removed from office in Nicaragua and briefly replaced by a socialist government, inspired by the government of Salvador Allende.

Regardless of the fact that Latin America and its inhabitants were colonized by Europeans and continue to be “colonies” under the dominion of twentieth-century foreign economic doctrines, the 1970s are of utmost importance in understanding Latin America's present as well as its possible future. Chile's case sheds light on what happened in the region from the 1970s until the early 1990s. Allende represented the possibility of building a humanistic socialism through peaceful means and outside the Soviet sphere of influence. The greatest threat his government had to face stemmed from the fact that it had been elected democratically and thus created a precedent many wished to erase. In Argentina and Uruguay, military governments arose and destroyed the democratic presence in the Southern Cone. They united forces through Operation Condor, which allowed them to stay in power for almost two decades. If Allende's government had allowed people to hope, Pinochet's regime did the opposite; it defeated a dream. As Argentine journalist Jacobo Timerman affirmed, Allende was an impossible dream, but Pinochet did not even allow people the possibility of having a dream.

In the 1980s, President Reagan's government unleashed an anti-Communist campaign in Nicaragua and El Salvador, supporting paramilitary groups that continued to disseminate violence, forced disappearances, and condoned massacres, like the one in El Mozote, where military forces assassinated more than eight hundred people. Latin America's turbulent history is filled with disap-

pearances, graves without names, and concentration camps, but it is also a history of hope, of building peace, of courage and the power of words to retell events and bear witness to political violence and the disappearance of a whole generation of idealistic youth.

Although the military dominated most of the Southern Cone's mass communication services, visual artists, poets, and writers defied the culture of fear through their creativity and passion for telling others about the governments that repressed them. Writers, artists, and moviemakers documented with tenacity and honesty what was happening in their respective countries.

Filmmaker Miguel Littin produced the extraordinary documentary *Battle of Chile*, a six-hour epic filled with the testimony of workers and students punished for their political convictions. Two decades later, another filmmaker, Patricio Guzmán, created a historical memoir of a forgotten generation and interviewed those who had supported Salvador Allende and his government. Ariel Dorfman, from exile in the Netherlands, wrote poems and an allegorical novel, *Widows*, dealing with the imperious need to bury the dead. Jacobo Timerman wrote his memoirs while imprisoned outside Buenos Aires. In Mexico, Elena Poniatowska gathered the testimonial voices of students and spectators at the massacre of Tlatelolco as well as describing the extreme poverty people experience in the outskirts of Mexico City.

Literature gained a sense of urgency and became vital, an act of courage and denunciation, of resistance and hope. At the same time, it achieved the necessary presence to deny the complicity of silent societies, submersed in fear and indifference. As the repressive apparatus controlled the history of these countries, it also censored the education of children, the books that could be published or read, the right to vote, and the right to choose certain college careers. Throughout Latin America, writers creatively and peacefully counteracted the culture of fear through art. The words of poets became weapons; theirs were powerful voices that were not silenced in the prisons or torture centers but fought to retain their humanity in a dehumanized world. Literature affirmed faith, feeling, and believing. Moreover, art attempted by other means to defy censure, to trick the military that read poetry and arbitrarily determined which texts were deemed dangerous.

Chilean women from various social strata formed an action group motivated by social justice since people were being terrorized by the propaganda machine operated by the dictatorship. Women for life and against the culture of death, they were known in Argentina as the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo; in Chile as the Asociación de Detenidos y Desaparecidos; and in El Salvador as Las

Comadres. These women—citizens, mothers, and workers—decided to make their pain public. The dark countenance of the military dictatorship was now covered with mothers, sisters, and wives, in contrast to the oppressive patriarchal appearance of the military. These women were not afraid to denounce the military forces as the ones who had assassinated the youth of their countries. Armed with photographs, white kerchiefs, and folk dances like “Cueca Sola” created by the mothers and widows of the disappeared, they danced alone, without partners. These women publicly protested the forced disappearances and torture. Their voices throughout the region became an ethical pillar, representing morality in a society tainted by lies and repressive tactics. The tenacity of their struggle and convictions is very moving. An unprecedented number of women writers arose along with these social movements, making women the most active presence within authoritarian society and defying age-old stereotypes of women’s passivity.

These voices were joined by those of artists, writers, poets, and painters who marched and protested alongside the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo. Human rights literature produced in Latin America is inseparable from history, and backed by a chorus of “Where are they?” It is also inseparable from the voices of the writers who, through their novels, dramas, and histories, recreate the voices of these women. Imagination and reality are united to create a passionate cultural movement reflecting the activism of its citizens and the sensitivity and vision of its writers in the name of human rights.

Uruguayan writer Carlos Liscano, imprisoned for many years, wrote about the emptiness of language and the inability to articulate certain thoughts from captivity, but he also acknowledged the impossibility of remaining silent. Through his testimonial, readers are able to descend to the rings of hell, the perverse darkness of captivity that he transforms into light and word. Through Liscano’s text, we manage to understand testimonial literature’s power to incorporate political violence into the world of artistic language.

From the 1970s onward, an extraordinary force was conceived within Latin American literary culture, as well as a deep aesthetic literary sensitivity in which art and politics formed a powerful alliance. Together they were capable of building, through words and memories, the history of a continent marked by violence, horror, and hope.

During these same decades, autobiographies, memoirs, and the voices of marginalized groups—among them women, indigenous people, homosexuals, and Jews—emerged. In their histories, the personal and the political, the intimate and the collective, join together to give voice to testimony that demands

that the reader commit to understanding the suffering and alienation of the other. This history is the only history they have, the story of their own lives and memories. In her important study of minority literatures, *Proceed with Caution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), Doris Sommer tells us that we must be careful. We may need to step out of our usual patterns of reading to touch and understand human rights literature, a literature that questions and demands another way of being read. "Learning to read these reticent texts will require signs that make a political as well as an aesthetic difference" (16).

The testimonial narratives written beginning in the 1970s, the plays presented in the streets of Buenos Aires, Montevideo, and Santiago, the poetry and the visual arts, all created a central space within the artistic imaginary of Latin America that coexisted with the culture of silence. So-called artistic actions responded to the immediate need to create a public show for a transient audience and defy censure. Art acquired a sense of the immediate, of the here and now. Street performers served as a public denunciation in the same way that flyers with photos of the disappeared would show up on walls around dawn. All forms of art demanded a different approach, a different way of seeing, reading, experiencing. Most important is that, through writing, those who were victimized by history could finally speak.

Understanding human rights and their defense is one of the ways the privileged thinking of the Western world approaches the history of oppression of the twentieth century. Yet human rights must not be seen as separate from history, culture, and the arts. They must coexist with the vital experiences of human beings who have suffered the violation of their rights. Consequently literature on this topic assumes a very personal yet collective voice that inserts itself within the canons of public history. Human rights literature encompasses the human experience of suffering and redemption through an aesthetic that requires responsibility and action on the reader's part as well as critical thinking and empathy. This literature is born from writers, workers, women, and youth who clamor for the return of loved ones. It is born from the marginality of citizens who, although silenced, continue to act. Human rights were implemented by a group of Western nations in response to the moral crimes that occurred during World War II. Yet the same nations that ratified their declaration remain unable to protect their own citizens. The strength of a literature that denounces and questions, that speaks and implies that its own citizens can decide through the power of their voices and words, becomes effective in denouncing the moral vacuum in which the abuses took place.

This anthology presents an important group of literary voices specific to

Latin American culture. The voices are varied and from many countries, but they have much in common. All respond to an understanding that collective history is an experience that affects all citizens dominated by authoritarianism and fear. All share an ethical and artistic vision born of the peculiarities of political violence and social injustice. The clear understanding that the personal is political and historical is one of the principal components of this literature which denounces through realistic and direct rhetoric or through ambiguous and subtle poetry.

It is impossible to cite the many texts created within this literature, especially those not made available through the established channels of the official publishing market. I am thinking of clandestine writings, the poems carved into tree trunks and rocks by prisoners in the concentration camps of northern Chile or Patagonia. Some day, this literature will be part of Latin America's cultural history and will not be seen as an isolated element within history. On the contrary, it will be regarded as a foundation of this literature. Some of the voices contained herein are those of recognized authors whose trajectory in this field begins in the late 1970s; others represent a new generation that carries on the legacy in which art and politics unite as participatory forces of history.

One clear example is the poetry of Pablo Neruda, who denounced social injustice and supported the struggle to recognize forgotten ones during the Spanish Civil War; he was the voice of peace, of conscience, of invisible beings including women, children, and the working class, as well as detainees and others condemned during the war. Neruda's poetry, like that of other authors included here, represents the possibility of creating a literature that responds to an experience, to the sensitivity of different sectors and economic classes. Even today in Latin America, students, workers, and housewives read Neruda's poetry. His passionate and enchanting voice represents the pulse of the people and their everyday history. His poetry is not marginal; it is part of the community's identity.

Poets like Pablo Neruda and Gabriela Mistral, playwrights like Griselda Gambaro as well as storytellers like Reina Roffé are part of a fascinating artistic tradition in Latin America that invokes the social participation of literature as inseparable from the autonomous voice of society. During repressive times, this literature acquired even more importance from its clandestine readings to its publication in the postdictatorship years and readings in classrooms, theaters, and stadiums.

The 1970s were essential to the exploration of the Latin American cultural

identity. It was a time of change and dreams, of transformation and vindication. The working and middle classes acquired a stronger political voice. Yet it was precisely this voice that was silenced at the official level by the government's forces. The 1960s had been a time of reflection, meditation, and understanding of a Latin American reality that went beyond the individual countries. The Cuban revolution and its cultural contributions had incited radical meditation on what it meant to be Latin American. Years later, Salvador Allende's death, the military's power, and the denial of the disappeared bodies were an essential preamble for the writers who attempted to create and divulge, who struggled against the power that many times denied its human rights violations.

The authors in the following pages participated in a long tradition that articulated the possibility of representing, through the literary imagination, the social and political landscape of the everyday and the collective experience of a people, with all of its symbolic, social, and literary meaning. These writers present a new way of telling. Thus, we observe how the language used by these authors bears direct witness to a period of repression and is capable of defying censure. These writers are united in the most important cultural traditions of the twentieth century and articulate life and literature as integral elements of the human conscience. Writing is a body of human expression, in which the daily conventions of our lives join with the ambiguities and subtleties of literature. But we must add in the bodies of the disappeared without identity, without memory—and this becomes the existential body of this literature that is not quieted by the dominant ideology or its power to deny what is happening. In the context of the early 1970s, it is impossible to deny the bodies floating by the banks of the Mapocho River in Santiago. It is impossible to look at the streets of El Salvador and not see the mutilated bodies strewn throughout. The literature of this period gathers the victimized bodies and arms them with words; it restores them and offers them dignity.