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*Washington University in St. Louis*

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

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A Daring Voice: Confessional Poetry of the 1970s from Argentina and the United States

by

Julia Leverone

A dissertation presented to the  
Graduate School of Arts & Sciences  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy

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Julia Leverone

*Washington University in St. Louis*

*May, 2016*

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

A Daring Voice: Confessional Poetry of the 1970s from Argentina and the United States

by

Julia Leverone

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

Washington University in St. Louis, 2016

Professor Ignacio Infante, Chair

Daring to confront difficult socio-political realities on the page, Argentine and United States poets writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s strove against systems of silence. Implementing direct and indirect poetics, each set of poets embodied, in differing and overlapping ways, elements of the confessionalist mode, at once relational and witnessing. Their poetry in collections from these particular years reflected the risk in their auto-positioning as subjects within their poems and with complex relationships with their audience, and in their usage of language, sometimes fragmented, protective, or urgent. They committed personal experience to the page, and in conveying their experience through narrative and lyric techniques, they opened their lines to provide access to masses of readers who had known the same difficult truths and shared in those realities. These poets, here represented by Juan Gelman, Olga Orozco, Francisco “Paco” Urondo, Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich, conducted a risk-taking socio-political poetics of relation demanding awareness and change.

In the United States, the experiences that Bishop, Rich, and Sexton wrote of in their work of this historical moment pertained to socially taboo issues—mental illness, alcoholism, abuse, marital strain, non-normative sexuality, and unequal gender treatment—an address of which that

had been fought for in the protests and movements in the 1960s. In Argentina, Gelman, Orozco, and Urondo were writing of the increasing harms being committed by state military forces against citizens and that threatened their own lives as subversives working counter to the interests of their national government. These years constituted a time of darkening hope, as Argentina headed into successive military dictatorships. In response, Gelman and Urondo, along with other authors, developed a more pointed, witnessing, unmistakable, yet emotional and intimate style of writing that paralleled that of the United States poets. Differing from all four of these poets slightly, I also observe the indirect poetics of acknowledgment of Bishop and Orozco, who wrote concurrently with the others, yet communicated autobiographical and socio-political truths through more buried and protective technical means.

This dissertation observes the literary commonalities and discrepancies in these national poetics that upheld the dual ethic of art and socio-political witness. I would use the terms “confessional,” “conversational,” and “testimonial,” cross-applying them to the different national poetics and showing how each implemented aspects of the modes. I set forth with the assumption that confessionalism is relational and necessarily enacts vulnerability, skepticism, a critical stance, and risk in its very practice of communicating experience both personal and shared.

The trajectories in American literature and through events affecting both nations as well as the globe—including protest movements for identity rights—led these Argentine and United States poets to a fascinatingly common space despite their very disparate stakes for writing, which later in the decade would lead to exile and death in the country to the south. These brave writers harnessed devastating fact and made socio-political art by representing multitudes of others with a belief and insistence on the power of language, knowledge, and relation.

## Introduction

The function of the act of confession in twentieth-century poetry minimally retains the qualities of the Catholic confession and the tones of guilt and absolution this implies, and it does not quite align with legal confession either, the product of interrogation. On a basic level, the confessional act in confessional poetry does share a discursive nature with confession's traditional contexts, dependent upon the transfer of information about personal experience from the confessant to the confessor. In this dissertation, I advance the critical discussion on confessionalism as a mode of relation, primarily working forward from the contributions of Jo Gill, Jeremy Tambling, Michel Foucault, Thomas Travisano, and Zachary Pickard. In confessional poetry, I see the truth confessed as not only individual; when the poet conveys personal experience, fraught and difficult to admit, he or she does so in part to evoke the memory of experiences his or her readers possess themselves, to call that memory forth. I see confessionalism as a testimony of the self—distinct from the testimonial mode, as I will show—who is a representative for silenced others. Confessionalism is political, and seeks, upon establishing connection, justice for the pervasiveness of harmful experiences that have largely gone unacknowledged by a public, even one that contains multitudes of individuals who have experienced those very harms.

The Argentine poets Juan Gelman, Olga Orozco, and Francisco “Paco” Urondo wrote concurrently with U.S. American confessional poets Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich, a starting point for my comparative justification. No Argentine poets have ever been considered to have been writing within the confessionalist mode, though their literary production has been described in ways that very closely approximate descriptions of



confessionalism, especially in Mario Benedetti's critical production surrounding communicative poetry. Thus, my analysis of these poets must be understood as speculative, though working toward an understanding of the function of historicity and risk in poetics from the time period extending from the late 1960s through the 1970s. The main objective of this dissertation is to cross-apply analyses of these works as conversational, communicative, testimonial, and confessional. I take up the existing analyses of confessional poetry that do prioritize its relational scope and techniques and apply these aspects to the poetry of Gelman, Orozco, and Urondo. I consider the work of the U.S. American poets—who are already acknowledged critically as pertaining to confessionalism, and even in a socially representative or relational light—as sharing the qualities of revolutionary and political poetry. The comparative practice I undertake in this dissertation is described by Djelal Kadir's term "to world," that expansive-inclusive, "highly repercussive and consequential verb" (6). I bring into comparison a heretofore never-compared set of work by drawing connections among examples from Gelman, Orozco, Urondo, Bishop, Rich, and Sexton—in other words, I "world" confessionalism by stretching the mode across the equatorial divide and applying it to the poetry of these Argentines.<sup>1</sup> As such, the research in this dissertation contributes to transamerican studies.

As Kadir notes that "the invocation of something referred to as 'world' repeatedly correlates and becomes coeval ideologically with cultural and political thresholds at traumatic cusps of history," the contemporary historical and literary moment balancing on the early 1970s, I believe, held a dual aperture for Argentine and United States writing that gave fruition to

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1. As "worlding" involves expanding an awareness of texts not frequently explored, part of the newness of this dissertation's analysis is that Urondo has not received much critical attention (in Spanish, let alone in English), nor has his work appeared in translation into English except in Hernan Fontanet's scholarship and in my own translation endeavors outside of this dissertation.

parallel techniques that certainly qualify them as poetics of witness, but that can be further refined as pertaining to confessionalism (5). Of course, each country's writers formed part of different, though not alien, historical, social, political, and literary trajectories and contexts that influenced and placed pressures upon the writers from distinct angles in the late 1960s and 1970s. The greatest difference between the Argentine and United States cases was this: that the pressure to not speak, to not dare, would culminate in mass execution in the former country, and in social and emotional damage in the latter, which still ruined and took lives, but not systematically. Regardless of the outcome or the degree of violence awaiting them—indeed, against the murkiness of the possible threats—these writers took on the responsibility of representation; their circumstances arrived them at a similar rhetorical and creative space, and in this dissertation, I consider the techniques of that space as common to and affirmative of the confessional mode. I see this set of poets as taking part in intimate autobiographical witness within a poetics that also performed advocacy for socio-political change. In both national contexts, the repressions these poets wrote against—the repression of bodies in Argentina, and the repression of identities in the United States—were perpetuated by silence and ignorance. Knowledge was a way out of this circumstance, and the confessional poets built their work instructively so that readers might learn to be cognizant that the experiences they shared within a given national context constituted injustices. Beyond this motive, the poets examined in this dissertation wrote toward promoting the special capacity for poetry—and language, and beauty—to convey truth and solidarity in its form.

Not all writers of this time and in these two countries chose to reflect the reality of their socio-political circumstances in their writing, though there were open discussions of the need for this ethic among the literary communities in each country (put forth by Rich in her prose, for

one). In Argentina, the socio-political poetry of the writers who did adopt the ethic of realist representation followed a period of coups, increasing military violence, and the activity of socialist guerrilla groups like FAR (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias ‘Revolutionary Armed Forces’)—and the retaliation against these by the Argentine state in huge clashes, the Cordobazo, the Rosariazo (1969).<sup>2</sup> In the United States, a distinct socio-political writing followed the period of exalted strides in civil rights in the 1960s that had deflated with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Rights for women and rights for homosexuals, and even discussions of these identities, were still repressed in the period of the early 1970s, and this, in my view, incited some poets to continue the fight for these rights and recognitions on the page. Historical and socio-political circumstances shifted timbre in both Argentina and the United States and affected the poetic production of the poets I center on in this dissertation. I take up Marianne DeKoven’s characterization of the new literary attitude that emerged as one of a “utopia limited”: “muted, partial, local, diffuse, multiple, skeptical, complicit, displaced, and significantly refunctioned” (DeKoven 25). In their tones of disillusionment, their striking techniques of urgency in recounting experience, and in their representational scopes, the core poets analyzed in this dissertation adopted what I argue are confessional poetics specifically in their collections from the early 1970s that made their poetry distinct in characteristic from the poetic production that preceded and followed it, even within the individual oeuvres of each poet. I discuss how these poets’ personal biographies and the national socio-political events occurring around them led up to this shift in poetics in Chapters 1 and 4.

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2. The Cordobazo was a popular uprising under the then-dictator Juan Carlos Onganía, begun in May of 1969, against state forces that had been put in place to hold off student protests. Rather than consisting of Peronists, the uprising was enacted by communist and socialist Argentines, fourteen of whom would be killed in the conflict, at least. A similar conflict took place subsequently in Rosario (Hedges 187).

Despite the broad awareness of socio-political issues each poet showed, and the often transnational literary influences that sustained their growth as writers (Sexton's favorite poet was Pablo Neruda, for instance), each nationally-bound set of poets had likely never read the poetry of their counterparts from across the equatorial divide.<sup>3</sup> But they were intertwined themselves: Bishop, Rich, and Sexton were colleagues who corresponded and read each others' work; and Gelman and Urondo were close friends and colleagues, though Orozco's relationship to them was limited to only a critical awareness of her work by Gelman. Their commonality in age—Gelman was born in 1930, as was Urondo; Rich was born in 1929, Sexton in 1928; Bishop and Orozco were a little older, the former born in 1911 and the latter in 1920—translates in each of their cases into a maturity come the 1970s, a sense of belonging to the literary community, and publishing success. They were all established and prolific writers, engaged in not only writing but in taking part in the critical and creative conversation surrounding literature and presenting their poetry publicly at readings, and Gelman, Urondo, and Rich were active in advocating for social and political change outside of their poetry. Rich was outspoken in her advocacy for women's and homosexual's rights, refusing, for years, to perform readings at which a man was present. Sexton, though less wont to acknowledge her politics, consistently and vocally sought connection with and for her readers by committing their (and her) difficult truths to the page. She did participate in readings and publications hosted by feminist organizations when invited. Bishop, perhaps more unwilling to adhere to politics, especially where they intersect with poetry, did admit to Rich on a road trip that she aligned with the women's liberation movement (Dean). Orozco wrote critical pieces for the magazine *Yo, Claudia* about a variety of cultural topics,

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3. Perhaps the closest any one of them got to an awareness of the poetics of the companion group across the equatorial divide was Rich's knowledge of Roque Dalton's poetry, which she mentions in *What Is Found There* (116).

though always under pseudonyms. Gelman and Urondo notably read together in Buenos Aires, electrifying their audiences. In addition to serving within leftist guerrilla organizations, they both worked in journalism (as colleagues at the newspapers *Panorama*, *La Opinión*, and more), a practice very often intertwined with their militarism, and one that largely informed their approach to poetry. Gelman and Urondo were each arrested once for their political affiliations, Gelman in 1963 and Urondo in 1973. In 1976, with the coup installing the military junta in power led by Jorge Rafael Videla, Gelman went into exile, which manifested powerfully in his ensuing poetry. He tried to convince Urondo to leave Argentina as well, but Urondo decided to stay and fight. Urondo was publicly killed by the Argentine police later that year. These intersections of ideology, life, and writing propagated a tone of urgency that is more prevalent in the poetry of Gelman and Urondo than in Orozco and in the work of the U.S. American poets, though Rich was known for her use of a tone of anger in her poetry. The general disparity in insistence between the poetry of the Argentines and the U.S. Americans corresponds with the differing immediacies of their national socio-political contexts.

As each national context—and its accompanying repressions—was separate, each poet’s style that was developed within and in response to these contexts offers technical information about the possibilities of the confessional mode. Broad as the social and political scope of their confessional poetry was, the work of this core set of poets always sets forth from the intimate. I explore among each of these poets their implementation of vulnerability and metalinguistic techniques in putting forth the writing as accessible; explore the self as an autobiographical “I” and a subject with agency in the poems; explore how image and symbol contributed new information to the experience of the referent; and explore the qualities of the poets’ proximal voice and narrativizing of experience used to navigate the represented-confessor other.

Individually, Sexton's confessional poetry displays moments of high colloquialism, leans on the popular nature of Grimm's fairy tale characters to explain the pervasiveness of social ills, inserts brazen moments of clarity and testimony, and deals in an insecurity that itself evokes her experience and influences the reader's approach to that experience. Bishop, too, erupts into moments of near-admission, as her socio-political referents lurk behind her videographic poems. Gelman renounces his control over language in a similar show of dependence upon the reader to both interpret his information and to feel affinity with that rupture, reflective of the brokenness of his experience. This request for individual meaning-making is an integral part of his poetry's ethic, and with his questions, insistences, and neologisms, Gelman establishes an egalitarian stance entered through beauty, thus placing his trust above all in poetry's capacity to unite people. Orozco writes in a twisting and eschewing manner, reflecting what potentially was a self-censorship, but nevertheless leaving symbols and sentiments for the reader to attach her work to the socio-political. Rich's poems blatantly fracture and affirm, in instances conveying the fraught nature of experience and in others directly coming to speak of those truths. Her poet's voice is controlled and her criticism is always active, advocating for the similar active participation of her readers in the world's news and progress. And Urondo employs a critical stance as well; in moments he accuses his readers of their ignorance, self-effacingly grouping himself among those who could have done more—this, from the one poet of this set who gave his life for his beliefs, inseparable from his art.<sup>4</sup> As with Sexton's insecurity and Gelman and Rich's fracturing of

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4. Jean Franco describes the practice of critical realism:

For the critical realist, not only does literature truthfully reflect history through the mediation of the writer but, by revealing connections and continuities which would otherwise remain hidden, it enables the reader to take a critical, conscious, and dialectical distance from events. Realist writing is cognitive in intention and speaks directly and rationally to the conscious awareness of the reader. (79)

language, Urondo too provides moments, including his critical ones, when he works through his arguments and displays his poet's mind at work. Such writing offers footholds of lucid statement meanwhile weaving lines in accordance with the effect of the experience that fuels them. It is spun from the self and directs at other selves, multitudinous other selves, who, these poets argue, must act in concert.

The relationship between the confessional poet and reader is complicated, and I draw from Foucault's writings on this relationship to analyze it as it manifests in the work of these core poets. Though egalitarian and solidary, these poets still held positions of privilege, tied to their access to information that accompanied their careers and their abilities in expressing that information. However, their positioning, especially as having experienced what they perform in witness, distinguishes them from testimonial writers, who represented what they themselves had not intimately known. The editors and translators of *testimonios* transcribed and shaped narratives of difficult and otherwise silenced mass experiences. Within such narratives, a focus on individual experience constitutes a depiction suggesting the experience of the many; this slip—individual-multitudinous, and instance-trend—converts the personal into the social. The same movement occurs in the autobiographical, confessional writing of the poets I examine, where they are their own representatives and the representatives of entire ideological groups. They all work with the same ethic to give a daring voice to the under-served, turning the poem itself into an active stay against forces of repression; yet they depend upon the force of experience they have felt and known, themselves counting among the repressed.

Neither do these core poets belong fully (though they nearly do) to the conversational or communicative mode that critics like Benedetti used to describe the Latin American poetry of the

early 1970s.<sup>5</sup> He writes, “*Poetas comunicantes* significa, en su acepción más obvia, la preocupación de la actual poesía latinoamericana en comunicar, en llegar a su lector, en incluirlo también a él en su buceo, en su osadía, y a la vez en su austeridad” ‘*Communicative poets* means, in its most obvious sense, the preoccupation of current Latin American poetry with communicating, with reaching its reader, with including him as well in its investigation, its daring, and at the same time in its austerity’ (*Los poetas* 14) (emphases in original). Benedetti even notes the experimental quality of this poetry, but does not account for nuances in the mode that pertain to writing like that of Gelman, Orozco, Urondo, Bishop, Rich, and Sexton (its power relationship; its indirect capacities) and there is not the critical depth of support for this term like there is for confessional poetry.

The traditional critics writing about confessionalism would have it as a mode that, boiled down, centers on the cathartic admission of strained personal experience. The first to use the term, M. L. Rosenthal, said about Lowell’s confessional poetry that it was comprised of “a series of personal confidences, rather shameful” though nevertheless indicative of the experiences of many others (*Our Life* 117). David Yezzi characterized the mode by the “rawness of its address and the incorporation of guilty personal detail for emotional effect.” The poets readily pointed to as confessionalist (Lowell, Snodgrass, Plath, and Sexton, per Diane Middlebrook in “What Is Confessional Poetry?”) and the narcissistic/self-serving elements in such criticism, however, limit the mode. The writer of confessional poetry, I argue alongside Gill, is aware of the connection he or she establishes with a reading public in sharing his or her experience(s); the art

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5. *Poesía conversacional* (“conversational poetry”) had a further counterpart in *antipoesía* (“antipoetry”), both Latin American poetic forms termed in the 1950s (based on the poetries of Ernesto Cardenal and Nicanor Parra, respectively) that presented social and political themes and incorporated the quotidian, along with tones of humor, gravity, and awareness. Roberto Fernández Retamar noted that antipoetry defined itself negatively, as counter-current and exceptional, and was founded upon skepticism; while conversational poetry tended towards a hope for resolution instead of despair; was the more revolutionary mode.



is driven to make possible that access. There is the requisite authenticity, and like with the *testimonio*, in order to convince the reading public the poetry requires verisimilitude (for writing is always already distanced from the event, is an interpretation, however direct or apt that interpretation is). Directly and indirectly, confessional poetry conveys the experience and the accompanying emotions, logos and pathos, factual and felt. Further, the confessional poet breaks language to recreate the textures of the experience so that the reading public can take it in and then understand it, as an experience shared interpersonally and then as one forming part of their national history.

Sandra Gilbert interestingly refers to confessionalism as a female mode, and her stance dictates my decision to elect the two female confessional poets from the United States for my dissertation's analysis. She writes:

The male confessional poet, in other words, even while romantically exploring his own psyche, observes himself as a representative specimen with a sort of scientific exactitude. Alienated, he's nevertheless an ironic sociologist of his own alienation because he considers his analytical perspective on himself a civilized, normative point of view. [...] [B]y contrast, the female confessional poet seems to feel no such paradoxical ease with her own anxieties. Even when she observes herself with amused irony [...] she enacts as well as dissects her suffering, her rage, her anxiety [...]. The detached irony of a Lowell or a Berryman—the irony possible for a self-assured, normative sensibility—is totally unavailable to her, unavailable because even at her most objective she feels eccentric, not representative; peripheral, not central. More, she struggles with her suffering, grapples with it in bewilderment. (102-3)

The motions of fracturing, of grappling, and showing the mind at work in the poetry of Gelman and Urondo exclude them from this reading of male confessionalists. For that matter, these characteristics made these poets clear choices for this dissertation; there were few other Argentine poets, male or female, who wrote with the variety, confessionalism, and ideology they exhibited at the particular point in history I examine. Like Bishop, Rich, and Sexton, Gelman and Urondo sought to establish a new hegemony of an empathetic, knowledgeable public (or one that

recognized the knowledge it already had as symptomatic and collective), national if not planetary, and to define themselves, unstable subjects, within that hegemony. This in itself is political, as Jacques Rancière defines politics:

Politics is commonly viewed as the practice of power or the embodiment of collective wills and interests and the enactment of collective ideas. Now, such enactments or embodiments imply that you are taken into account as subject sharing in a common world. Politics is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience way of being, doing, speaking. (10)

Asserting the self and speaking against the harms of the state constituted one revolutionary, political element of the confessional mode; its constituent techniques themselves were new and radical poetics as well, techniques that fascinatingly link this work from Argentina and the United States. They displayed a renovation in style that Julio Cortázar stipulates is necessarily revolutionary, himself an interesting example of coming to incorporate material from reality in his fiction that I explore briefly in Chapter 3. And Travisano concurs that confessionalism entailed a technical risk, an exploration not just of the personal, but in the methods that can bring about witnessing and relation. Within the variety of approaches confessional poets took to their task, a balance of indirect (often emotional) experience with a direct address of experience emerged.

Apart from more direct literary influences—Raúl González Tuñón, Oliverio Girondo, Juan L. Ortiz, César Vallejo, and Neruda for the Argentines; Snodgrass, Lowell, Muriel Rukeyser, and Audre Lorde for the U.S. Americans—Ezra Pound was a major international proponent of the radical expansion of the poetic form to accommodate a variety of documentation methods. As Cardenal notes, after Pound's influence:

En un poema caben datos estadísticos, fragmentos de cartas, editoriales de un periódico, noticias periodísticas, crónicas de historia, documentos, chistes, anécdotas, cosas que antes eran consideradas como elementos propios de la prosa y no de la poesía. Pound

pues abrió los límites de la poesía, de manera que en ella cabe todo lo que se puede expresar con el lenguaje [...] aun con más fuerza que en la prosa. (Benedetti *Los poetas*, 101)

[In a poem one can fit statistical facts, fragments of letters, newspaper excerpts, press announcements, historical features, documents, jokes, anecdotes, things that were before considered to be elements pertaining to prose and not poetry. Pound as such opened the limits of poetry, so that in it can fit anything one can express with language with even more force than in prose.]

Pound can be cited as a forebear of this confessional poetics that depended upon differing textures to reflect the lived events of the poet and to draw the reader into the poem from at times multiple angles. Inclusivity can be achieved, in this way, when a reader is called upon to feel, or interpret, an argument through a poem's form, rather than be given that argument explicitly. Julia Kristeva's signifying practice of "metalanguage" describes this motion, dependent upon thought and deduction (94). Another major international proponent of this technique was Eliot, particularly with "The Waste Land." As Sarah Cole writes, "'The Waste Land' works by evoking; 'wants to promise that aesthetic potency will develop directly out of real-world agony'" (1641).

Preserving silences becomes as effective a poetic technique as direct address when it can embody and suggest experience, especially that which was emotional. This is a particular quality poetry can obtain that critic Nelly Richard describes in *The Insubordination of the Sign* as producing "blind spots that demand an aesthetic of diffuse lighting, so that their forms acquire the indirect meaning of what is shown obliquely, of that which circulates along the narrow paths of recollection, filtered by barely discernible fissures of consciousness" (21). These blind spots still point, still have referents that are identifiable and historical. In Chapter 3 of this dissertation, I turn to analyze the work of Olga Orozco and Elizabeth Bishop that engages social and political experience far more indirectly than directly, informing moments in the core poets' work that,

too, speak through silence in the poem's form—in line breaks, symbolism, image use, through the mask of characters, etc. Such a poetics of protection, evasion, and self-censorship—along with techniques of breakage of the sentence and line and syntax—implies the powerful effect of the initial event and its recording process by the poet, thus marking the difficulty of not just the experience but of its commitment to memory.

Chapter 1 is where I establish the transitions of Gelman, Urondo, Rich, and Sexton into a socio-politically advocating confessional mode. I see this shift in the poets of each of the two countries as following DeKoven's description of a "utopia limited," entering into a use of poetic techniques never before seen and inextricable from the historical moments in each country. Particularly salient about the new poetics was the critical practice incorporated into the poetry—the analysis—wherein the poets asserted their intellectual interpretations of issues. In order to provide their readers access to this analysis posed both as instruction and an advocacy for socio-political cognizance, these poets adopted conversationality, vulnerability, and documentation into their lyricism. I further argue that these poets wrote with the purpose of both defending and finding a new hegemony of individuals acting to counter the repressive forces affecting the poets and their readers, namely in promoting the spread of knowledge. Confessional poetry especially has a number of opportunities for the poets to engage their readers to this end. In Chapter 1 I separate the confessional poetics of my core set from other characterizations, including that of Benedetti's communicative poetry.

Chapter 2 is where I engage more deeply with confessional scholarship and the analytical tools it offers for a transamerican, comparative understanding, here considering its overlaps and divergences from the testimonial mode. Using Foucault's theory, among others, I write on the power relationships between confessant and confessor and the ways the poetry of the core set

anticipates, engages, and interacts with a reader-confessor who represents a judging, punishing, forgiving, consoling, and reconciling entity. I bring Rodolfo Walsh, the Argentine prose writer, into the equation here, namely to consider reader relationships where a writer exhibits aggression, useful to the processing of difficult experiences, as Frantz Fanon notes in *The Wretched of the Earth*. I explore related elements, like brazenness and pain, in the tone of confessional poets Sexton and Gelman—at times to the extent of the splitting of the poet from serving as a narrator-subject to merely a narrator, a protective, evasive act in the face of dark, unspeakable fact, enacted so that the discourse might continue.

In Chapter 3, I show how visual illustration, like the fracturing of language, can open a poem to a reader's participation and indirectly assert a socio-political experience. Deviating from the core set, I turn my attention to two separate poets who were noticeably more indirect in their confessional techniques, though who still wrote within the mode. Bishop and Orozco wrote within the same historical and socio-political contexts as those of the core poets of the dissertation, and though Bishop's work is frequently referred to as "reticent" and Orozco's as "cryptic," they nonetheless wrote of their personal experiences in a confessional—and relational—way. As Pickard notes of Bishop's poems, she "creates an aesthetic object that indirectly testifies to her knowledge of what she is not describing"—but she does testify, and she does acknowledge the world and shared, communal experiences of it (403). Her manners of not saying, wrapped in extensive images and a non- (or low) presence of the poet's voice, together with Orozco's rapid movement between and piling up of varied images, confoundingly symbolic, offer important examples of how confessional writing can interact varyingly with its subject/referent and its audience.

In Chapter 4, describing the personal histories of Rich and Urondo and how these influenced the poets' shifts into a confessional, relational poetics, I trace their broadening developments of cognizance of socio-political issues. I note their entrance into such empathy and awareness with their employment of techniques that I term a "narrativizing" and a "proximal voice," based on Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of addressivity. Their auto-positioning of themselves as subjects in their confessional poems comes along with the problem of crossing the distance to the other, though their targeted readers shared in their experiences. The position of poet and narrator entailed a power these poets attempted to overcome with the popularization of their verse, as in their use of conversationality and ruptures in form to convey their own vulnerability. Still, their representation at times fails to practice the inclusivity their projects propose.

This poetry of acknowledgment, this writing against silence, achieved its precision in a parallel historical moment in Argentina and in the United States, when regimes of silence were exacting painful ignorance upon their publics. Beginning in the late 1960s, paramilitary and Triple A (Alianza Anticomunista Argentina 'Argentine Anticommunist Alliance') forces were targeting citizens posing threats to the Argentine state, beginning the kidnappings and executions of subversives—guerrilla militants, but also leftist intellectuals—which would explode into the systematic violence that marked the dictatorships of 1976-83 in Argentina. To the north, United States writers and even protesters were not killed on such a scale, hardly at all in light of the Argentine numbers (30,000 disappeared, according to *Nunca más* [*Never Again*]). We do know that black and gay citizens were killed, as they continued to be when this dissertation was being written. The identities and rights of black, homosexual, and female citizens were repressed socially and legally; though postwar social movements to protest that repression were securely

underway at the start of the decade of the 70s. The real repercussions of the state repression and social ignorance in Argentina and the United States differed greatly in violence, but poetic maneuvers emerged in both poetics of the early 1970s enacting the damaging effects of that violence, to body and to identity, on the page. Their development of techniques of solidarity and fracturing signal these poets' deep implication in their contexts and in their commitment to poetry. These poets were individuals in possession of unspeakable experiences they conveyed with a confessional approach, seeking relation, advocating awareness, and placing trust in poetry's beauty to initiate a change in the way their audiences considered information and poetry's intersection with their socio-political realities.

## **Chapter 1. Gelman, Urondo, Rich, and Sexton's Entrances into the Confessional Mode in the Early 1970s**

At the end of Jean Franco's article "From Modernization to Resistance: Latin American Literature 1959-1976," the critic arrives at a conclusion about the direction of what she discusses as the revolutionary literature of the region: that though such writing has not manifested in great quantity yet, the author of accessible, actionable literature will allow "active participation in a process of political learning. It is along lines such as these that radical writing and criticism can begin to separate itself both from the passive model implied by realism and the vacuity of the modernizing avant-garde" (94). Her prescription for the further emerging of the Latin American author into relation with an audience, exemplified only thus far, in her view, by Pablo Neruda and Augusto Roa Bastos, was actually being exercised in Argentina by the poets Juan Gelman and Francisco "Paco" Urondo. Leftist militants and journalists, these two poets bridged the gap between the once-elite positioning of the author-intellectual, accomplished vis-a-vis various techniques including one Franco commended, the "Brechtian alternative, that of building into literature not only the force of experience but also the knowledge that will allow critical judgment" (93). Gelman and Urondo both arrived at this new poetics in their forties as already established poets, accruing in the early 1970s elements of a mode that was at once popular, experience-driven, representative, and metalinguistically effective at instructively conveying the reality of their socio-political present. With the 1966 coup that placed Juan Carlos Onganía in power in Argentina and the initiation of the repressive "Argentine Revolution;" with the violent crush of popular uprisings in the Cordobazo and Rosariazo of 1969; with the formation of the right-wing death squad Triple A (Alianza Anticomunista Argentina 'Argentine Anticommunist Alliance') and ensuing executions in 1973; and with Juan Domingo Perón's death in 1974, these poets descended into disillusion. Experiencing this after the decade of the 1960s, infused with



Che Guevara's and Cuba's counter-revolutionary hope, these writers were incited to reach out through poetry to a reading public that might understand and participate in the spread of knowledge of their nation's decline.<sup>1</sup>

Marianne DeKoven writes in *Utopia Limited* of a parallel U.S. American change in perspective during this same historical period from a more unrestrainedly utopian, hopeful outlook to one that was positioned more cautiously, conscious of the keen potential for once-dreamt-of political and social freedoms to fail. After this change, the utopian ideals—maintaining optimism for a better future time and a trust in that possibility, as Ernst Bloch defines utopia—of the leftist and intellectual U.S. American public remained somewhat intact, though altered (Bloch 3). For DeKoven, in this new realm, which I argue factors in the historical progression of leftist thought in Argentina as well as the United States,

[The utopian impulse] is neither underground nor invisible; rather, it is both visible and pervasive, though no longer revolutionary, and very much altered and constrained. It is still critical, still a motivating force for change, but it has become “limited”: muted, partial, local, diffuse, multiple, skeptical, complicit, displaced, and significantly refunctioned. (DeKoven 25)

Other adjectives DeKoven uses to describe the ensuing literary moment are “popular,” “egalitarian,” “multigenre,” “hybrid,” “transnational,” “border-crossing,” and consisting of “wavering or roaring voices” (290). One of the features of the new writing, in which change could still be advocated beyond revolution and counter-revolution, is that it was intentionally fractured, slant, alternate. The effect upon poetic production of this shift from political hope into disillusion was fruitful: new techniques embodying breakage and a critical astuteness resulted in

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1. Régis Debray, the French philosopher, journalist, and academic, was instrumental in adapting not just European Communism for the Latin American context, but the Cuban Revolution for the rest of the region by encouraging the installation of guerrilla “focos.” Essays from his *Révolution dans la révolution?* (1967) were disseminated widely among Latin American writers and intellectuals.

a more intimately aware, and therefore urgently charged, poetry with a broadened cognizance of the ailments of multitudes.

Part of this limited-utopian shift was a searching for and an assertion of a new, active-citizen hegemony, centered on individual agency and on a community prizing the dissemination of true information about national events. DeKoven explores the anti-consumerism hegemony promoted in the work of Herbert Marcuse as part of his utopia limited. Her discussion does not specifically make mention of the applicability between the new limited utopian literature (including and beyond Marcuse) and the mode of confessionality, a poetic mode of daring personal-multitudinous witness and fractured form that was being practiced in the US at the same time. But the fit is apt: the confessional mode consists of enacting a transfer of personal experience situated inside a desire to represent and be recognized as affiliated with multitudes, also promoting the exchange and expression of such socially- and politically-oriented information (Tambling 206). As I argue in this dissertation, confessionality as a literary mode is not exclusive to the 1950s in the United States, but can be seen to extend to the Argentine context, and to the years of the early 1970s, past the climax of utopian hope of the 60s in both countries.

### **Re-Envisioning the Work of the Core Set**

Conveying experience was at the forefront of many writers' artistic ethics at this time both in Argentina and the United States, but especially for a core set of four poets: Gelman, Urondo, Adrienne Rich, and Anne Sexton. Because of the trial and turmoil of the socio-political times they lived in, Gelman, Urondo, Rich, and Sexton turned to challenge poetic form and how it accommodates shared reality. Exploring the particular ways in which they came to challenge

poetic form within a confessionalist paradigm will be the objective of my use of specific examples of their poetry below.

I particularly focus in this chapter on exploring the expanded sense of community and vulnerability these poets came to adapt in their poetry in the early 1970s, while moving away from many existing characterizations of their poetry. I show how the labeling of Gelman's and Urondo's work by terms including "conversational" and "communicative" does not fully encompass the qualities they evolved. I also expand a conceptualization of confessionalism to reflect its qualifications by critics Jeremy Tambling, Jo Gill, and Thomas Travisano. In Tambling's confessional study, he admits that the risk of broadening considerations of confessionalism is that any writing that is discursive can also be seen as confessional. In my argument, however, confessionalism is unique because that discourse is difficult, because of the pain the truth experienced has caused the confessant and/or the confessor, or difficult because of the distance between the two participants, and the unwillingness of the latter to accept the admission, and thereby admit its veracity. Here the relational poetics of the abyss, put forth by Edouard Glissant, informs confessionalism. I believe confessionalism refines the understanding of the poetry of these poets from both Argentina and the United States, and is the most nuanced and applicable for understanding the socio-political work of Gelman, Urondo, Rich, and Sexton in the early 1970s. I see the mode as broader than much criticism of it allows (by M. L. Rosenthal, Robert Phillips, Al Alvarez, and Diane Middlebrook).

Perhaps the next most applicable characterization of the work of this core set, though more applicable to the Argentine poets, and significantly related to my confessional reading, is that of the "communicative poetry" described by Mario Benedetti in 1972. Similarly involving renovated, risk-taking poetics, Benedetti's described mode is, like confessionalism, dependent

upon boldness in address. He distinguishes the conversational mode—an independent term describing a style of intersecting intellectualism, revolution, and art prominent in the Latin American poetry community—from its literary trajectory, which had also leaned heavily on change and invention:

Los nuevos poetas experimentan, vanguardizan, tienen osadía; pero eso también pudo y puede decirse de sus mayores. En todo caso, lo que cambió fue el lenguaje (cada vez más despojado) y la clave comunicativa (cada vez más abierta). Pero no hubo grandes conmutaciones en el afán experimental, ni mucho menos, en la persistente intención de llegar hasta el hueso. (*Los poetas* 13)

The new poets experiment, vanguardize, are daring; but the same was and can be said of their forebears. In any case, what changed was the language (increasingly more stripped) and the communicative key (increasingly more open). But there were no great changes in their experimental eagerness, and especially not in their persistent intention to arrive at the bone.

The aspect Benedetti notes of the stripped language, open communication, and “persistent intention to arrive at the bone” gestures to the intimate nature of the confessional mode, also nearly arrives at a parallel with the special relationship between confessional author and reader. He does go on to consider the role of the reader in this poetics, when he explains that “*Poetas comunicantes* significa, en su acepción más obvia, la preocupación de la actual poesía latinoamericana en *comunicar*, en llegar a su lector, en incluirlo también a él en su buceo, en su osadía, y a la vez en su austeridad” “*Communicative poets* means, in its most obvious sense, the preoccupation of current Latin American poetry with *communicating*, with reaching its reader, with including him as well in its investigation, its daring, and at the same time in its austerity” (*Los poetas* 14) (emphases in original). Benedetti saw the potential of communicative writing to serve as a bridge for multiple crossings in which information is shared, but does not offer a depiction of the techniques and angling for reader involvement that some key pieces of confessionalist criticism offer.

Gelman commented to Benedetti in an interview in *Los poetas comunicantes* [*The Communicative Poets*] (1972), “Si me preguntás si me quiero comunicar, te contesto que sí; si me preguntás si estoy dispuesto a sacrificar algo para comunicarme, te digo que también. Pero lo que estoy dispuesto a sacrificar para esa comunicación no es cuestión poética, sino cuestión de vida” ‘If you ask me if I want to communicate, I’ll say yes; if you ask me if I’m ready to sacrifice something to communicate, I’ll say the same. But what I’m willing to sacrifice for that communication isn’t a question of poetics, it’s a question of life’ (*Los poetas* 229). During in the same interview, Gelman claims that “No hay por qué decir: o escribo poesía o hago la revolución” ‘There’s no reason to say: either I write poetry or I participate in the revolution,’ and also that revolutionary poetry has no need to lower its quality (*Los poetas* 231; 234). Though he believed that communication is most effective when one actually lives with “the people,” Gelman did arrive at a communicative, representative, confessional poetic address in his own way, which I expose in examples below (*Los poetas* 234). Writers such as Gelman who allowed themselves to be spokespeople for those suffering in kind also allowed their art, along with the immediacy of the situation, to dictate the form of their representation and telling. The ethic of beauty and the ethic of witnessing, in their eyes, had to be reconciled in favor of literarity: the act of evoking through style, sound, and trope.<sup>2</sup>

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2. The term *literatura comprometida* (See André Gide, Brecht, Julio Rodríguez Luis, José de la Fuente, Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, and Susana Cella), covering writing committed to socio-political address, applies to writing from multiple Latin American countries and socio-political climates (and Spain) in the twentieth century. It holds applicability to this core set of poets, but again is not precise enough to thoroughly encompass their writing.

“Revolutionary literature,” even less applicable, is often reserved for writing produced during and about the wars for independence from Spain in Mexico. Indeed, there were so-denominated revolutions in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s (in Argentina, Bolivia, Cuba, and Nicaragua), but with the exception of the Sandinista-led Nicaraguan Revolution, these were opposed by leftist citizens and in leftist-intellectual literary production. The literary response, however, was not frequently dubbed as counter-revolutionary. One of the most prominent guerrilla organizations in Argentina of this period, fighting against Onganía’s Argentine Revolution, asserted itself as revolutionary rather than counter-revolutionary: the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias ‘Revolutionary Armed Forces’ (FAR).

As it is in Benedetti's communicative poetry, the assertion of experience (and its accompanying politics) within confessionality is necessarily bound in risk-taking form. Jo Gill offers the most useful approach to the mode for this dissertation, in a way that more closely homes in on its elements and techniques:

[I]t is precisely the uncertainty and strangeness of its own endeavor which is modern confessional writing's major preoccupation.... Confession, then, is not a means of expressing the irrepressible truth of prior lived experience, but a ritualized technique for producing truth. Confessional writing is poetic not mimetic, it constructs rather than reflects some pre-textual truth. It is not the free expression of the self but an effect of an ordered regime by which the self begins to conceive of itself as individual, responsible, culpable and thereby confessional. Most importantly, confession takes place in a context of power, and prohibition, and surveillance. It is generated and sustained not by the troubled subject/confessant, but by the discursive relationship between speaker and reader (confessant and confessor).... (*Modern 4*)

Joining Gill's description of the mode to DeKoven's depiction of a historical moment of limited utopia, the years of the early 1970s in Argentina and the United States can be understood as opening up a space for a confessional poetic mode in particular: in that context of "prohibition and surveillance," where subversive citizens were beginning to disappear in Argentina, and where in the United States women continued to be demeaned and repressed, confessional writers asserted their individuality and their experience through at times tenuous and vulnerable

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Socialist realism, born of the Russian context, is a mode which prominent Latin American leftist-intellectual writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries define themselves against and steer clear of, despite their own sometimes socialist and communist beliefs and practices and their intents to merge politics and literature; the strictness of the mode comes at too high a cost of form and style. It had the following primary qualities: "En 1934 el Primer Congreso de Escritores Soviéticos codificó el método para pintar la realidad; exigió una 'reproducción verídica e históricamente concreta de la realidad en su desarrollo revolucionario'; reconoció como su objeto el de 'remodelar y educar ideológicamente a los trabajadores dentro del espíritu del socialismo'" "In 1934 the First Soviet Writers Congress gave name to the method for painting reality; it demanded a "truthful and historically concrete reproduction of reality in its revolutionary development;" it recognized as its objective the "ideological remodeling and educating of workers within the spirit of socialism" (Fizer 129).

autobiographical explorations, inherently (in the act of committing truths to language) in opposition to the harmful impositions of order from the state apparatuses.

Over the course of the twentieth century, and the arcs of the two World Wars, poetry's capabilities in response to war and violent experience, including state repression in dictatorial periods, or the social and political repression of female or non-normative sexual identities, should have evolved, and did. As writer Belén Gopegui argues, “La escritura que tiende a la revolución, la que se escribió, la que se escribirá, no está hecha, está siempre por hacer y su estructura, sus temas, su práctica de la autoría, habrán de ajustarse a cada momento, no podrán fijarse” “The writing that tends to revolution, that which was written, that which will be written, isn't made, is always to be made and its structure, its topics, its practice of authorship, must adjust in every moment, cannot become fixed’ (18). Gopegui is not alone in her belief about the necessary fluidity and adaptability in poetry as a rebellious medium, and a revolutionary tool.<sup>3</sup> The double ethic to honor art and reality is reconcilable, but requires a revolutionary willingness on the poet's part to test the poem, place its legibility into danger.

The dual emergence of protest writing in the United States and Argentina testifies to the parallel nature of the struggle born from their independent circumstances. This protest writing also responded to international movements of protest; and to the movements and developments of political literature leading to their contemporary moment of the early 1970s. The core set of poets were aware of their impulse to combine imagination and denunciation in lucid reflections

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3. This claim extends far beyond the Latin American context. As Theodor Adorno wrote that poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, he was not calling for an obliteration of expression, but for change to the lyric. That barbarity, a crudeness reflecting that of the terrible experience, translates into directness. In this ethic, the poem must not look away; for example, Paul Celan utilized a breakage—a visible breaking-down—of form and language, incorporating repetition to emphasize both the insistence and urgency of the subject to convey the delicate impossibility of communicating fully the horror of his experience.

of their present realities, and also the difficulty of merging art with politics. Their writing depended upon the critical capacity of the poets to interpret their circumstances in such a way that it could be accessed and understood by multitudes. Incorporated into poetry's form and message was the necessity of coming to speak out against difficult reality. Benedetti addresses the encounter of politics in writing in *El escritor latinoamericano y la revolución posible* [*The Latin American Writer and the Possible Revolution*] (1974): "Quizá el único camino para llegar a una obra artística de dimensión política, sea precisamente el inverso: es decir, que la injusticia social, la enajenación, el atraso de los pueblos subdesarrollados, provoquen tal confusión en el artista, que éste sienta el impulso interior de incorporar esos temas a su quehacer artístico" 'Perhaps the only path for arriving at an artistic work of a political dimension is precisely the inverse: that is to say, that social injustice, alienation, the regression of underdeveloped peoples provoke such a confusion in the artist that he or she feels the interior impulse to incorporate those topics into their artistic task' (130). As he argues, lived experience of militancy and increasing unrest beyond revolutionary hope is, as such, a crucial element to the poetry of this period. Experience was not something sought out intentionally for the purposes of creating a political literature, but rather an important and integrated part of the lives of many writers at this time that made its way irrevocably into poetry.

Benedetti's point about living strife being an exclusive waypoint into political writing is of interest also in its dependence upon an inner tenuousness, conflict, or confusion within the poet as an instigation to write politically. Ambrosio Fornet observes this element of conflict when transferred into writing; how "la inserción de conflictos y personajes [hacían] resaltar las contradicciones del sistema e implícitamente la necesidad del cambio" 'The insertion of conflicts and characters [made] the contradictions of the system stand out and made implicit the necessity



for change' (70). Thus poetry that poses problems begs action or resolution from the reader, some completion on the receiving end. It would follow that confessional poetry is especially open to the reader's completion of meaning and political involvement, according to Trivisano's description of the incomplete quality of the mode:

In short, these poets make frequent, skillful, and dramatic use of factual or emotional material that is withheld. Their poems offer very incomplete disclosure while dramatizing situations involving varying degrees of psychological blockage, of the partial or complete repression of traumatic material. These barriers are in general only partially unraveled in the course of the poem. These poets combine richness of human and cultural detail with a focus on irreversible loss to create a climate of epistemological, moral, and emotional uncertainty. (Trivisano 51)

I argue for the importance of tenuousness to the accessibility of the political writing in this chapter, necessary for the ethos of the writers and for the invitation to participation of their readers in the transfer of understanding about the socio-political reality writers and readers shared. Their poetic methods tended toward a colloquial, communicative style; yet also effective in establishing points of relation with their audiences is the affect of their lines achieved through expressing an urgent, or sometimes confused and unsure, emotional experience. Just as the socio-political climate had become more troubled, it followed that in the poetry of this core set there would be depictions of unrest and stances of instability the poets themselves felt as a byproduct of the times.

Along with depictions of unrest, then, came establishments of the poets' alignment with their publics in the form of practices of solidarity. In the following section, I show how Gelman, Urondo, Rich, and Sexton each changed their poetics between the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s, comparing lines from collections that straddled the limited-utopian divide. This shift entailed, as I have mentioned, an expansion of consciousness along with a vulnerability as these poets performed autobiographical witness—testimonies of the self—in relation to the socio-

political experiences of many, making their poetry into criticism that constituted an incitement of their public's similar awareness.

In Daniel Desaloms's documentary on Urondo, an interview with the poet's colleague Noé Jitrik notes an expansion of Urondo's awareness: "Yo creo que Paco allí [Cuba] se deslumbró por lo otro.... Me parece que ese es el punto de la partida del cambio de él" 'I think that there [Cuba] Paco became fascinated with the other.... It seems that that's the starting point of his change.'<sup>4</sup> Certainly in Urondo's early work prior to the 1960s there is much less concern for widespread socio-political issues and victims, and much more of this increasingly over the decade of the 60s (*Nombres* [*Names*] (1959), *Del otro lado* [*From the Other Side*] (1965), *Adolecer* [*Lacking*] (1967), *Son memorias* [*They Are Memories*] (1969), *Poemas póstumos* [*Posthumous Poems*] (1972), and *Cuentos de batalla* [*Battle Stories*] (1976)); by the 1970s his poems adeptly name, accuse, denounce, and bemoan the harms of the Argentine state. Gelman's collections (*Los poemas de Sydney West* [*The Poems of Sydney West*] (1969), *Cólera buey* [*Oxen Rage*] (1965/1971), *Fábulas* [*Fables*] (1971), and *Relaciones* [*Relations*] (1973)) similarly grow in incisiveness and inner strife into the 1970s, before the poet's exile, and period of silence in poetic production between 1973 and 1980, years encapsulating the worst of the Dirty War. The same shift into a national and even international consciousness occurs in Rich's work between *Necessities of Life* (1966), *Leaflets* (1969), *The Will to Change* (1971), and *Diving into the Wreck* (1973); and between Sexton's *Love Poems* (1969) and *Transformations* (1971).

DeKoven's argument about the literature traversing this historical shift with respect to the writer's altered outlook on national socio-political circumstances, together with Benedetti's

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4. See *Paco Urondo, la palabra justa*.

definition of “communicative poetry,” very approximate to confessionalism, are two strong cases for the applicability of confessionalism to the poetics contained within the realm of what they describe. Another critical approximation comes from Saúl Yurkiévich, who saw the trend in Latin American poetry between the 1950s and 1970s as a manifestation of the following:

Crisis del idealismo romántico, pasaje de los nerudeanos a los vallejeanos, conciencia crítica, desgarrada, desacralización humorística, irrupción de la actualidad, transición entre el psicologismo y el sociologismo, agresividad, libertad de expresión, avance del coloquialismo y del prosaísmo, pluralidad formal y estilística, discontinuidad, inestabilidad, ruptura, apertura, cosmopolitismo, tales son en suscinta recorrida los rasgos comunes, las líneas de fuerza de la poesía que se hace hoy en América. (7)

Crisis of romantic idealism, passage from Nerudeans to Vallejeans, critical conscience, shattered, humorous demystification, an eruption of actuality, transition between psychologism and sociologism, aggression, liberty of expression, advance of colloquialism and of prosaicism, formal and stylistic plurality, discontinuity, instability, rupture, opening, cosmopolitanism, such are, in succinct exploration, the common traits, the lines of force of the poetry that is made today in America.

Yurkiévich, too, observes the tenuousness manifested in this poetry. He notes of Latin American poetry in the same time period characteristics exactly like those observed by DeKoven of limited-utopian literature in the United States: that it displayed an “opening” and a “formal and stylistic plurality” (to her “multiplicity” and “multigenre”) and also “discontinuity,” “instability,” and “rupture”; recalling her adjectives “partial,” “displaced,” “hybrid,” and “wavering or roaring voices.” A further comparison exists between his observations of an “eruption of actuality,” the “transition between psychologism and sociologism,” and a “liberty of expression” and her “popular,” “egalitarian” adjectives (DeKoven 25; 290). The U.S. American and Latin American literatures align within these views. In the sections that follow, one devoted to each of the poets of the core set, I compare the particular techniques their respective poetics evolved, as they all

shifted into manifesting relational, confessional qualities in their poetry collections of the early 1970s.

### **Sexton's Poetry**

Though frequently accused precisely of not being representative, relational, or reflective of the experiences of others, Sexton is nevertheless a strong example of the how the new poetry of the 1970s witnessed and confessed not just intimate struggles but shared, collective ones during this period (Gill "Textual Confessions," 83). Notably in her collection *Transformations*, of 1971, Sexton's concerns become social and denunciative: she exposes pervasive and taboo ills like abuse and women's repression in relationships. The merging of Grimm's fairy tales with these awful, dark truths about women's realities leans on her readers' familiarity with both the popular tales and with the widespread commonality of the truths she highlights. Her interpretations of the fairy tales are modernized in diction as well, further making the poems accessible and relevant to a contemporary public.

Alicia Ostriker notes how in *Transformations* Sexton uses imaginative material and a colloquial diction to shed light on contemporary personal-social issues. Ostriker calls this technique "conspicuous" and "brazen," and contributing to a "brilliant fusion of public with personal matter" (*Writing* 65; 63). Identifying the collection as Sexton's most successful, Ostriker goes on to characterize it as a sign the poet had outgrown the personal; who then, "uninhibited," began to practice cultural representation (*Writing* 65). Jo Gill comments on the communicative-representative link in Sexton's work:

Paradoxically, the self-disclosure in her work is made always with a view to its reader; while ostensibly focusing inward, it also looks outward and turns away from the self. Crucially, Sexton's poetry is predicated on restoring the "connection with the world" that

Lasch sees as absent in narcissism...and on *flamboyantly laying bare the processes by which this connection is established*. This communicative impulse has tended to be lost in many readings of what narcissism signifies. (“Textual Confessions” 66) (emphasis in original)

Where, as Ostriker argues, Sexton’s writing is “stripped to the colloquial bone”—displays a coarseness, is “not a fine writing”—the fact of such display becomes instructive about the poet’s experience and even her outlook (*Writing* 65, 61). This is an aspect of Sexton’s poetry that parallels what Gelman was doing in the same exact historical moment with his collection of a mythical bent, *Fábulas* [*Fables*]. Though his characters are either historical or invented, Gelman uses imaginative content to expose understandings about power, with clear connections to his socio-political context (as I explore in more detail below).

Daring to expose one’s vulnerability in the face of attacking circumstances is a powerful move for establishing relation. It creates an emotional space for a reader to feel safe in, feel understood, and that he or she is among supportive company. Sexton is excellent at carving her own instability and insecurity in poetry. But in her previous collections her techniques for relation are more evasive or symbolically distant, where the reader is called upon more heavily to fuse meaning back together based on her own knowledge from interacting with the world. This kind of allusion to experience can be observed in “For My Lover, Returning to His Wife” of *Love Poems* (1969): “She is so naked and singular. / She is the sum of yourself and your dream. / Climb her like a monument, step after step. / She is solid. // As for me, I am a watercolor. / I wash off” (*Selected Poems* 131). Her commentary about being involved in an extramarital relationship evokes more than it points.

However, in *Transformations*, Sexton does accrue a directness in statement and tone. Among her use of symbol and image and allusion, in the 1971 collection there are moments of

directness and clarity, footholds for assertion and instruction. We see this duality of directness and indirectness in Sexton's "The Frog Prince":

Frog has no nerves.  
Frog is as old as a cockroach.  
Frog is my father's genitals.  
Frog is a malformed doorknob.  
Frog is a soft bag of green.  
.....  
She woke up aghast.  
I suffer for birds and fireflies  
but not frogs, she said,  
and threw him across the room.  
Kaboom!  
Like a genie coming out of a samovar,  
a handsome prince arose in the  
corner of her royal bedroom.  
He had kind eyes and hands  
and was a friend of sorrow.  
Thus they were married.  
After all he had compromised her. (*Transformations* 93-99)

This colloquial, contemporary take on the tale of "The Frog Prince" both provides direct interpretations of the symbols of the story and platforms for indirectly suggesting underlying meaning. The line "Frog is my father's genitals" is brazen and explicit, yet how this significance fits into the narrative of the traditional tale is not followed through. That line seems to be there to add another layer of meaning, on top of her implication of the marriage and of sexual acts as tricks to bind women into roles they do not desire. The hated frog is thus multifarious, and able to be used by a reader with parallel individual experiences as a symbol for a figure in her life. This connection happens to the end of the reader identifying with the tale, but also to the end of acknowledging the heinous aspects of it, providing relief in that and in Sexton's empathy and affinity to her experience.

We know from her letters that Sexton sought connection through her writing; she cherished reaching others, helping them not feel so alone.<sup>5</sup> In the poem “Iron Hans,” we see her further using Grimm’s characters to link mentally ill people as discarded by a “you,” accusing, informing, and establishing solidarity with her readers (depending upon their own experiences):

Take a woman talking,  
purging herself with rhymes,  
drumming words out like a typewriter,  
planting words in you like grass seed.  
You’ll move off.

.....  
Take a man in a cage  
wetting his pants,  
beating on that crib,  
breaking his iron hands in two.  
And you’ll move off.

.....  
Without Thorazine,  
or benefit of psychotherapy  
Iron Hans was transformed.  
No need for Master Medical;  
no need for electroshock—  
merely bewitched all along.  
Just as the frog who was a prince.  
Just as the madman his simple boyhood.

When I was a wild man,  
Iron Hans said,  
I tarnished all the world.  
I was the infector.  
I was the poison breather.

---

5. To Maggie Thomas, May 27, 1973, she writes:

So far I’m keeping alive, but it is like swimming in oatmeal. I don’t know if I’m known or unknown. All that matters is writing the poem. Being known is not so great as one might think, although I can remember wanting it desperately, darkly, deeply. I really only wanted to reach out. That’s all I ever meant to do.  
(Letters to correspondents, 1963-1974, Box 36, Folder 4)

And to Peggy O’Connor, June 11, 1973—a woman who was a stranger to Sexton: “I’m with you. I will always be with you. My poetry is a reaching out, and our hands do touch. You are twenty, and I am forty-four. Still, now all is confusion, but I struggle and fight, and you must too” (Letters to correspondents, 1963-1974, Box 36, Folder 4).

I was a professional,  
but you have saved me  
from the awful babble  
of that calling. (*Transformations* 44; 45; 50-1)

Her own experience rests just behind the surface of her stanzas—that or the experience of friends she had, such as Robert Lowell—who also suffered from mental illness. Her proximity to the reader is never closer in this poem than when she describes the writing woman in the first quoted stanza, and then in the final stanza, when she merges with Iron Hans in the conflation of magic, mental illness, and the calling of a writer’s life. She is telling us, indirectly, of her own writing process; and perhaps that she wishes to some degree that she could be “saved” from producing what she considers cathartic, infectious, “awful babble,” and could emerge into lucidity. By slipping from the example of Iron Hans to that of herself as a subject in the tale, she also suggests the multiplicity of the occurrences of mental illness (as in the multifariousness of the frog as symbol), and related occurrences in others, welcoming them into her poem and also requiring their solidarity. By using herself as an instance and example, she moves inductively into suggesting the widespread nature of her own experience. As such, her scope is at once “partial” (one instance), “local” (related to herself), and “diffuse” (applicable and representative on a large scale) (DeKoven 25). In slipping into and out of her own example, as well, Sexton projects the difficulty of speaking on such a topic, leading her writing to fall within Triviani’s “withholding” and “incomplete” qualifications of confessionality.

Other than uncertainty, what Sexton achieves confessionally and relationally in her 1971 collection is an intentionality in tone. Her stripping of language “to the colloquial bone” constitutes an interaction with her readership that is unprecedented for her (and which I explore in more detail in Chapter 2); more frank and honest here, she obtains a more popular tinge, more



accessible—an effect interestingly bolstered through her refunctioning of popular tales with their own memorable and instructive capacities (Ostriker *Writing*, 65). The impetus for *Transformations* is never identified, though the poet was happy and busy while writing it, and aware of its anomaly within her oeuvre (Letters to correspondents, 1963-74, Box 36, Folder 5). This effective breakthrough into popular and socio-political representation is not sustained by Sexton past the early 70s. The work of *Transformations* did alter her writing without question, though her later books, according to Ostriker, “return to a predominantly autobiographical mode. But they are bolder in language, formally more experimental, and readier to challenge convention, than any of her earlier work” (*Writing* 71). A study of the implications and influences of *Transformations* for other writers would be an interesting path to explore in future scholarship.

### **Urondo’s Poetry**

Like Sexton, Urondo did not live much longer than the early 1970s, and so we do not have the opportunity to observe repercussions of the developments from this literary moment on their own later work. But significant changes happened within his oeuvre during this period: even though Benedetti produced an entire article revolving around Urondo’s hope (“Paco Urondo, constructor de optimismos,” 1977), we can track his shifting (diminishing) hopefulness in successive collections from the 1960s and 70s. In the years of his final work, there is a distinct negativity in the form of resignedness and sadness, and in certain poems he even prophesizes his death at the hands of the Argentine state in 1976. In his early career, he displayed surrealist techniques and short, abstracted lines, and his revolutionary hope was quite evident. Even in his 1964 collection *Nombres* [*Names*], where his poetic descriptions begin to accrue more tangibility

and detail, he treats a revolutionary future (and poetry's role in achieving it) as possible. In "Peppermint" (from *Nombres* [*Names*]), dedicated to Gelman, he writes, "no cantan / los que nunca conocieron una esperanza" 'they don't sing / those who never knew a hope,' as if singers and poets were suffused with positivity and the potential for effecting change (*Obra poética* 154). But in his subsequent collection, *Del otro lado* [*From the Other Side*—recognized by the Casa de las Americas prize committee in 1967—Urondo pushes forward into socio-political commentary, with an indignant and proud and sad tone, acknowledges the tenuousness of his position as a poet:

Si ustedes lo permiten,  
prefiero seguir viviendo.

Después de todo y de pensarlo bien, no tengo  
motivos para quejarme o protestar:

siempre he vivido en la gloria: nada  
importante me ha faltado.

Es cierto que nunca quise imposibles; enamorado  
de las cosas de este mundo con inconsciencia y dolor y miedo y apremio.

.....  
Puedo hablar y escuchar la luz  
y el color de la piel amada y enemiga y cercana.

Tocar el sueño y la impureza,  
nacer con cada temblor gastado en la huida.

Tropiezos heridos de muerte;  
esperanza y dolor y cansancio y ganas.

Estar hablando, sostener  
esta victoria, este puño; saludar, despedirme.

Sin jactancias puedo decir  
que la vida es lo mejor que conozco. (295-297)

If you, sirs, would permit it,  
I prefer to continue living.

After everything and having thought it over, I have  
no motives to be angry, to complain:

I have always lived happily: I never  
lacked anything necessary.

It's true I never wanted the impossible, enamored  
of the things of this world easily, with pain, with fear, with urgency.

.....  
I can speak and listen to the light  
and color of the skin of a lover and an enemy and a close friend.

I can touch dreams and impurities,  
begin anew with each tremor of ascent.

With setbacks that have been themselves mortally wounded;  
with hope and pain and weariness and will.

I can be speaking, sustain  
this victory, this fist: and salute, and bid farewell.

Without reservation I can say  
that life is the best that I know.

Urondo's stance here in "La pura verdad" ("The Plain Truth") is set against an abusive power structure, yet transcends infighting and pessimism by focusing on the generative and valuable aspects of life, reduced plainly. Hernán Fontanet comments that *Del otro lado* [*From the Other Side*] embodies both an introspection and a social awareness, which are confessionalist techniques that carry Urondo into his direct and relational poetics of the 1970s:

The work was comprised of four differentiated thematic parts. The first was a notable and successful effort by Urondo to maintain a poetic corpus devoid of the influence of Juan L. Ortiz and Pablo Neruda, the two most "unavoidable" poets of the time.... The second was a reflection upon his own identity, which at this stage of his poetry attains, according to a majority of his critics, a level of important maturity. The third was a presence of a social conscience that is expressed with intensity and firm conviction, along with Urondo's

premonitory intuition about his tragic end. Finally, there was the manifestation of a poetry that was emotional, honest and introspective. (*The Unfinished Song* 87)

By 1969 (in *Son memorias [They Are Memories]*) Urondo's skepticism is prevalent:

“Aquí nadie / tiene derecho a distraerse, / a estar asustado, a rozar / la indignación, a exclamar su sorpresa” ‘Here, no one / has the right to be distracted, / to be frightened, to feign / indignation, to exclaim their surprise’ (382). Only in his poetry from the 1970s, however, does he accrue the directness and communicative quality that placed his poetry into clearer political purpose—and a sense of himself functioning within the historical and socio-political moment. Distinct from his earlier work, this limited-utopian production is more constrained and skeptical in its hope, and more strongly linked from the personal to the multitudinous. In “Solicitada” (“Solicited”) (from *Poemas postumos [Posthumous Poems]*), he writes:

Siempre los poetas fueron, en efecto, hombres  
de transición, Roberto  
Fernández Retamar

.....

Esos bostezos, esa gente,  
son poemas de transición, mi querido Roberto; esas furias  
en efecto, estas maneras violentas de caminar hacia el vacío: este  
tiempo siempre estuvo plagado; y si no hay  
transiciones, habrá que señalar el fin de estos mundos  
hostiles y movedizos, dar  
los trompetazos y salir corriendo del campo de juego, entre  
pedradas –seguramente– y pedorretas: será ese, a pesar  
de todos los años de espera y anuncios, un dato bastante impopular;  
una mala noticia, un poco tremendista como el mismo Apocalipsis.

.....

Una sola ráfaga del tiempo pasado,  
pronunciada sílaba por sílaba, acto por acto. En  
el revuelo, debajo de los primeros terrones,  
vengo a ofrecer la inutilidad  
de mi derrota, abrir el desquite  
sobre la muerte (esa pre-dicción, gritar)  
una victoria abierta como el pasado que vendrá  
como mi vida que no me pertenece

en tanto que es ajena—otros se han apropiado, a  
otros se la debo—y común al grueso del destino.

.....  
Y la historia de la alegría no será  
privativa, sino de toda la pendencia  
de la tierra y su aire, su espalda y su perfil, su tos y su risa. Ya no soy  
de aquí; apenas me siento una memoria  
de paso. Mi confianza se apoya en el profundo desprecio  
por este mundo desgraciado. Le daré  
la vida para que nada siga como está. (456-57)

Poets were always, effectively, men  
of transition, Roberto  
Fernández Retamar

.....  
Those yawns, those masses,  
are poems of transition, my dear Roberto; those furies,  
essentially, these violent methods of walking toward the void—this  
time was always plagued—and if there are no  
transitions, it will be necessary to signal the end of these hostile  
and restless worlds, sound  
the trumpets and leave running from the playing field beneath  
the thrown rocks—surely—and blown raspberries: it will be, despite  
all the years of waiting and warning, a fairly unpopular fact;  
a piece of bad news, a little alarmist, like the Apocalypse itself.

.....  
One single gust of history,  
pronounced syllable by syllable, act by act. In  
the commotion, beneath the first clods,  
I come to offer the uselessness  
of my defeat, to open revenge  
over death (that pre-speech, the scream),  
a victory wide like the past that will come forth,  
like my life that doesn't belong to me  
as long as it's foreign—others have appropriated it, to  
others I owe it—and common to the thickness of destiny.

.....  
And the history of happiness will not  
be exclusive, but will belong to all of the quarrelling  
earth and its air, its back and its profile, its cough and its laugh. I am no longer  
from here; I hardly feel I am a memory  
in passing. My confidence balances on a profound disdain

for this disgraceful world. I will give  
my life so that nothing continues as it is.

Urondo appears as a narrator in discourse with the writer and critic Fernández Retamar. As a subject in his poem, he is also a critic of the times, a character being taunted, and a spokesperson and servant to the masses. Even while defending poetry's foothold in historical progress, here he writes that the failure of the huge ideological project, to which he and Fernández Retamar belonged and that was founded upon progress, would really be un consequential, undermining it, yet nonetheless devoting himself to it. Urondo directly asserts his skepticism in the phrase "este tiempo siempre estuvo plagado" 'this time was always plagued.' By exposing his doubts with his use of sad humor, he establishes himself as a more vulnerable and relatable narrator, and asks if the reader is also willing to make great sacrifices.

One of the crucial aspects of "Solicitada" ("Solicited") is how it exposes the poet's mind at work, as Franco notes is integral to a making-visible of poetic process that was becoming common in mid- to late-twentieth-century Latin American poetics, and which I argue is a crucial method of providing readerly access. Urondo visits and revisits the apocalyptic moment, in which individual acts are squandered and the necessity of collective action is established; victory's path through language opens; and destiny and history are called into question for their instructive qualities as the present is condemned. This insistence is productive, as the poet's approaches to the critique he is offering must be precise and also preserve rhetorical effectiveness. He incorporates multiple images and metaphors, along the way showing his own exasperation with the contemporary present, its complexity, and his own insufficiency as an actor in it—though his surety in his stance about it models an attitude for the reader (along with modeling and inviting attempts to grasp the implications of the present). Such showing itself

serves as commentary and constitutes part of this poet's ideology of solidarity, something I explore more in Chapter 4.

### **Rich's Poetry**

Rich has provided extensive commentary on the ethic of poetry and its socio-political function, as in her collection of essays, *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*. She attempts to converge in her poems the two imperatives she cites from the poet Muriel Rukeyser, though “[she does] not find it easy”; “not separating dream from history,” combining the poetry of ‘unverifiable fact’ and ‘documentary fact’” (*What Is Found* 21). We hardly see her struggle; rather, in her early-1970s poetry, she, like Sexton, acquires a brazen tone, demanding acknowledgment. Claire Keyes writes of the politics of Rich's poetry: “For her, being a woman and a poet brings into conflict the states of power and powerlessness, forcing new definitions of power, new possibilities for women, and profound repercussions for society” (4). Rich designed a poetics around a new hegemony where experiences of women and homosexuals were central.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, recalling DeKoven, Rich performs a skeptical, displaced poetics, questioning the present and her role in it, as did Urondo, and similarly holding utopia at bay (DeKoven 25). In “The Phenomenology of Anger” of *Diving into the Wreck* (1971) she pieces together sharp visuals to enforce the urgency of her topic and to enact her criticism of its fact:

Madness. Suicide. Murder.  
Is there no way out but these?  
The enemy, always just out of sight  
snowshoeing the next forest, shrouded  
in a snowy blur, abominable snowman

---

6. Adrienne Rich entered her Jewishness purposefully into her writing as a personal and proud element that, in its utterance, became a move against invisibility in addition to her speaking the unspeakables of female and lesbian reality. Too, Gelman's Ukrainian Jewish roots were converted in his poetry into a cultural tool and further weapon to assert strength and identity in his work.

—at once the most destructive  
and most elusive being  
gunning down the babies at My Lai  
vanishing in the face of confrontation.  
The prince of air and darkness  
computing body counts, masturbating  
in the factory  
of facts. (*Later Poems* 19)

Her images and commentary texture her poem interestingly, and her tone of anger drives it toward unity as it spins to include contemporary socio-political facts like international hostility and the failures and corruption of reportage and memory production. But her poems were not always so expansive nor emotionally vulnerable. In the title poem of *Necessities of Life* (1966), she writes: “Soon / practice may make me middling-perfect, I’ll // dare inhabit the world / trenchant in motion as an eel, solid // as a cabbage-head. I have invitations: / a curl of mist steams upward // from a field, visible as my breath, / houses along a road stand waiting // like old women knitting, breathless / to tell their tales” (*Collected* 206). Her confession is only a personal one, here; she has not yet submerged into relationality and witness. Her desire to do so, to listen and convey stories in solidarity, is clearly laid out, and grows in future collections. In “For a Russian Poet” (*Leaflets*, 1969), she identifies her relational desire with more urgency: “this year we both / sit after dark with the radio / unable to read, unable to write // trying the blurred edges of broadcasts / for a little truth, taking a walk before bed / wondering what a man can do, asking that / at the verge of tears in a lightning-flash of loneliness” (*Collected* 300-301). These thoughts of the poet’s emerge in a voice that is cohesive, coherent, and even, much more metered than the lines from “The Phenomenology of Anger.” There, the syntax fractures in the first two cited lines, which are punctuated fragments; when “abominable snowman” is used in the sentence as an adjective; and with the lack of a conjunction and line break before “vanishing.” The internal



rhyme is abrasive, especially at the end of the stanza with the sardonic pairing of “factory” and “facts.” She moves from generalizations (“madness”; “enemy”) into metaphors (abominable snowman) and the example of My Lai, reminiscent of the techniques in Urondo and in Sexton.

Beyond her personal political agenda, there is another factor that could have strongly influenced Rich’s expansion in socio-political consciousness. She had begun translating from the Dutch with a Bollingen Foundation grant as early as 1962. She published these translations within *Necessities of Life* (1966), and in her next collection, *Leaflets* (1969), there is a clear transition to narrating her growing consciousness that is explored consistently throughout *The Will to Change* (1971) and *Diving into the Wreck* (1973).<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Gelman undertook multiple pseudo-translations, writing within invented personas in (*Los poemas de Sydney West* [*The Poems of Sydney West*] and *Cólera buey* [*Oxen Rage*], and then of both historical and invented characters in *Fábulas* [*Fables*]; he himself has acknowledged how such work in persona helped him emerge from a negative intimism into Brechtian estrangement, which Franco defines as “laying bare the social structure which determines daily life” (Benedetti *Los poetas*, 229) (Franco 78). If anything, these practices in empathy fueled the power of these poets in seeking to establish connection with their readers in their poems confessionally.

## Gelman’s Poetry

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7. Rich was actually the person who solicited translations by Sexton from the Afrikaans of the South African poet Ingrid Jonker. Rich wrote in 1967, “there are some beautiful poems there, very personal, very direct, at their best very powerful. [Y]ou would make an ideal translator for her—it seems to me a real affinity... I think you’d get her tone marvelously” (Letters to correspondents, 1963-74, Box 25, Folder 2). Sexton took some convincing, but she did end up finding the task to be not boring, and Jonker to be bold (Letters to correspondents, 1963-74, Box 30, Folder 6). We can see how this exercise in which Sexton had to engage with the techniques of this similarly confessional poet may have shifted her own technique: Nearly mythical, perhaps Jonker’s poetry—or coming to know the plights of a poet who had been previously unknown to Sexton—motivated the breadth of address in *Transformations*.

Like Urondo, Rich, and Sexton, in the early 1970s Gelman arrives at a poetic voice very colloquial but still lyrical, as he had been practicing since he began writing poetry (and especially as part of the group *El pan duro*, highly influenced by César Vallejo and Raúl González Tuñón) (Montanaro 136). This arrival is a product of his own development, but responds to the events of his contemporary present. In the poem “XXXII” of *Cólera buey* [*Oxen Rage*], as with Sexton, or Rich, there is an acknowledgment of socio-political ill—the good and the bad—and a consideration of history’s record. Here as in Urondo’s pre-1970s work, there resides a skeptical hope for revolution:

eternamente perseguido por ti  
o persiguiéndote paso  
los días malos y los buenos contemplo

el bello cielo sé  
que no cesarán los astros ni  
las aventuras con los astros después  
que mis ojos se apaguen y

ya no se oigan los ruidos de tu cuerpo  
y la Revolución siga avanzando  
y retrocediendo  
exactamente como

nosotros nuestro amor  
y todo haya terminado menos  
el sol el mal el bien otros amores y  
lo que fue de nosotros (*Oxen Rage* 244)

eternally pursued by you  
or pursuing you I spend  
days good and bad I contemplate

the pretty sky I know  
that the stars won’t cease nor  
the journeys with the stars after  
my eyes close and

the sounds of your body are no longer heard  
and the Revolution continues onward  
and backward  
exactly like

us our love  
and everything has ended except  
the sun the bad the good other loves and  
what became of us

Like in “Solicitada” (“Solicited”) or “La pura verdad” (“The Plain Truth”), the Gelman-as-subject in the poem identifies his helplessness and insufficiency as an individual, swept along by history. Here, though, Gelman seems to both choose love over revolution and to argue that one must step from solitude into solidarity. Notable in this poem—though others in the collection were more radical with punctuation and grammar—is the relative evenness and logic of the syntax, like with Rich’s cited poems written before 1970. In comparison, Gelman’s collection *Fábulas* [*Fables*] is much more strained in voice and in imagination, perhaps an effect that was heightened because of its intentionally uncomfortable containment (uncomfortable for musicality and the economy of the content) in nine-syllable lines:

“joaquin joaquin” gritaba el monstruo  
persiguiendo a la monstrea la  
noche que lo hizo perfecto  
o le dio la respiración  
pero no pasado completo  
padre buenito o cruel o madre  
llena de frío o calor  
o sea una infancia propiamente  
y aunque eso tenga sus ventajas  
(a falta de niñez los monstruos  
nunca harán versos por ejemplo)  
el monstruo de joaquin jadeaba  
detrás de todo lo que fue  
noche o pedazo de calor  
caído del pecho o catre donde

joaquín cogía con el olvido

oh bello joaquín oh bello  
diseminándose otra vez  
con un día más y un día menos  
para la revolución  
de la que no vio más que el suelo  
donde iba a venir y quedarse

.....  
sólo una noche paró el monstruo:  
fue cuando varios olvidados  
resolvieron como joaquín  
que todas las vidas del mundo  
les pesaban más que la propia (*Anunciaciones 52-53*)

“joaquín joaquín” screamed the monster  
pursuing the female monster the  
night that made him perfect  
or that gave him breath  
but not a complete past  
good or cruel father or mother  
full of cold or heat  
or rather a rightful infancy  
and though that has its advantages  
(lacking childhood the monsters  
will never create verses for example)  
joaquín’s monster panted  
behind everything that was  
night or piece of heat  
fallen from the chest or cot where  
joaquín fucked oblivion

oh beautiful joaquín oh beautiful  
disseminating himself again  
with one day more and one day less  
for the revolution  
from which he saw nothing but the floor  
where he went to arrive and stay  
.....  
just one night he stopped the monster:  
it was when various forgotten  
decided like joaquín

that all the lives of the world  
weighed more than their own

Joaquín, the invented character, is representative of readers who were similarly pursued by a sinister, sneaking, elusive monster (just like Rich's snowman always out of sight) and squandered by unfeeling relations and oblivion. He is also a part of Gelman; the poet's window into this imagined world betrays his own access to that experience. But where before, in "XXXII," there is a marked sense of inevitability to the poet's commentary on the wash of history and the uselessness of the individual, here as an Argentine/South American fable the lesson is ominous.

As Eduardo Chirinos writes of Gelman's fictional characters in the collection *Fábulas* [*Fables*], the Argentine poet "los convierte en seres aquejados por las mismas miserias que sufre cualquier lector" (178) "converts them into being afflicted with the same miseries that any reader suffers"; just as Sexton uses Rapunzel or Briar Rose or Snow White. With the newness of the texture of experience in his collection, Gelman radicalizes poetry's capabilities for incorporating collective experience:

[S]e deja conmover por la patología de estos melancólicos obsesionados por organizar el mundo y extrae de ellos una lección para su quehacer poético y un modelo para su obra. Es como si...nos advirtiera que la poesía no puede (ni debe) organizar enciclopédicamente el mundo, pero puede aspirar a registrarlo...para hacerlo más habitable. (Chirinos 190-91)

He lets himself be moved by the pathology of these melancholic characters obsessed with organizing the world and extracts from them a lesson for his poetic task and a model for his work. It is as if he were advising us that poetry cannot (nor should it) encyclopedically organize the world, but it can aspire to registering it to make it more habitable.

Gelman's poetry thus offers a commentary on control, as a result: he shows that totalitarian aspirations are futile even at the level of language, and that poetry can offer a break from that via

points of ever-evolving relation for readers, just as Sexton “flamboyantly [laid] bare” processes of connection for her readers—and as Benedetti observed about many poets writing contemporaneously to these two (their “persistent intention to arrive at the bone”) (Gill “Textual Confessions” 66) (Benedetti *Los poetas*, 13). This confessional writing, in its revolutionary style, advocates individual meaning-making.

In his later collections, even more radical breakage ensues to pair with this poet’s growing sense of urgency and implication in the worsening Argentine context. In this sense, Gelman enters into the most radical form seen from this set of four poets, the closest stylistic reflection of the rupture of his socio-political experience—that would increase in 1976 with the Dirty War and the disappearances of Gelman’s son and pregnant daughter-in-law, after which the poet fractured his lines with numerous slashes and increased his urgent tone, in addition to utilizing the multiple questions we see already present below. His progression into further poetic rupturing later in the 1970s not only corresponds in form with the awful nature of Gelman’s losses, but likely also with his writing from exile. That distance enacts certain changes upon poetics. In *Relaciones [Relations]*, Gelman writes the poem “Cartas” (“Letters”), showing early poetic ruptures:

entre tus brazos y mis brazos ¿es como si hubiese una  
tela de fuerzas contrarias perros célebres vientos una tela de amor donde  
alguien avisa que las bestias estaban en algún lugar de la oscuridad  
coceando sombras coceando impacientes o como ciegas

o ciegas de verdad o sin ojos? ¿o una tela  
donde la camarada escribe “el día 20 de abril a las 20:05 nació  
el chiquito que esperé cuidé defendí tanto tiempo contra” escribe  
contra la oscuridad que está en algún lugar de las bestias

.....  
“sus ojitos no se abrían ni lo harían jamás” escribe  
actalectasia pulmonar hemorragias dijeron los médicos “los  
golpes la picana la violación la cárcel de su madre” escribe

el niño “fue testigo y mártir de la causa y héroe” escribe? ¿o una tela de amor

donde tanto dolor ya durmió bastante y quiere  
saber dónde están los caballos?

.....  
el que vivió cuatro días ¿no es  
un caballo para derrotar al enemigo? ¿no convirtió sus  
manitas en un caballo para derrotar al enemigo? ¿no está  
galopando o corriendo ahora entre tus brazos y mis brazos amada?  
.....  
¿así chirrían los goznes oxidados de nuestra gracia? (*Interrupciones 1 56*)

between your arms and my arms is it as if there were  
a fabric of clashing forces dogs celebrated winds a fabric of love where  
someone warns that the beasts were in some place of darkness  
sewing shadow sewing impatient or like blind things

or blind to truth or without eyes? or a fabric  
where the comrade writes “on the 20th of April at 8:05 a boy  
was born whom I waited cared defended so long against” she writes  
against the darkness that’s in some place where the beasts  
.....  
“his little eyes didn’t open nor would they again” she writes  
atelectasis collapsed lungs hemorrhages said the doctors “the  
beatings the electric prod the rape his mother’s cell” she writes  
the child “was a witness and martyr of the cause and a hero” she writes? or a fabric of  
love

where such pain has slept enough and wants  
to know where are the horses?

.....  
he who lived 5 days is he  
not a horse for defeating the enemy? did his little hands  
not turn into a horse for defeating the enemy? is it not  
galloping or running now between your arms and mine my love?  
.....  
do the rusted hinges of our grace screech in that way?

Gelman, here, asks the reader to consider what to make of the death of the child, re-evaluating  
the ideological project of the Argentine left and, like Rich, of the role reportage plays on the

memory of events. His style—of questions pulsing forward, lines repeated with difference—is insistent and pained. But the pain is not just at this child’s death or his mother’s torture: he pushes the reader to consider the whole trajectory of national events that have been kept in darkness, and how an acknowledgment and memory of instances of state terror might illuminate and counter that obscurity.

The engagement of the reader in considering how facts and truthful language can serve to create socio-political change is wrapped up in the lyricism all of these poems: there are beautiful leaps and images, distinct tones, and rhymes that deliver the meaning of each piece. Documentation, narration, lyric, and direct and indirect methods of presenting historical and emotional experience here are combined in the effort to draw the reader into the text, as they are in differing balances within the poetry of Urondo, Rich, and Sexton. Their techniques—Sexton’s tentativeness, Urondo’s skepticism, Rich’s fracturing, and Gelman’s invitations for individual meaning-making—position readers to discover access points for realizing the relation of their own experiences to the text and to detect the poet’s empathetic, solidarity-seeking stances. There is a renunciation of control involved in inviting readers to the site of confession that requires the readers to be conscious, thinking citizens in relation, aware of a greater shared experience—but also requires them to value their experiences and identities as individuals. Glissant calls this aspect of relation the possibility “to be both solidary and solitary” (131). The access points each poet provides to this end are accompanied by steadying assertions that locate and guide the reader to the experience in question, and depending on the poem, with more or less contextualizing information. The poetry, certainly, was resistant and sharp in its inclusion of socio-political details that were, essentially, taboo, not information considered openly in public



consciousness. In daring to speak these truths and to ask readers to participate in that daring, the confessional poetry project's agenda was decidedly political.

### **The Politics and Purposes of the Mode**

Noting the new lucidity born of historical circumstances that have moved beyond initial shock, and how poetry moved into intentioned communication about reality in the 1960s, Urondo expanded upon the nature of the literary production from authors who were politically committed:

La única particularidad que se podría advertir en la poesía actual es que ésta, al pertenecer a un mundo que ha sufrido y padece, pero que también ha ido obteniendo alguna experiencia, ve con mayor claridad los problemas que aquejan su tiempo. Este mayor grado de lucidez (que la diferencia de su pasado) le exige mayores responsabilidades y por lo tanto, da un contenido fundamentalmente ético a la poesía contemporánea. (Fontanet *Francisco Urondo*, 140)

The only distinction that can be noticed in the poetry of today is that, in pertaining to a world that has suffered and endures, but that has also been accumulating some experience, it sees with greater clarity the problems that trouble its time. This greater degree of lucidity (that differentiates it from its past) demands greater responsibilities and therefore gives a fundamentally ethical content to contemporary poetry.

Underlying this quote from Urondo are a few more of DeKoven's adjectives—"egalitarian," "complicit"—in the responsibility he notes in the "poetry of today" to experiences of suffering (DeKoven 25; 290). Another factor DeKoven notes in limited-utopian writing of the 1970s in the United States is the popular, which comes hand-in-hand with the colloquialization of diction in both nation's poetic language and with the breadth of address of these core poets, and which is resoundingly acknowledged by Urondo and by critics of poetry in his vein. Ana Porrúa writes of Urondo's poetry, also applicable to his contemporaries, "Además, continúa con el proceso de desmitificación de la figura del poeta, que se presentará como 'un hombre común'" "Moreover, it

continues with the process of demythologizing the figure of the poet, who will be presented as “a common man” (309). This popular element is of course not new to Argentine or greater American poetics in the 1970s: for instance, *testimonio*’s popular-common positioning of narration also counteracted the figure of the ‘great writer’ that had been established by the Latin American *boom* (Beverley 13). What Porrúa notes about the positioning of the poet in Urondo’s poetry is precisely the ability of the poet to convey his personal experience and situate it within that of multitudes. Urondo’s poetry and that of the poems during this period examined in my dissertation placed alluded and communicated fact into a receivable, transportable form that could then help others understand the plight at base and learn to recognize it in themselves and in others.

Audience access, which I explore more in Chapter 2, is essential to the formation of these poetics which increasingly sought to represent and connect with fellow sufferers, incorporating address and diction that was more relatable. As Franco claims in her article “From Modernization to Resistance: Latin American Literature 1959-1976,” the writing of this period “allows active participation in a process of political learning” (94). And Fonet, that “las nuevas formas presuponían al nuevo público un lector consciente y exigente, capaz de ver en la subversión formal el modelo literario de una subversión más profunda” ‘the new forms presupposed of the new public a conscious and exigent reader, capable of seeing in the subversion of form the literary model of a deeper subversion’ (72). Socio-political instruction, it follows, is integral to the Argentine literature of this time, as is finding ways to address a public that was perhaps ignorant or oblivious to the perspectives on specific national socio-political circumstances and the prescriptions of the literary-intellectual left. With Rich’s and Sexton’s

appeals for connection in the United States via the recognition of shared experience, such a critical, analytical, and instructive stance from the poets could also be seen.

The instruction of confessionalism, as I explore in more detail in chapters 2 and 4, is enveloped in an extension of solidarity, which these poets appear to have wished to pass on to masses of people with shared experiences; as Hannah Arendt writes, audience members turn into potential narrators (*Crises* 15) (Passerin d'Entrèves 76). If the witnessing enacted in confessionalism can accrue such a scale and promote the memory and history of victims within repressive national contexts, then the politics of the project of confessionalism is inevitable.

Jacques Rancière describes politics in his 2010 work *Dissensus* as follows:

Politics is commonly viewed as the practice of power or the embodiment of collective wills and interests and the enactment of collective ideas. Now, such enactments or embodiments imply that you are taken into account as subject sharing in a common world. Politics is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience way of being, doing, speaking. (10)

The new hegemony attempted in this limited-utopian period in literature was accordingly politicized, both in an oppositional way and affirming of the breadth of cognizance these confessional poets desired their audiences to share in. Too, the relationality of the poetics supports its characterization as political as per Rancière. The confessional poets sought a new collective order of acknowledgment and empathy.

As argued here, the techniques of the poetic mode, themselves, can be read as radical. In confessional poetry, documentation merged with lyric for greater efficacy; for both elements have persuasive and memorable and subversive qualities, necessary for political effect. In his book *Theory of the Lyric*, Jonathan Culler discusses the resistance inherent to the nature of lyrical poetry as it incorporates musicality:

Song has always ministered to pleasure more than industry, and often has been a form of resistance to the political organization of life; and as the written version of song, lyric operates in the same fashion, but with greater verbal artistry and precision. Readers' encounters with anomalous verbal combinations, along with the kinetic effects of rhythm, offer a challenge to homogenized experience. Like song, lyric can work subliminally to these ends, enlisting its readers and performers in language processes that are not determined by communicational efficiency and propositional meaning but memorability, ceremoniousness, harmony, charm. Lyric language doubtless works subliminally, and much of its social efficacy may depend on its ability to embed itself in the mind of readers, to invade and occupy it, to be taken in, introjected, or housed as instances of alterity that can be repeated, considered, treasured, or ironically cited. (305)

Culler points out that this potential of lyric proffers it a socio-political function, when a reader accesses and must then interpret that music. Sound and musicality offer a plane upon which understanding and information can be transferred, even at odds with the message of the content of a poem. This access is not at odds with documentation, and the two together—specific, unequivocal information alongside information that must be deduced in the silences the poem preserves (as Travisano argues convincingly that confessional poetry possesses) along with its imaginative elements—can create a hybrid political poem that slips convincingly from individual experience to the large-scale.

As we have seen in the examples of the core poets' work above, moments of vulnerability, commentary, discursivity, and representation place this confessional poetics in a ready position to resist the repressive homogenies, political and social, of Argentina and the United States. Other critics see greater rebelliousness in different modes:

For Marcuse, however, the avant-garde is more fully imbued with resistant negativity. Only the avant-garde can occupy this position of refusal because it must entail the communication of "the break with communication": "the word [in avant-garde literature] refuses the unifying, sensible rule of the sentence. It explodes the pre-established structure of meaning and, becoming an "absolute object" itself, designates an intolerable, self-defeating universe—a discontinuum. (DeKoven 41)

The identifiable applicability of this poetics to groups of people with particular experiences is questionable, however (one can think of the complexity of socio-political signification of Gertrude Stein's poems, for instance). Footholds in clarity are necessary, the confession must be relatable, the poems must be transportable. As I write of Gelman, his poetic development into fractured presentations of fraught experience perhaps most reflects the difficulty of his reality, and this plays into the "resistant negativity" discussed just above; but what he wrote of, his referents, are importantly able to be located in his poetry.

On an even broader level of consideration of the radical nature of poetry, Octavio Paz, Theodor Adorno, and other critics of the genre of poetry recognize its positioning within social and political systems as one of peculiar power because of its alternativeness.<sup>8</sup> Paz wrote, in his 1989 essay "La otra voz" ("The Other Voice"):

Poesía: piedra de escándalo de la modernidad. Entre la revolución y la religión, la poesía es *la otra voz*. Su voz es *otra* porque es la voz de las pasiones y las visiones; es de otro mundo y es de este mundo, es antigua y es de hoy mismo, antigüedad sin fechas. Poesía herética y cismática, poesía inocente y perversa, límpida y fangosa, aérea y subterránea, poesía de la eremita y del bar de la esquina, poesía al alcance de la mano y siempre de un más allá que está aquí mismo. (81-2) (emphases in original)

Poetry: scandalous stone of modernity. Between revolution and religion, poetry is *the other voice*. Its voice is *other* because it is the voice of passions and visions; it is of another world and it is of this world, it is ancient and of today, antiquity without dates. Poetry is heretical and schismatic; innocent and perverse, clean and muddy, airy and earthly; of the hermit of the bar and the corner; at arm's reach and always of an elsewhere that is right here.

Paz depends on the genre's timelessness to explain the power of its assertions, and goes on to place the definition of poetry itself within a poet's expression of that "other" voice, a claim that is interesting to consider in light of the heightened representation in poetics during and past the

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8. For Adorno's exploration of poetry's necessary alternativeness, see his chapter "On Poetry and Society" in *Noten zur Literatur* [*Notes to Literature*].

1960s in Latin America. In “La otra voz” (“The Other Voice”) Paz sees the perseverance of imagination and poetry past many individual national conflicts in the region; poetry’s survival is implicit in his claims.

Yet poetry’s success—and that of this confessional poetry, angled for reader access and change—is impossible to document, especially compared to the activism of second-wave feminism or FAR or the Montoneros group in Argentina. If this poetry executed communicative and relatable techniques, and forged a new active, cognizant, and egalitarian political hegemony, what purpose did that serve? To what end does the poet pose him or herself as an intermediary or representative? Beatriz Sarlo argues in *Tiempo Pasado* [*Past Tense*, or *Time Past*] about experience that it is inextricable from an account; that experience comes into being through its expression, its passage from one person to others, affirming Arendt’s comment on readers as narrators (Sarlo 31). There may very well be solace in the transference to a perceived audience, with potential hope that the experience, understanding, and messages of the text might be received. A writer’s audience is always integral to the act of writing: that receiving entity will place effects upon the direction and tone of any piece, and is something I explore in my next chapter.

Increasingly, into the 1970s the poet’s position—as common, as of the people, and readily accessible by the masses—grew to be more popular, renovating for the new contexts and possibilities of poetry. The popularization of the poet and poetic language, in Argentina and in the United States, extended beyond the poem as well; poets further established a proximity to their readers by reading their work aloud in public. This was a practice that more broadly, in the 1960s, “became a natural part of political movements—the black and antiwar movements, the women’s movement, the lesbian and gay movements. And that still continues. Poetry as words

spoken and heard in the community” (Montenegro 9). Rich and Sexton participated in readings with high frequency; Sexton even formed a band, “Anne Sexton and Her Kind,” in 1968 in which she performed: she would read her poems, accompanied by musical instruments.<sup>9</sup> Gelman and Urondo joined forces in readings in Buenos Aires on several occasions in 1965 and 1967. As early as 1959, they filled a small theater on the Calle la Valle; according to Horacio Verbitsky, “Juan y Paco Urondo leían sus poemas y era sorprendente que la poesía pudiera convocar a tanta gente en el Buenos Aires de fines de la década del 50. Y la palabra de Paco y de Juan nos hacía vibrar, era una poesía muy bella que hablaba el lenguaje de la vida cotidiana” ‘Juan and Paco Urondo read their poems and it was surprising that poetry could summon so many people in the Buenos Aires of the end of the decade of the 50s. And the words of Paco and of Juan made us tremble, it was a very beautiful poetry that spoke the language of daily life’ (Frieria). Of course, Gelman and Urondo also militated outside of their poetry, attending to a convergence of intellectualism and revolution that Benedetti advocated: “the man of action should be a vanguard for the intellectual, and in the sphere of art, thought, and scientific investigation, the intellectual should be a vanguard for the man of action (in Franco 83). As Gelman said in the interview with Benedetti quoted above, “No cabe duda de que con endecasílabos no vas a matar a nadie, mucho menos tomar el poder” ‘There’s no doubt that with hendecasyllables you’re not going to kill anyone, much less assume power’ (*Los poetas* 232). But, he explained, “En algunos momentos, muy particulares, el poeta y lo que él escribe, efectivamente pueden lograr un tipo de difusión, penetración y movilización” ‘In some moments, very particular, the poet and what he writes can effectively achieve a kind of diffusion, penetration, and mobilization’ (*Los poetas* 232). This

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9. Parts of *Transformations* were adapted as operas; Sexton thought that “Rapunzel” was more effective on stage.

community-congealing effect was alas not seen either in Argentina or in the United States, but these poets insisted on seeking solidarity and relation on socio-political issues nonetheless.

As I establish at the very beginning of this chapter, the socio-political worsening of the national contexts in both the US and Argentina complicated the hopes of the public and changed the way poets approached reality and their audience on the page. Beginning with Argentine President Arturo Frondizi's failed promises, governmental inefficacy, and repudiation of appeals for workers' rights, and then solidified in the Onganía dictatorship, the state's utter unwillingness to engage discourse with dissenters formed an imposed silence. Poetry became an antidote to this silencing effect, able to circulate and communicate. Rich, as well, found poetry to be powerful in an essential way in the United States context: "Precisely because of its recognitive and recollective powers it is cast aside in this country" (*What Is Found* 18).

Poetry, in its versatility, is poised in any context as a medium that can convey—can testify—to experiences like war through either sensory methods through documentation proper, inserting the language and texture of external experience by shaping it and adapting it to a poetic form. Especially when conceived against silencing forces, an assertion of voice, a manifested reaction or response or without shaping, stripped down, direct witnessing can all act as proof that harm was done and reparation and change are needed. Poetry as testament in its various forms can thus be considered a political threat, a venue in which violent reaction can transpire.

We have seen the urgency and strain and sardonic/skeptical use of language and tone in Gelman, Urondo, Rich, and Sexton. We have seen, too, how poetry itself is treated as a source for hope in its abilities to visit and recreate experience and relation. If the writing is "muted," "partial," "local," "diffuse," "multiple," "skeptical," "complicit," "displaced," "significantly



refunctioned,” “popular,” “egalitarian,” “multigenre,” “hybrid,” “transnational,” “border-crossing,” and with “wavering or roaring voices,” it invites along the reader who is anticipated as being as disillusioned; who possesses the same experiences the poets convey (25; 290). Part of the early 1970s poetry’s disillusion discussed in this chapter, though, was not just with the social or political state of Argentina or the United States, but with the public itself that did not unite to fight for the freedom from repression the poets believed in. So the poets wrote with insistence and empathetically, with hope the readers would attain their own empathy; and they wrote critically, with hope the readers would achieve an informed and broader worldview—one these poets saw as direly lacking.

## 2. The Poet as Subject and Multitudinous Self: The “I” and the Audience

The critical work on confessional poetry is consistent if only in its shakiness. It is agreed upon that confessionalism originated in the late 1950s in the United States, but past that there is too much co-opting and appropriation of the mode. It too often means something nuanced for each distinct critic, which frequently converts into a lack of depth in exploration at the level of line analysis. The technical aspects of the mode are usually passed over for substantiating arguments about the religious, sexual, psychoanalytical, or autobiographical ways of viewing confessionalism as being best; or arguments for Robert Lowell, W. D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, Randall Jarrell, or even St. Augustine of Hippo as the mode’s founder. In this chapter I delve into an analysis of poetic techniques of the confessional mode. Following my expansion of the mode to include Argentine writers contemporary to those from the United States, I explore the particular stance of the author in confessionalism, the effects of that stance, and the writing’s engagement with its audience. I thus attempt to discuss confessionalism in a way that evolves it from its stagnating, troubled status in criticism.

The self-positioning of writers as individual narrator-subjects in their poems is an important confessional construct that enacts guidance and instruction, as well as accessibility. As representatives, the confessional poets’ personal truths—the singular truths they present in a given piece—were at once intimate and multiple. These writers had a keen sense of their audiences, who were complicated: they consisted of both perpetrators and allies, people who came to the page with a memory of the truths being related there, but who also, for varying reasons, had not acted in the world to the end of resolving the repercussions of those truths. These confessional poets present that opportunity for change. Confessing thus becomes

activist—on top of its political nature, which I establish in Chapter 1—and knowledge a weapon, though this imperative is at times conveyed more subtly, which I show here and in the following chapter.

In the first section of this chapter, I engage the established definitions of confessionalism, and expose how they already do or can accommodate the facets I highlight in this dissertation. I consider Michel Foucault's conceptions of the confessional audience, and I also observe a splitting of the narrator and subject in order to make analysis and discourse possible—a technique of protection and of evasion. In the second section of the chapter I introduce the ideas encompassed in the testimonial mode and how that dovetails with and bifurcates from confessionalism. I use examples from the works of Anne Sexton, Juan Gelman, Rodolfo Walsh, and Francisco "Paco" Urondo, ranging from evasive to brazen, personal to multitudinous, and generous to accusatory. Their differences are instructive of the limits of confessionalism.

### **Sexton's Brazenness**

Many take issue with the confessionalism of Sexton and how the wildness of her poetics gels with the mode. She, too, contradicted her affiliation with confessionalists on numerous occasions (but also bought into it, once claiming she was the only confessional poet); she eschewed the autobiographical link when she classified the "I" in her poetry as a persona, when she rejected critical interpretations of her poems as referring to her, the poet, explicitly. But her tentativeness toward specificity actually makes room for more readers to connect with her text. As Jo Gill, author of *Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetics* and editor of *Modern Confessional Writing*, writes of this confessional "I" in the latter volume: "the 'I' of modern confessional writing is more complex, mutable and fluid" in comparison with the precise and direct "I"

typically assumed to signal confessionalism (7). Because of this fluidity and complexity, we can see how the positioning of the “I” alone can make the writing representative and discursive, as I show in the following examples.

Such use of the “I” is at work in the poem “Her Kind,” which Sexton would present before each of her readings; in it we can also observe the intersection of evasion with daring and brazenness. She writes:

I have gone out, a possessed witch,  
haunting the black air, braver at night;  
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch  
over the plain houses, light by light:  
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.  
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.  
I have been her kind.

I have found the warm caves in the woods,  
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,  
closets, silks, innumerable goods;  
fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves:  
whining, rearranging the disaligned.  
A woman like that is misunderstood.  
I have been her kind.

I have ridden in your cart, driver,  
waved my nude arms at villages going by,  
learning the last bright routes, survivor  
where your flames still bite my thigh  
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.  
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.  
I have been her kind. (*Selected Poems* 18)

The poem subverts Sexton’s self-association with the “I” of the text by offering two differing versions of an “I.” Narrative precision is troubled here, and to an interesting effect. Here we can begin to note the parallels that stretch between poetry and narrative, as Miranda Sherwin has argued. The “I” of the first line of each three stanzas (“I have gone out, a possessed witch;” “I

have found the warm caves in the woods;” and “I have ridden in your cart, driver”) is stricken from reality in three moves. First, there are the distancing metaphors that remove the possibility of the “I” as Sexton: that of “a possessed witch” importantly and swiftly establishes a challenge to—if not the identity—then the intimacy and accessibility of the first “I” of the poem. Then, the penultimate lines to each stanza close the description and exploration of the initiating “I” by repeating the phrase, “A woman like that.” “That,” as a demonstrative pronoun, lifts the writing from the stanza, referring to it but also summarizing it. “A woman” genders the “I” but also, as with “that,” begets generality—though singular grammatically, this could be any woman. In referencing “a woman like that,” Sexton as writer is momentarily separating the initial subject “I,” the witch, the one haunting and dreaming evil, from the narrating “I” doing the later summary and commentary work. This narrating “I” is clearest in the final line of each stanza, “I have been her kind.” The move into this narrating “I” solidifies the distinction between the narrating “I” and the subject “I,” yet preserves a wisp of a link by noting a history, if infrequent (“have been”), and a pertinence between the two (“kind”). The confusion resolves, but the splitting suggests a hesitation—indicative of the tenuousness of the poet around identifying one way or the other.

Throughout the stanzas’ lines above the complicating final two, descriptors such as “braver,” “lonely thing,” “out of mind,” “whining,” and “survivor” point to what we might expect as readers to derive from the autobiographical. They are perhaps false clues, but possess a verisimilitude and fulfill what the reader might desire to “learn,” or use to complete suspicions, about the poet. But what we know from other poems and from biographies of Sexton do not necessarily give us a special access to “Her Kind.” The poem is valuable in itself, and in how it approaches the reality of the poet. Sexton sets a trap to expose our greed: she works an

interpretable “you” into her third stanza, the driver and member of villages of people who burn and crush the initial, symbolic “I” (*Selected Poems* 18). The poem becomes a discourse with this introduction of the “you;” it further calls for meaning-making, for consideration of the subject. Critics have interpreted “Her Kind” as a poem discussing Sexton’s own writing, like I suggest about “Iron Hans” in Chapter 1. “Her Kind” can further serve, I argue, as a kind of primer for hers and all confessional poetry, instructing the “you” about confessional interaction and the issues latent in it. The “nude arms” in the poem can also stand in for Sexton’s perception of her bare and afflicted themes and topics as they appear in her poems. But the evasion, and the play—the images, the rhyme scheme—overtly remind us that her work still toes the line of the fictional. Gill acknowledges this discrepancy between the real and the constructed in Sexton’s work. She writes, “Truth and artifice are not so much equally valid as equally equivocal, and her own authority to determine such questions about her own work, her own value as a witness, are thrown into doubt” (*Anne Sexton* 445). David Yezzi takes and extends this observation to other confessional poets who, as he puts it in his essay “Confessional Poetry & the Artifice of Honesty,” “lie like truth.” Given these qualifications to the nature of confessionalism in poetry, we must consider confessional poetry as not exactly autobiography, though it is written with a necessary verisimilitude.

Indeed, critic Jeremy Tambling places the will to the autobiographical on readers: “The decision to take a text as autobiographical is a readerly one: the writer cannot impose a frame upon the text and declare that this is autobiographic and this is not” (105). Such a relocation of agency for determining the intersection of poem and reality is especially crucial in Chapter 3, where I explore indirect poetics that require greater reader participation in the unpacking of referents behind images and symbols. Tracy Brain, in her essay “Dangerous Confessions: Sylvia

Plath,” admonishes against readings of confessional work that search out any hint of autobiographical truth at all. Brain writes,

The implication of such an exercise is that the ever-confessional Sylvia Plath was too unimaginative to make anything up, or too self-obsessed to consider anything of larger historical or cultural importance.... Plath’s writing is much more than personal. She uses her poems and fiction to look at a world that extends far beyond her own skin, and invites us to look with her. (Gill *Modern*, 28)

Brain places the purpose of confessional poetry both within and outside of the personal, where the reader and the author might each find meaning for themselves. It is important to remember that as pieces of art, confessional poems function as vessels. They are of a design and voice that suggests the autobiographical; but above all, they work to establish access and representation, and leave room for their readers to participate through their individual experiences. This openness is important for the mode’s transportability.

If confessionalism constructs its verisimilitude through elements that can be viewed as fictional, where does the power and relevance of the personal lie, and what is the extent of the personal? According to Robert Phillips, the first critic to publish a book on the mode, confessional poetry “springs from the need to confess. Each poem is in some way a declaration of dependence. Or of guilt. Or of anguish and suffering. Thus, the writing of each such poem is an ego-centered, though not an egocentric, act; its goal is self-therapy and a certain purgation” (9). M. L. Rosenthal, who coined the term “confessional” in his review of Lowell’s *Life Studies* in 1959, has this to say about Lowell’s cathartic style: “Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself, and it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal” (*Our Life* 117).<sup>1</sup> Again, we

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1. Craig Svonkin identifies the following reading by Rosenthal as incorrect in his article, “From Robert Lowell to Frank Bidart: Becoming the Other; Suiciding the White Male ‘Self.’”

see shame identified as an impulse for writing. This therapeutic, cathartic element is one that has brought much critical scorn, some of which comes from Al Alvarez who preferred to select and promote a subgroup of “extremist” poets apart from the “confessional” group. The writers of “extremism,” to Alvarez, were successful despite their confessionalism and due to their control and cool. Alvarez has much valuable insight to offer into confessionalism, especially as he instructs us to break with our prior notions of it. However, his theory becomes issue-laden where he claims that such poetry spurs from an extreme inner place within the poet; a fount where experience is stored and erupts through the subconscious via art-making.

I think that in order to reconcile these definitions of confessionalism with the corrections above regarding autobiography, these ideas of “impulse” or “need” have to be re-examined. Confessionalism does not equate to a knee-jerk or inevitable production. Sexton’s evasive practices are testament to this. Instead, we might consider using language like “felt need” or, again, verisimilitude, for describing moments seemingly direct and fueled with intense or shocking, confessed information. Yezzi offers an explanation of the mode that is more in tune with the ritualistic and non-autobiographical elements that Sherwin and Gill emphasize as defining: he writes that confessionalism is identifiable by the “rawness of its address and the incorporation of guilty personal detail for emotional effect.” That guilty personal detail indicates a particular exchange, a discourse, involving shameful and unspeakable information that the author and reader might share. The “rawness,” in turn, suggests a tone—but does not preclude a critical distance which I see as necessary to the poetics central to this dissertation.

In her collection *Transformations*, Sexton’s collection least associated with the confessional mode (it is absent from most studies of her work in connection with the mode), the brazen and ashamed are also at play, but with new inclusions in the poetry of instructions for



interpreting the intimate on a broad and social scale. Though the collection purports to distribute consumable messages (per the tradition of the fairy tale), Sexton herself pointed out the depth of the personal nature of the poems in *Transformations* in a letter to Kurt Vonnegut, who introduces the book (*A Self-Portrait* 367). Phillips, even, writes of the verses and how they “at times strip the poet bare” in *The Confessional Poets*, though he renounces the poems’ association with the “confessional” term (91). On the contrary, they have much to offer for our understanding of confessionalism.

*Transformations* won the Pulitzer Prize. In it, Sexton interprets seventeen of Grimm’s fairy tales in an updated context; the references—to Joe DiMaggio, to Dior, to Thorazine—unmistakably place her contemporary voice among the lines. The alignment of the contemporary moment with the narrative present opens the possibility for Sexton as an acting and thinking presence in that contemporary moment to enter into the poem, and she does. The first assertions of a verisimilitude to the personal appear at the very beginning of the book. Amid the contemporary references in the first tale, “The Gold Key,” Sexton references herself: the first lines of the tale read, “The speaker in this case / is a middle-aged witch, me” (*Transformations* 1). Having read “Her Kind,” which did predate *Transformations*, the connection from the “witch” to Sexton (troubled in “Her Kind”) becomes even easier, more precisely clear. In themselves, the lines cited are not unequivocal confessional lines; though the descriptors “middle-aged witch” are disparaging and self-reflective, they function also, here, within the occasion and imaginary of the fairy tale.<sup>2</sup> As for her insertion of the “me,” while it is not ever imperative for a confessional author to explicitly state that she is the narrator or the subject

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2. By “imaginary” here I mean the realm painted by the image group constructed by fairy tale-related images, such as witches.

(though references to the applicability of the writing to the self, in some form, are necessary), in this collection the direction is useful, for all of the traveling between subjects and characters Sexton does later on in *Transformations*. The direction situates the tales and makes possible Sexton's treatment and exploration of herself as subject.

The instructive nature of Sexton's verse on the extradiegetic level, as with her explicative steps at the beginning of the book to self-identify ("The speaker in this case;" "me"), belongs to the poet's style, but its implications are multiple and useful to identify as contributing to the writing's purposiveness. As I have indicated in the previous chapter, it is interesting and new that Sexton performs the assertive directing that she does in *Transformations*. Other instances of this practice crop up in the collection: she at times adds the words "I'd say" within the lines of a tale. These instances suggest a number of things, narratively. The extradiegetic reminder of Sexton's presiding stance punctuates the book, giving it little returns to the world in which the reader is being written to by an author. The returns are necessary not just for providing a sense of an arc amidst the tales; but also for continually engaging the actual world, marked by social, cultural, and political thought and behavior. The self-assertion situates the work both narratively and in the present, instructing the reader to consider Sexton's self-awareness as well as her presence within her writing as contributing to the experience and information of the book. Additionally, the reader is instructed to consider the external contemporary moment as functioning to guide the information and interpretation of the book. Just in this small narrative practice, Sexton is initiating a dynamic that carries across confessional poetry.

Michel Foucault, in his first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, offers important insight into the relational makeup of confession, the first of which is his classification of confession as a ritual. Barring all questions of personal content and even of the confessant-confessor dynamic,

confession is most immediately a ritual; a mode. Thinking of it in this way allows for practice to take precedence in confessional analysis, and also amplifies the possibilities of what can be considered confessional, if at heart it is a mode (as I believe) rather than a group of certain poets.

Foucault qualifies the notion of confession as ritual of discourse. He goes on to describe confessional relation:

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile; a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated; and finally, a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation. (61-62)

I want to continue my foray into confessional relation and power relationships according to Foucault by thinking about the influence of the partner that he discusses. Instead of the partner—the reader or confessor—being simply (and necessarily) available for or demanding the confession, she represents a judging, punishing, forgiving, consoling, and reconciling entity for the writer or confessant. This placement of imagined active response upon the partner requires a certain kind of utterance or formation of information from the writer that may take the shape of seeking or daring, however brazen or shameful. Within the relationship, part of the interaction reverses direction and affects the nature of the confessional utterance.<sup>3</sup> The call, the initiating confessional utterance, becomes affected; what is chosen to be said, and how, contribute to an awareness of audience.

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3. See Jacques Derrida and J. L. Austin's theories of the speech act.

Sexton often seems to eschew intimate connection and to be brazen and assertive with the images and descriptions she includes; the nude arms in “Her Kind” have an imposing feel to them, for one. Sherwin discusses the crossover between the boastful and the confessional in Rousseau, and in this way we might also consider Sexton’s confessional poetics, as potentially an act of *jouissance* (6). She holds power over her reader, and seems to delight in wielding it, at points; this is reminiscent of the purpose of using violence in writing, as Frantz Fanon explains and which I discuss in my analysis later in this chapter. What ultimately emerges in a moment like with the waving arms is a bit of Sexton’s own vulnerability and awful admission—admission in the sense of telling, and also giving access. The reader might connect to her through a similar vulnerability.

Gill notices the malleability and complexity of confessional language in Sexton’s “Her Kind.” Here we see a complication of the potential consequences of confession as listed by Foucault; the location of the instigating force behind Sexton’s first line (“I have gone out, a possessed witch”) is slippery, so it is hard to tell what effect the poet is hoping to achieve with her utterance. In response to Sexton’s words, Gill writes,

She is proud of the madness or possession which seizes her, yet refuses to specify the source of her inspiration or, perhaps, compulsion. Is she “possessed” by madness? Or by poetry? Is her motivation the desire to write, to share, to go “out” of herself? Or, in the context of the very public, and repeated, performance of the poem, is she “possessed”—in the sense of controlled—by the expectations of her audience? (Gill *Anne Sexton*, 436)

That the utterance could be a response to an audience that sneers at madness or is frightened by it, or that, perhaps greedily, demands formalism and entertainment—this is the observation that Gill is making, all valid, all affirming Foucault’s theory. And she pushes the effect of the words into multiplicity, necessary for Sexton, who seems to promote multiple truths with her particular evasive and confessional style.

Where Sexton is direct, past her extradiegetic instruction, is in her sentence construction, her tone, her selection of detail. Again, *Transformations* has not been regarded as a particularly confessional work, but the confessional elements—the instruction, the self-insertion, the self-reflection, the particular regard for the audience, and the difficult content—are all there. And because of the popular tradition of the tales, Sexton’s confessionalism here can be brought into greater clarity as a relational form. Not stories from the fantastic, Sexton’s links to reality—whether autobiographical or in the shape of commentary on contemporary social behavior—are formed for access on multiple fronts.

In “Red Riding Hood,” Sexton establishes the theme of deception for the tale and its prologue, which she implements by mentioning it repeatedly and at key moments throughout the whole piece.<sup>4</sup> Deception is certainly identifiable enough as an element important to the popular fairy tale; the wolf masquerades as Red Riding Hood’s grandmother, only to consume the girl. Sexton tests the theme in her prologue, stretching it across scenarios she presents, it seems, as the targets of the piece, the puzzles that Red Riding Hood’s story can help resolve. Among the scenarios that follow, a woman shops at the supermarket at the suburb and readies to meet a lover; two different women trick a third, older woman with a scheme to earn money, and the latter ends up robbed of her savings; a comic on the “Tonight” show entertains one evening and then commits suicide. Then we arrive at scenarios which Sexton informs us concern her as a subject. She writes, immediately following the extended and awful description of the comic’s

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<sup>4</sup> The fairy tales all open with an offset section of verse, indented and separated from the body of the tale by a stanza break. These prologues are of varying lengths, but at times are so long that they begin to overcome the reading experience and confuse the entrance into the tale-telling. In the prologues Sexton offers some understanding of the tale to come, either by establishing a tone or setting or delving into the perspective or observation of a character from the tale (writing as Rumpelstiltskin before telling the tale about him, for instance). The prologues are also varyingly used to explore personal, confessional information meant to interact with the information of the corresponding tales.

suicide by cutting his wrists, at the beginning a new stanza: “And I. I too.” Here her instruction is to have us read her as a subject into the story, connected to the suicide by these four words; and also, by contrast, “Quite collected at cocktail parties, / meanwhile in my head / I’m undergoing open-heart surgery” (*Transformations* 74-5) Sexton goes on to extend the metaphor the stanza adopted and consider the heart’s beating, panicked, “until he gags on an apple / and it’s all over.” In the following stanza, she visits again, via anaphora, the words: “And I. I too.” Twice the tying of death to the “I.” The poet is writing insistently, though about what is the question; this is the direction we never receive, and its evasiveness itself is informative of the difficulty there. Though in the final stanza of the prologue Sexton suggests suicide as present in her diegetic world, her perception of it is unsure and interpretable. We are told that the A-frame summer house she built on Cape Ann was a deception for not being haunted, for giving her a sense of stuckness, where in the poem escape is preferable. The ocean rumbled, and “at each window the secrets came in / like gas;” “even in the electric kitchen there was / the smell of a journey” (*Transformations* 75). The mention of gas—a suicide method, the one that Sexton would eventually choose to end her own life—serves to taunt the subject and to anchor the house as surrounded, deceiving despite what we can understand as the freedom of summer (and, possibly, the liberation of suicide).

Foretold in the instance of the first “I too,” Sexton’s self-referential stanza rests at almost the midway point of the entire “Red Riding Hood” piece, and at the edge of the prologue. Immediately following the summer house scene she shifts into the tale proper. The subsequent lines read, “Long ago / there was a strange deception: / a wolf dressed in frills, / a kind of transvestite. / But I get ahead of my story. / In the beginning / there was just little Red Riding Hood” (*Transformations* 76). Their grandeur, their metacommentary (the recursion to the theme

of deception), and their leap in time retroactively lend a definitiveness to the previous stanza; the narrator is placing emphasis and interest elsewhere, swiftly moving away from whence she just came. If her shift is evasive, it is suggestive.

Sexton chooses another instructionally loaded moment in her collection for perhaps one of her most difficult confessions. At the very end of *Transformations*, when the reader is already anticipating writing that will be especially illustrative, reflective, meaningful, or powerful, she is entered into a description of confinement, repression, insomnia, numbness, and incest. As within the “Red Riding Hood” piece, Sexton preps us for this entrance, though this time she slips us in using narrative nonspecificity. It is also a surprise that we are taken through this change at the end of a tale, and within the tale itself. By troubling the end of “Briar Rose,” continuing past the marriage of the protagonist to the prince to discuss Briar Rose’s remnant insomnia, the poet is both challenging conceptions about marriage and the structure of narrative. As Alicia Ostriker writes about the collection,

The poet’s effort to understand her stories on her own terms precipitates a transformed view of traditional social values, particularly those associated with feminine life patterns: love and marriage, beauty, family, and most radically, the idea of goodness and moral responsibility, all of which she slices through like butter. (*Writing* 12)

Sexton explores the new territory here as if it were “life after death,” language she uses in the last line of the tale. She creates the possibility to assert an interpretation for Briar Rose’s story and, in the same breath, insert her own story as incorporating and depending upon the metaphor of Briar Rose.

The penultimate and third-to-last stanzas utilize a narrative “I” that could easily belong to the persona of Briar Rose—though all previous exploration of character in the collection has refrained from narratively assuming the voice of any person other than Sexton. Or, the narrative

“I” could still belong to the poet; but this would be the very first moment in the collection in which we are provided with such an involved and action-based first-person narrative in the present tense. Even in the fourth-to-final stanza there exists the potential reading of the “I” as transferring mid-monologue to the “I” of Sexton, especially if we take the line “the hole in my cheek open” as a clue—referring to Sexton’s famous 1966 poem, “Wanting to Die,” in which she describes herself as “drooling at the mouth-hole” (*Selected Poems* 98). What is more, Sexton, ever-playful (or sardonic), complicates the new narrative perspective by turning within it to comment on the new subject as a third person, and using a second-person address: “I’m all shot up with Novocain. / This trance girl / is yours to do with. / You could lay her in a grave.” And in the penultimate stanza, she complicates the subject by confusing it with its aggressor, manifesting a potential symptom of the repression and trauma—of the event of incestuous sexual abuse or even caused by the ensuing therapy—to which she refers. She writes,

I was forced backward.  
I was forced forward.  
I was passed hand to hand  
like a bowl of fruit.  
Each night I am nailed into place  
And I forget who I am.  
Daddy?  
That’s another kind of prison.  
It’s not the prince at all,  
but my father  
drunkenly bent over my bed,  
circling the abyss like a shark,  
my father thick upon me  
like some sleeping jellyfish. (*Transformations* 112)

Sexton’s narrative turning completes its pulling apart in her final stanza, where she addresses the subject as distinct from the narrative “I”—the little girl there either representing Briar Rose or Sexton’s younger self. It would not be too far a move to attach the label of the uncanny to what



happens here in the end.<sup>5</sup> Our ability to dissect the narrative rules is suspended, and the autobiographical subject, the apparition behind all these tales, finally emerges as potentially having served truthfully through the metaphors, characters, and tales that constituted *Transformations*. We are startled and overwhelmed by the idea that Sexton could have experienced or witnessed herself the harms she details, either in the prologues or the tales. More than that, we are frightened because we do not wish to live out what she appears to have experienced—suicidal thought, incest, abuse.

The above topics are among the dark unspeakables of human experience. Elizabeth Gregory notes in her essay, “Confessing the Body: Gendered Politics” (Gill *Modern*, 34), that these topics, as forbidden, become transgressions when confessed. It is evident despite all of her play and evasion that Sexton means to establish a countercurrent, to be different in her writing, through her frankness and fearlessness—“sleeping jellyfish” is seemingly spot-on, disparaging, and takes no detours. This intention is indicative of the confessional movement at large, staving off the impersonality and disaffection of New Criticism. Even at the level of her insertion of the self, or at least the imagined self constructed in verisimilitude, Sexton’s writing defies traditional hegemonic discourse, as Tambling interprets Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject and discussion of hegemony, the subject, and vomiting; such narration and address make dialogue possible again, separating out the “I” (27). Being able to comment on dark experience is meaningful both for Sexton and for the members of her literary and social contexts. As I establish in the introduction to the dissertation, I agree with Sandra Gilbert’s assessment that true confessionalists are those who seek to assert their insecurities, to construct their individuality and experience on the page, to become present and heard through method and statement. This, in

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5. See Freud’s discussion of the uncanny, or *unheimlich*.

turn, was what the core poets of this dissertation wanted for their readers; discourse was a stepping stone for the formation of a new, active, egalitarian hegemony.

Throughout the book, Sexton decentralizes the typical teaming of fairy tales around the favored, hyper-normative, “good” characters in another movement indicative of confessionalism. The uneasiness of the truths Sexton isolates about the tales—Snow White’s eerie adherence to gender roles, for one—mirrors the shock and unease of more overtly confessional work; it is the subjects’ abjectness that serves the confession and the potential for the readers’ connection. The ills she describes are not just particular to a character (or to herself), but extend to the many; Snow White “rolling her china-blue doll eyes open and shut” exhibits an affliction that has seeped and continues to seep into the behaviors of Sexton’s contemporaries (9).

Making-present is an act carried out by the confessional poem’s “I” as a subject. On the surface of confessional poems, we are reminded of the involvement and agency of this “I.” But the directness of this authorial insertion can pose problems for the author-subject who has experienced pain perhaps past what he or she can stand to have reflected in a permanent way in writing. As such, evasion can be a signal of pain (and is a prominent tactic in the writing under dictatorship I explore later in this chapter). It may be the case that Sexton’s narrative twisting defers the arrival at a direct connection between herself and difficult truth; even Lowell’s famous bald admission in the poem “Skunk Hour”—he breaks off from description of a lovers’ hill scene to write, “My mind’s not right”—can be seen as couched, protected (Lowell 95). The complication of Sexton’s storytelling in “Briar Rose” behaves as a kind of distancing, as I have mentioned. This is not unusual for the narrating subject in pain. Elaine Scarry, author of the work *The Body in Pain*, confirms the distinction: that for the person in pain, the “I” is an unreliable

narrator (6). The internalization of the self; the curling in, the unavoidable and constant presence of the body as site of pain, as sheerly experiencing, precludes the possibility of expression. Consequently, Scarry delineates the acceptability of a speaker interpreting on a pained person's behalf. This is representative of what I believe happens in Sexton's confessionalism at the end of *Transformations*, and in other confessional writing: a splitting of the narrator and subject in order to make discourse possible.

For all of its daring, confessionalism requires protecting; the confessing act comes with risk, the confessant vulnerable to the negative aspects of what Foucault lists the confessor can be: judging or punishing. The rejection of the poet's experience by the reader, or the reception of that experience as inauthentic or non-representative, is part of that fear, but such a failure would primarily be relegated to the rendering of the experience, the poetics themselves. Confessional poets achieve safe distance through the art, and also in analysis, as Tambling notes (85). That critical stance is one the poets hoped their readers might attain, as I explain in Chapter 1. More comforting is the community they seek through relation: these poets argued that they were not alone—and thus change was needed, beginning with the acknowledgment of the pervasiveness of socio-political repression. They asserted themselves as narrators and as subjects with inscribed bodies; Tambling writes,

The author as corpse: it is a variant on the death of the author. But in any case, the author is a reader: losing himself in trying to work out what is happening to him; the textual labyrinth or maze is another means whereby the text refuses to be transparent. But then the author is also the confessant, accused and appealing to have his discourse validated by the reader who has been interpellated into the textual unconscious of the confession. (105)

In this sense, the reader brings the author back to life, back to a bodied relationality.

Even if the writing process of confessional poetry is therapeutic—Sexton did initially begin writing at the encouragement of her therapist—the permanence of whatever reality or understanding the writing is able to create for her is fleeting. Part of this impermanence is the distance from experience that is implicit in the construction of the confession, in its necessary fictionality. Tambling writes, “Is not the confessant the actor above all? Yet confession as acting means also, of course, self-fashioning and implies the presence of metonymic displacements and a glossing of the (textual) self” (194). Bringing the element of interpretation in conjunction with the performing nature of the narrative subject, Tambling reverts to the perspective of the confessant as self-dramatizing, though this is not necessarily a navel-gazing move; in the confessional poem, self-dramatization is always presented in relation. Too, Tambling writes that this element of construction—or ritual, as Gill and Foucault see confessionalism—attempts but does not manage to transcend time: “Self-fashioning demands a freedom from the past, and it is the past which acts as the greatest inducement to present confession: the past must be gone over again and again” (200). Insistent revisiting, certainly, factors in what we have seen in Sexton’s work, such as to the topic of suicide. Still, a stuckness in the past is indicative more of a poetry of trauma. Tambling writes, “memory can guarantee nothing finally, though it may seem to provide a resting-place” (15). Apart from artistic aim, and irrespective of whatever other intent might secondarily reside in the piece, confessionalism’s focus on the self necessarily enters any piece into a trajectory where, as Tambling argues, “becoming what one is tilts the task in [the direction of] the future;” what one is is never knowable yet (187). This is especially true when what follows confessional poetry, as per its design, is a connection with an audience that has shared or is empathetic to the experiences expressed on the page—or to the emotional, “felt”

experience conveyed in the poem's techniques. This is the ritual into which the confessional poet enters, one angled for the future.

### **Frankness and Accusation in Urondo, Gelman, and Walsh**

To the south, in Argentina, at about the same time that confessionalism was first emerging in the United States—in the 1950s—Urondo and Gelman both produced their first full-length collections of poetry, and Walsh published his first testimonial piece. *Historia antigua* [*Ancient History*] and *Violín y otras cuestiones* [*Violin and Other Questions*] emerged in 1956, and *Operación masacre* [*Operation Massacre*] in 1957, all emitting pangs of the political and ideological in their lines. The three contemporaries and friends were involved in the militant guerrilla organization Montoneros; this activity, along with the increasingly tense socio-political climate and their exposure to the repression and violence of the anti-subversive campaigns hosted by the Argentine state, incited subsequent reactions, reflections, and engagement with difficult reality from the authors in their work. Indeed, theirs and the writing of many of their *compañeros* not just in Argentina but across Latin America, where state-sponsored terror was in effect, earned the moniker of *literatura comprometida*, politically committed, engaged literature, dedicated to their cause and refusing to look away from the harms and trials of their time.<sup>6</sup>

But the harms done went beyond the imaginable, and these poets' abilities to handle realities that pertained to them intimately were altered in kind. Gelman's son, Marcelo, and pregnant daughter-in-law, María Claudia, were "disappeared" in 1976, that Argentine euphemism for secretive extrajudicial kidnapping, torture, and then murder and anonymized

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6. These campaigns were supported by the United States government, which offered training to national militaries through Operation Condor.

disposal of bodies conducted by police and military—a process, referred to by the state as the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* or National Reorganization Process, that was systematic and pervasive in the Southern Cone. Urondo, Gelman, and Walsh lost many friends and fellow writers in the Dirty War, and Urondo and Walsh themselves were killed publicly by the Argentine police. Each performed their anxiety and grief distinctly. The commitment to memory and striving against the regimes of silence and ignorance in their country enacted the daring that also prevails in the confessional poetry we have seen.

Writing from the “abyss,” Edouard Glissant’s source of exchange marked by suffering, strains the text but also binds it in relation to other texts of suffering. Critic Nelly Richard writes on the further defensive power of the literature constructed under dictatorship in Latin America, in which writers designed a poetry stylistically unable to be assimilated by the regimes of order, also maintaining the imperfections of history and multiple facets of memory instead of allowing for a single narrative to prevail, as the totalitarian regimes would have it (16). These techniques are evident in the poetry of Gelman, in the collections referring to his son’s disappearance.

Gelman writes, in the 1979 collection *Notas* [*Notes*]:

¿estás vivo?/¿estás muerto?/¿hijo?/  
¿vivimorís otra vez/otro día/como  
moriviviste estos años  
en un campo de concentración?/¿qué

hicieron de vos/hijo/dulce calor que alguna vez  
niñaba al mundo/padre de mi ternura/hijo  
que no acabó de vivir?/¿acabó de morir? (*Interrupciones I* 112)

are you alive?/are you dead?/son?/  
do you livedie once again/one more day/like  
you diedalive those years  
in a concentration camp?/what

did they make of you/son/soft heat that once  
childed the world/father of my tenderness/son  
who never stopped living?/stopped dying?<sup>7</sup>

Gelman splits his writing within the single line, even splicing verbs together to form complex and nuanced terms of existence, violent writing acts necessitated by the nature of Argentine disappearances. The forward slashes initiate an information exchange laden with acts of revision and propulsion, seemingly stagnating or circling around the event being discussed. The writing offers alternate ways in, according to what we might interpret as the author's own grappling with his son's disappearance—dead or alive, pervading the world with his being a child and birthing the author's tenderness. The acts in these slashes are comprehensive and evasive, simultaneously.

The idea of this instance of Gelman's writing as confessional is somewhat problematic because of the proximity of the difficulty he is striving against and the specified focus and insistence he employs. The writing of *Notas* [Notes] is, as such, more a poetry of trauma, elegaic. Upon his exile and the trauma inflicted upon the poet by this and from the losses of his family and friends to the dictatorship he suffers, I believe Gelman's writing enters into a phase of poetry more violent, open, insistent, raw, and personal, and less confessional than we see in *Fábulas* [Fables] in Chapter 1.<sup>8</sup> The main differentiating factors between confessional poetry and poetry of trauma are the critical distance a poet obtains on the page from the event, the situating of the personal instance within a chain of experiences indicative of a socio-political injustice, and the dependence upon the reader as an ultimately empathetic, similarly vulnerable entity, possibly in

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7. All translations mine unless otherwise indicated.

8. Though he returned for brief periods, Gelman continued to live away from Argentina for the rest of his life.

possession of a parallel experience that the poet expects the reader to have difficulty admitting just as the poet has difficulty. We do not sense shame as present or informing any part of Gelman's expression; any reticence or evasion he uses is caused by his unsureness of what the truth is, but not about expressing the truth. He expresses the difficulty of his experience and is vulnerable, angrily. His brazenness in his late-1970s poetry comes from a place of hurt that attempts to process and make sense of the source of that hurt; there is some critical distance, and certainly a discussion of his witnessing from exile—testifying to his emotional experience—as a witnessing of an endemic issue.

To understand Gelman's scale we will need to consider his solidarity in address and his connections to the testimonial mode. Gelman functioned within a tight community of Latin Americans marked by their militarism, intellectualism, leftist ideologies, involvement in journalism, and, of course, the fact that they were writers upholding an ethic of art. In more than one sense, they wrote for each other; to be in dialogue with one another (to maintain supportive interpersonal relationships and affirm their purposes), to promote dialogue (as a leeway to an active, egalitarian public enabled to fight against its repressors), and to dialogue with the world (bolstering the literature they all took part in constructing). They wrote conversationally so as to promote accessibility, though in flashes, increasingly into the 1970s adapting poetics of rupture. Certainly, the kind of writing displayed by Gelman's contemporaries and within the testimonial mode challenged the notion of what was literary. As Mario Benedetti writes, "Si la realidad social penetra de algún modo en el individuo, también en el individuo literario, o sea el personaje, se vuelve paulatinamente social, a veces a pesar del propio autor. La influencia es recíproca...." "If social reality enters in some way into the individual, so too in the literary individual, or rather, the character gradually becomes social, sometimes in spite of the author



himself. The influence is reciprocal...’ (*El escritor* 37). There are parallel claims about confessional writing; Steven Axelrod writes, “the Confessional poets turn their world outside-into their minds. They internalize the moral and political disturbances of our times.... The madness that destroys the Confessional poet’s mind is as much society’s as his/her own” (6). The introduction of the real into lyric in the Argentine writing—these poets were often very lyrical before and even during their social poetry production—changed the timbre of the writing and its purpose, in an intersection that tested the capacity of literature to accommodate differently charged truths and anticipated the needs of a newly concerned audience.

Richard, in further critical treatment of the Latin American writing responding to dictatorship, proposes that these authors constructed readers with a memory of trauma (18). This suggests that these authors were anticipating a more receptive audience than the confessional audience—that judging, punishing, forgiving, consoling, and reconciling entity, according to Foucault. The latter kind of audience finds a better parallel with the testimonial audience; more on this below. An audience with a memory of trauma may already be disposed toward accommodating the memory act. Instead of shunning taboo, they assume a readiness toward it distinct from the confessional audience’s when arriving at the page. Still, the Latin American audience to which Richard refers and that Gelman engages must be wary of not only the recurrence of the harms but of their oblivion, which plays into the desires of the dictatorship to thrive without opposition.

In the Argentine case as well as in that of the United States, the retelling and remembering are never finished. The poetry of the authors I have displayed here bravely erects testaments against the numbing and condemning ignorance of their societies. Their words keep history from passing over their suffering, and enter their audience—made of the public and

literati—into a new cycle of recollection, encouraging admission (entry and acknowledgment), recognition, and the spread of acceptance of how the past (and historical present) was unjust. Whether the representations were of ailments apart from yet proximal to, or within the author-narrator-subject’s own experience, they pointed to the ailments of the many as a way of incorporating and encouraging knowledge as a remedy for their situation, and a remedy and antidote to be administered for future parallel situations.

As I have discussed regarding Sexton, on an individual level, confessional poetry as testament can be a tool for catharsis and reckoning, a therapeutic method of dealing with or processing a poet’s complicated feelings toward a violent event. It follows, especially in the Argentine writing I explore in this dissertation, that violent response on the page is a natural result of violent aggression: as Franz Fanon writes, “At the individual level, violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them, and restores their self-confidence.... Violence hoists the people up to the level of the leader” (51). Violence, then, per Fanon, when enacted by victims earns them a sense of agency. Through agency claimed in writing—an individual pursuit insofar as that a writer is one person and a reader is one person—poetry can accrue power by enacting violence in the reconstruction of an experience; power for the poet, and also for the group he or she may be representing. Violence and anger do have negative results for the relationality of poetry, however—when they result in exclusivity—and I discuss such limitations in confessional poetry in Chapter 4.

In my discussion of the confessant above I explore the idea of the narrative-subject as inscribed with story, in possession of a body that constitutes the “arena of conflict” put forth by

Tambling (29). In this same statement, Tambling goes on to extend the arena from the individual body, dissociated (because it is self-reflective), to that of a community—in his analysis, the monastic community, assigned with the task of completing the ritual of confession and, as Tambling writes, with the eradication of [the body] as something other (29). Given Gelman's ailment, Sexton's ailment, the ailment of leftist Argentines and abused women in the United States, the authors must be careful to cater to an audience that will not perpetuate their otherness (past recognizing its incorrect diagnosis as such) but accommodate it. For their audiences do contain hostile groups that might either alienate or attempt to undermine the validity of their claims. We can even see that hostility functioning within the poets' voices themselves; their hesitance, tension, or shows of difficulty make clear the pervasive presence of groups who seek annihilation of the true facts of the poets' lived experiences.

The author as divided into subject and reader is another of Tambling's ideas that transfers well into the Argentine literature on hand. In the case of the testimonial mode, the experiencing subject is literally a separate person, an abject other whose voice has otherwise gone unheard; the narrator is someone else with better access—in language, eloquence, education, and participation in groups of status that enable the circulation of ideas. Both subject and narrator hold as given an activist stance toward the topic of the testimony; as George Yúdice writes in "Testimonio and Postmodernism," "My argument regarding testimonio and its challenge to master discourse relies on those texts which are written as collaborative dialogues between activists engaged in a struggle and politically committed or empathetic transcribers/editors" (17). Again, readiness or empathy is integral to the transfer of information. However, the testimonial audience, the readership beyond the subject-narrator duo, is of another kind.

The testimonial audience is much broader than any that the original author and witness could independently reach on his or her own. It is privileged (which is not to say that the confessant is without privilege, something I discuss in Chapter 4), and also in a position to create change, from its breadth and also its access. *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* [*I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*], is a *testimonio*, for instance, that moved from Menchú's Quiché-influenced Guatemalan dialect into Elizabeth Burgos's Spanish and was subsequently translated into several other languages, including English. The size of such a readership affects the scope of the act, as much as Menchú's representation of a large community and their plight did. The representation is, naturally, suggestive; as Yúdice writes, "Testimonial writing, as the word indicates, promotes expression of personal experience. That personal experience, of course, is the *collective* struggle against oppression from oligarchy, military, and transnational capital" (26). But, in the same way, the practice Sexton employed in converting the narrative "I" into a subject (wavering between attachment to the poet or to a separate character) inductively suggested the non-exclusivity of that subject's experiences.

So was Gelman's poetry indicative of the experience of many. His focus and strength of voice, though, afforded him a commentary not strange to Sexton's own writing nor to other testimonial works. The division of the narrator from the painful topic (by choice, by design), allows for assertions of action. This appears in Rodolfo Walsh's 1957 *testimonio*, *Operación masacre* [*Operation Massacre*], translated by Daniela Gitlin:

Of course, Valle acted, and gave his life, which means more than words ever could. Understanding his actions is easier today than it was ten years ago; it will be even easier in the future. Valle's figure will continue to grow and take the place it deserves in the people's memory, together with the conviction that his movement's success would have saved the country the shameful phase that followed, this second *década infame* that we are now living in. (45)

Walsh here has the benefit of writing from a distinct moment in history, which affords him perspective and comparative power. Confessing an extrajudicial execution that unintentionally produced survivors, he is banking on Tambling's forward tilt of confessional identification to characterize 1956 Argentina and bring its lesson into importance for his present. Walsh produced revised editions in 1964, 1969, and 1972. He died in 1977, twenty years after the start of his political writing career; it was definitively his acknowledgment of the truths of the dictatorship that caused his death, for the day after finishing an open letter to the military junta, Walsh was executed. His activism through his representation of socio-political ills was heard by his target audience and swiftly and severely acknowledged.

Another angle the separated narrator becomes enabled to take is that of the accuser. The relationship between writer and reader is not necessarily swayed toward the weakness of the writer or confessant, with the reader effectively taking up the role of God. Even as we have seen in instances of Sexton's work, the "I" can show pride through ownership and brazenness in the construction of the confession. Walsh was similarly brazen; but his acknowledgment of the deed, the difficult truth, was unmistakable—where Sexton often promoted multiple truths—and charged. In his 1977 open letter, he writes that "The refusal of this Junta to publish the names of the prisoners is, moreover, a cover for the systematic execution of hostages in vacant lots in the early morning, all under the pretext of fabricated combat and imaginary escape attempts" ("Carta abierta"). Gelman, too, becomes accusatory and aggressive, as in his poem that opens the collection *Notas* [Notes]. He writes, "te nombraré veces y veces" 'i'll name you over and over;' "te mataré los pedacitos. / te mataré uno con paco. / otro lo mataré con rodolfo. / con haroldo te mato un pedacito más. / te mataré con mi hijo en la mano" 'i'll kill you, your pieces. / i will kill one with paco. / another i'll kill with rodolfo. / with haroldo i'll kill another piece. / i will kill

you with my son in my hand;’ “te voy a matar/yo / te voy a matar” ‘i will kill you/i / am going to kill you’ (*Interrupciones* 197). More than utilizing individual experience for rhetorical power, Gelman threatens the act of naming as if this recognition is powerful enough to take his enemy down. He names victims—Paco, Rodolfo, Haroldo Conti, his son—as well as the harms done by the dictatorship in the form of stating practices it used, like torture. His poetry becomes a site for language of witness that directs narratively, tonally, and by naming in addition to citing experience.

These tactics distance the addressee; Gelman’s “you,” antagonistic and personal, and Walsh’s ignorant audience made up of the Argentine public to which the author also belongs. Gelman is much more separated from his audience in the cited poem, though, as I have argued, this is indicative of a shift in his work, upon his exile and his son and daughter-in-law’s deaths, out of confessionalism. In his collection *Cólera buey* [*Oxen Rage*] from earlier in the decade (technically produced during the 1960s), there is a softness toward the audience because this has more flexibility; Gelman’s “I,” as well, is more tenuous. In “CCCLXXXII,” we can see the intimate and troubled poet-as-subject: “yo // escribí esta fábula un día de mil / novecientos sesentiocho que / había un sol que partía las piedras / no me dejaba en paz había / tu cuerpo tu recuerdo y no / me dejaban en paz” (272) ‘i // wrote this fable one day in nineteen / sixty-eight since / there was sunlight that split rocks / it wouldn’t leave me in peace there was / your body your memory and they wouldn’t / leave me in peace.’ This entrance into personal admission comes at the very end of the poem, emerging suddenly, as if erupting from the poet. Elsewhere in the collection there is a discursivity with a large public, still accused, though more multifaceted than the audience in *Notas* [*Notes*]. In “Pensamientos” (“Thoughts”), Gelman responds to Che Guevara’s death:

te doy noticias de mi corazón nada más  
¿alguno sabe en realidad  
cuáles son las noticias de mi corazón?

.....

soy de un país donde es necesario  
no amar sino matar  
a la melancolía y donde  
no hay que confundir  
el Che con la tristeza

.....

soy de un país donde ahora  
Guevara ha de sufrir otras muertes  
cada cual resolverá su muerte ahora:  
el que se alegró ya es polvo miserable  
el que lloró que reflexione  
el que olvidó que olvide o que recuerde  
y aquél que recordó sólo tiene derecho a recordar  
el comandante Guevara entró a la muerte por su  
cuenta pero  
ustedes  
¿qué habrán de hacer con esa muerte?

pequeños míos  
¿qué? (*Oxen Rage* 322-6)

i can give you news of my heart nothing else  
does anyone know truly  
what the news of my heart is?

.....

i'm from a country where it's necessary  
not to love but to kill  
melancholy and where  
you don't have to confuse  
Che with sadness

.....

i'm from a country where now  
Guevara has to suffer other deaths  
each of us will determine his death now:  
he who was glad is already miserable dust  
he who cried should reflect  
he who forgot should forget or remember  
and the one that remembered only has the right to remember  
comandante Guevara entered his death on his  
own but  
you

what must you do with that death?

my little ones  
what?

There is tenderness, even, characteristic especially of this collection, and moments in which Gelman aligns himself with the guilty he accuses. When he enters into the poem as an “I,” the poetry is typically more confessional. And more than in Sexton’s poems, Gelman employs a critical distance that precisely makes his poems socio-political, as in when he comments, “i’m from a country.”

Sexton’s selves diffuse the certainty of who is the narrator, who the subject, and what each does to inform the other. Her audience is steadier in its watchful and accusatory position—and as I have established in Chapter 1, her tenuousness (and the confessor’s) invites relation. If we consider Sexton’s selves as derivatives of one self, and further, of a group sharing experience and belief, then we might access Sexton’s testimonial nature as a representative transcribing wider truths. Another way of approaching her derivations and representational quality is to pose the “I” not as a persona, but a mask. The masking in Sexton’s poems is a fleeting, borrowed, and partially obscuring practice; the masks shift, and belong not only to her experience but to that of others, linking truths. While they make possible a variety of selves, in their variation they complete a fuller understanding of the narrator-subject in conjunction with those moments that are apparently “unmasked.”

For instance, the “I” at the end of “Briar Rose” is a girl with a history the reader learns from Sexton’s version of the fairy tale, previously confined to sleep and then released; she is entranced, numbed, silent, passive, subject; she is abandoned and visited nightly with brutality; she is death-addled; she is responsive to sexual acts; and she is also the perpetrator, which is



predatory, brutish, and awful. In the final page, she forgets who she is, inviting the notion of masking. The “I” is Briar Rose, Sexton; the prince, her father; and any woman or man akin to them as they possess the characteristics outlined above.

Even the slippage of the tales from prologue into body suggest embodiment and masking—the indented prologue pauses at its end and is taken over by new writing flush to the left-hand side of the page. Interestingly, Urondo performs the same manner of shifting in several of his poems in which masking also plays a significant role. These presentational modes—where layout speaks to the performance of the text’s content—are a bit separate from the idea of style and form, as we may imagine them having to be confirmed and aided in part by an editor (how far to indent; how much space between stanzas). Still, their function is steady, independent of any choices the press may have made to adhere to its historical layout.

Differently from Sexton’s, Urondo’s departures into discourses and engagements concerning realities and subjects that are alternate to those primarily working in the body of the poem occur at his poems’ ends as epilogues. These appear in “Adioses” (“Goodbyes”), “El nieto de Dios” (“The Grandson of God”), “Cuerpo del delito” (“Body of Crime”), “Solicitada” (“Solicited”), and “Trampa” (“Trick”), poems belonging to his collection *Poemas póstumos* [*Posthumous Poems*] (1972) with the exception of “Trampa” (“Trick”), which pertained to Urondo’s final, posthumously published collection, *Cuentos de batalla* [*Battle Stories*] (1976). More than conclusions that synthesize simply, keeping to the image-world of the earlier part of the poem and its subjects and focuses, these epilogues push past a natural end to explore implications on an intimate level, much like Sexton did in “Briar Rose” and at the beginning of her other tales.

The tactic in “Adioses” (“Goodbyes”) is most obvious, where the lines suddenly shorten to nearly half the average length of those in the beginning of the poem:

Del excusado al lavatorio salta  
mi corazón como si fuera  
un jabón. Puedo tener el mundo  
en mis manos, dijo Beethoven y también  
lo podría decir yo, si no fuera  
por este jabón que se resbala  
de las manos y nadie  
lo quiere por eso, a pesar  
de que haya lavado más de una cara,  
arrastrado alguna mugre, hojas  
en el otoño; subestiman  
su espuma dejándolo gastar  
de aquí para allá, del excusado  
al lavatorio, diluido  
en el agua caliente que ahogará  
las risas de los arrepentidos. (*Obra poética* 436)

From the one excused to go to the bathroom my heart  
leaps as if it were a piece  
of soap. I can hold the world  
in my hands, said Beethoven, and I  
could say it too, if it weren't  
for this soap that slips  
from my grasp and so  
no one wants it, despite  
the fact that it's washed more than one face,  
drawn grime, leaves  
in autumn; they overestimate  
its foam, letting it expend  
everywhere, from the one excused  
to go to the bathroom, diluted  
in the hot water that will drown  
this laughter of the sorrowful.

The poem has two stanzas—this heavily affected and elegiac one, and the more objective first stanza. The bulk of the poem, what preceded, is devoted to naming in a winding, list fashion the acquaintances and public figures alike—important to Urondo—who have died. The poet's first

line states this purpose: “A cierta edad, los allegados se alejan, empiezan / a morir” ‘At a certain age, those close to you become distant, begin / to die’ (*Obra poética* 435). Lovers, neighbors, colleagues, and political figures have died and are brought into the poem. Some apparently died of apolitical causes, though other examples are left unclear, and some do suggest a political nature—dying with a gun, or more potently, dying among the “great raptors,” a metonym for powerful Latin Americans.<sup>9</sup> However, the driving death of the poem, only mentioned abstractly, is that of Che Guevara.<sup>10</sup> Though it is mostly latent in the first stanza—except when emerging to inform the lines briefly describing the unmourned death of Urondo’s eternity—Che’s death promises to shed light on the second stanza.

The end of the first stanza involves a stark transition into a more generalized exploration of goodbyes (he mentions that classmates and even enemies have died), accompanied by a discussion of the living; Urondo brings himself and his children as subjects into the poem. The stanza completes with the bittersweet:

Puedo estar contento  
de estar vivo: abro los ojos, salto  
de la cama, me visto, salgo a esperar otros años, como ahora  
que cierro la puerta, miro hacia atrás la primera mitad  
del camino y busco los lugares para emboscarme  
a cara descubierta, a golpes. Alegrías pesarasas, funerales. (*Obra poética* 435)

I can be content  
to be living: I open my eyes, jump  
from the bed, leave to wait for other years, like now  
as I close the door, look behind me at the first half  
of my trajectory and search for places to lie in ambush

---

9. Condors and raptors are widely symbolic for the Andean and Southern Cone countries; as Che was Argentine, and his influence across Latin America great, Urondo is using the birds as signals of Che’s reach.

10. In the second line we are given Oliverio Gironde’s January 1967 death as a point of reference: “Murió Oliverio y todo el continente / también murió entre los cóndores diez meses después para poder / erguir sus cerbatanas” ‘Oliverio died and the whole continent / has also died among the condors ten months later in order / to raise their blowdarts’ (2010 435). Ernesto “Che” Guevara died in October of 1967.

with my naked face, the hard way. Regretful joys, funerals.

Where before, Urondo was involved in his poem discreetly, as someone with immortality and a proximity to others who have died, sometimes through dream, at the end of the stanza he enters as a singular, acting subject. Though the actions this subject performs are typified and symbolic—rising from bed, closing the door—the narrator-subject is asserting an immediate present, one that is also fraught and lonely.

As Sexton's newly redefined narrative "I" carries into stanzas a suggesting duality of experience—belonging to Briar Rose, possibly, but increasingly to a subject that seems to refer to Sexton herself—Urondo's prominence as a narrator-subject continues in his final stanza, at least at its start. The focus swerves to a new character, "one excused to go to the bathroom," and it is the "I" that grounds its presence in the poem. Recently regretful, the "I" is now bereaved. We can read the leaping soap as Che's Revolution: making sense of the world for the narrator-subject who so believed in it, for those who were cleansed by it, having toiled for it; and after Che's death, a movement that is obviously finite, at least for the narrator-subject who becomes the sorry and laughing formerly "excused."

The narrator-subject is isolated in his mourning because it seems to him no one else is feeling the dread that he is. There is an echo of that feeling in the early line about his eternity's death; I call it an echo because the development of the feeling happens most significantly in the second stanza, which then calls back to the prior moment. The structure of the poem as such, with this epilogue-like transgression of form, is still integrated. As Sexton's tales were divided between storytelling and interpretations, which included insertions of experiences and references that hinted at Sexton's own situation, so Urondo's poem takes on an evidence-interpretation split. The listing he undergoes is especially akin to evidence-making, though Briar Rose's tale

can be seen as a template setting up truths. Both contrast with the specificity of the prologues/epilogue. Within such sections of interpretation, admission occurs: in Sexton's "Briar Rose," of the experience of sexual abuse; in Urondo's "Adioses" ("Goodbyes"), of his compañeros flagging and faltering now that Che is dead. The sections—indeed, as so disparate from the bulk of the poem/tale, these pieces of writing might be referred to as independent sections—deeply access a site of uncomfortable darkness, that confessional place.

Urondo's is a confession of a "they" that he nonetheless still feels linked to, as if he were of a same body (why else the soap metaphor?). Too, his shame binds him to them. This multiplicity is concerned with representation, but also with address, as I have been covering in this chapter. In "Adioses" ("Goodbyes"), the shame is extended to the reader, who is consequently treated as one in solidarity. This extension may be condemning or freeing. It transpires thanks to a great deal of liminality and shifting happening in the scene of this final stanza, beginning with the absent presence of "the one excused to go to the bathroom." The narrative "I" steps into a coexistence with the subject, performing as the one from whose grasp the soap slips, and then returning to narrative distinction for the end of the stanza and poem: "letting it expend / everywhere, from the one excused / to go to the bathroom. Identity is being questioned—who are the guilty, and who is the righteous?—as well as agency. The fleeting natures of soap (that slips), of leaves in autumn, and of foam contribute to the blame and affiliation being difficultly placed. The scene can achieve all of this because of the specific and reference-producing work in the first stanza, on the one hand; and due to the imagistic distance and syntactical propulsion of the final stanza. Its pace is quickened with its comma usage and shorter lines, which accommodate the abstracted and fictional quality of the new story being told

here. For the second stanza is diegetically other; its character and plot have appeared nowhere in the poem until in that moment.

Fiction is a powerful tool for highlighting and emphasizing the real, carrying out its emotion and drama. Even in the most truthful, documentary, or witnessing modes of writing the forms construct stories that shape the audience's emotions. Elzbieta Sklodowska describes the factor of pleasure in *testimonio* and how this serves the transportation of the form's content:

Aunque lejos de otorgar al lector la importancia pregonada por la estética de la recepción, los testimonialistas nunca pierden de vista a sus destinatarios virtuales. Su preocupación por lo estético es muy pragmática; se trata de garantizar la difusión, perdurabilidad e impacto del testimonio. (50)

Though far from bestowing upon the reader the proclaimed importance through the aesthetic of reception, the testimonialists never lose sight of their virtual addressees. Their preoccupation for the aesthetic is very pragmatic; it deals with guaranteeing the dissemination, durability, and impact of the testimonio.

In the testimonial mode, she notes that aesthetics and form are subservient to the content in a necessary move to secure effective delivery. In confessional writing, I would argue that form is more meaningful and integral to the experience of a poem or prose piece. The craft in a poem like Urondo's "Adioses" ("Goodbyes") is dominant, despite the potency of the poet's accusations of the shortcomings and bandwagoning of his fellow revolutionaries. The metonymic function of the slipping soap and the unwanted soap—Che's revolution—along with the intimacy and cleanliness of the scene construct myriad perceptions, complicating the militant revolutionary even when Urondo as narrator is claiming the distinctness of adhering or not. In other poems—"Benefacción" ("Kindness"), most prominently—he explicitly calls forth and requests the forgiveness of the less-than-heroic actors in this period of his country, from "those who quickened their step and those / clumsily slow" to "those who spoke under torture," and the paralyzed, the smart-asses, the suicidals (*Obra poética* 451).

Urondo puts forth a variety of emotions related to the revolutionary project he was so devoted to, unveiling versions of himself—akin to using masks that correspond to attitude, though the moves are frank and revelatory, confessional in nature. Above, in “Adioses” (“Goodbyes”), we have an example of a more impartial tone, but elsewhere Urondo is more scathing: in “Mi tierra querida” (“My Beloved Land”) he writes, “Aquí nadie / tiene derecho a distraerse, / a estar asustado, a rozar / la indignación, a exclamar su sorpresa” ‘Here, no one / has the right to be distracted, / to be frightened, to feign / indignation, to exclaim their surprise’ (*Obra poética* 382). The same approach occurs in “Muchas gracias” (“Thank You Very Much”), “Solicitada” (“Solicited”) (where he refers to the narrator-subject’s “profound disdain for this world”), and in more poems. Contrastingly, in “Milonga del marginado paranoico” (“Milonga of the Marginalized Paranoid”) and elsewhere, the poet’s humor diffuses the sense of ethical responsibility: “Parece mentira / que haya llegado a tener / la culpa de todo lo que ocurre/ en el mundo: pero es así....pido entonces disculpas / por la mala impresión, por las exageraciones” ‘It seems a lie / that I’m to blame for everything / that has happened in the world / but it’s true....I ask then for you to excuse the bad impression, / the exaggerations’ (*Obra poética* 432). Urondo is the marginalized paranoid and the lover of his land; and he is also the empowered accuser and breaker of silence. He lets his fluctuations come through the poems’ tone, and acknowledges them; that perceptiveness manifests as integral to the method of his poems and apparently to his worldview. It is his narrative presence that guides us through these selves, grounding the explorations and assertions of individuality and representation.

The shifting within the poems of Urondo and Sexton to describe alternate interpretations for the bulk of the earlier lines in the poems places focus on fictionality. I have mentioned briefly above that the tale of Briar Rose can be read as a template for the insertion of the real and

confessional self. Is the self more present in the prologues of Sexton's *Transformations*, in the epilogues of Urondo's poems? In *Poemas póstumos* [*Posthumous Poems*] we seem to be presented with greater intimacy and emotional ferociousness in the sections that behave this way. In an already intimate poem—"Cuerpo del delito" ("Body of Crime"), Urondo paints a private, erotic scene between the narrator-subject and a woman. This swerves into the political at the end:

Una mano  
quedó en alto saludando tus pañuelos, tu aliento  
ebrio de Aranjuez, de este olor que te sopló  
desde tan lejos, con tanta  
fuerza para que lo recibas en tu Puerto  
y le permitas cargar la carne  
salada, el agua potable, los vientos de la partida, los  
cabos para ceñir los desengaños, para  
trincar la suerte sobre el cuerpo del muelle.

Toda la serenidad para ver la cara  
abrevada, de virgen-hombre, harta  
de astucias, de mi amigo Julio Lareu.

Su cara flanqueada por dos hijitas.... (*Obra poética* 446)

A hand  
is raised high waving your handkerchiefs, your breath  
drunken with the Aranjuez, of this scent that I blow to you  
from afar and with force  
so you can receive it at your port  
and load the salty flesh,  
the potable water, the winds of departure, the  
ropes to stay disillusion, to  
tie luck to the body of the dock.

All this serenity and I see the watered  
face, the man-virgin face, fed up  
with all the ruses, of my friend Julio Lareu.

His face flanked by two daughters....



Continuing into sadness, Urondo writes four tercets holding up Lareu's goodness to the light of the poem, ending on a wish for his friend's fortune.<sup>11</sup> The shift is eased by the quieting of the scene; a metaphor extends to a port and the water, and Urondo slips us through to an overpowering thought, a concern for his friend. Still, the disparity between the tone of the lovemaking scene, even with its extremes, and this discussion of a man in danger, is shocking and great. All the magic of the primary scene—the sighs, the heat, the colors—are cast off and Lareu is brought into relief in a move that balances the poem, establishing accordance with the tone and topics of the rest of Urondo's collection. There are other poems with smaller references to the turmoil in Argentina and revolution in the region and that nonetheless allow the political to preside over the supporting content, but not in a way that forsakes the poetry. Through comparisons and independent scenes like these in "Cuerpo del delito" ("Body of Crime") by Urondo and "Briar Rose" by Sexton, the integration of the real—as it is socially or politically charged—is a matter of succumbing to poetry's tropes. The material is shaped as new installations of anecdote and metaphor, more directly linked to identifiable external forms of information. For those who contest the artistic validity of political poetry, the balance and delivery of information in these poems should be acknowledged.

## **Turning the World**

Gelman and Walsh's examples are contrasting in this chapter, as their danger, their daring in writing, is state-imposed, if not in the form of an official law. The pressure in writing "Entre mil quinientas y tres mil personas han sido masacradas en secreto después que ustedes

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11. Electra Lareu was disappeared in 1977; Claudia Lareu was killed in an attack on the army barracks at La Tablada in Buenos Aires in 1989. Lareu himself was sequestered and tortured in the Banco and Olimpo detention centers in 1978.

prohibieron informar sobre hallazgos de cadaveres” ‘Between fifteen hundred and three thousand people have been massacred in secret since you banned the right to report on the discovery of bodies’ to the military junta is and was in actuality much more overtly consequential (Walsh “Carta abierta”). The issues they engage needed to be clearer and less couched in the process of understanding; they needed to be action-ready. Still, in the acknowledgment of fathers drunkenly bent over beds, of Snow White-like women rolling their china-blue doll eyes open and shut, of the “I,” “I too” attaching to suicide, the emotional effect of social issues is pressingly clear.

Sexton’s confessional poems in *Transformations* become social in scope in light of the work of Urondo and the others; and the Argentines’ writing becomes apparent as personally oriented, too, and as such can be considered as sharing this confessional element. The poets explored in this chapter utilize narrative control and an intimate narrator-subject to promote the verisimilitude of their lines. They are also confessional in that they performed act of witness, adapting the purpose of seeing—and not just reiterating, but constructing, illustrating what has transpired, as Gill stipulates—in order to convince readers who also possess knowledge (knowingly or not) of the confessed ailment. As a second point for worlding confessionalism, the fictionality of the United States and Argentine examples, including the testimonial works I mention, is crucial to the delivery and reception of the confessions.

Thirdly, the tone used by these writers is in turns brazen and frank, yet protective; not only do we see signs that they are cognizant of their comrades and fellow sufferers, but of those hostile entities with inclinations to ignore or lash out against the writing. As I have argued, the authors must take care to account for the possible negative repercussions of their writing, not just the ideal ones, a consideration which they undertake by themselves being audience members (performing self-reflection and putting on masks), by stepping into the perceptions and roles of

all those involved in the confessed issue. As separate from the poets, Foucault's judging, punishing, forgiving, consoling, and reconciling audiences compel the writer to write, but will have a memory of whatever topic the writer is addressing; but they have been forced to or have chosen oblivion. In the same vein, as the authors are designing their poetry for and requiring reception and knowledge from their readers, they are assuming the breadth and the awareness they want to foster, a fourth point for worlding confessionality.

The accessibility of these texts is important as they accrue purpose in addition to the poetic. Urondo's consideration of Lareu; his naming of the deceased in "Adioses" ("Goodbyes"); Walsh's accusations; Gelman's telling of his son's death; and Sexton's address of abuse are moments that prove the authors' fearlessness. The pathos-laden commentary, the alternating on and off topic, and the other acts of burying truths in references and metaphors contribute to the bravery of this writing precisely because of the hesitations they enact; these moves show the difficulty of the truths being presented.

They are all radical for choosing to address the difficult; and they manifest the complicated nature of their process in practices of evasion and narrative splitting. In doing so, these writers draw their readers in, making them implicit in the unpacking of truths like abuse and loss and threat, providing them with directness and direction for their task. All of this, the balancing, the tropes, the multiplicity of emotions and interpretations, contributes to a readerly experience in which the audience is able to identify—and to feel—with the author, as the authors have felt the realities of their shared experiences. Through writing, these authors engage their readers in a discourse that immediately does away with the taboo of their topics and the standard silence around it. They practice the opening and recognition they want their fellow citizens to

have—to promote the exchange of memory in the present and its continued exchange in the future; for future trying contexts to be met with parallel strength and witnessing language.

### **Chapter 3: Politics by Other Means: The Indirect Poetics of Acknowledgment of Olga Orozco and Elizabeth Bishop**

The retreat of the poet away from the poem can be an imposed or an inherent reflex, come from the poet's world or from inside the self. However reluctant a poet is to appear in her work—as a subject, as a narrator, or otherwise deliberately maneuvering the perspective of the writing—a poet is implicated in relation not just to another, single reader, but to an imagined realm of readers on whose continuum any potential reader might fall. Sometimes the world has placed her under attack—with heteronormative refusals to recognize her identity, as was occurring in the United States in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s; or with deadly threats, as had become a very real possibility under the military dictatorships tightening their grip in Argentina over the same period. Receding before the enormity of such realities is one option; or a poet may address them directly, striving against repression with the writing act, opposite of silence; or, as some did, poets may find alternate ways of entering into relation with their historical context.

In this chapter I take up the argument I have begun in earlier chapters: that it is precisely in a literary piece's construction, in its manner of expression, where the reality of a writer is reflected; his or her mannerisms made evident in such a way shine into the individuality of the writer's experience. These displayed mannerisms are not solely personal quirks or affects, but ones informed by lived interactions with a world where hostile and friendly forces exist, and resist and draw the writer's relation. When a writer's context develops beyond the historically precedented, or remembered, or imaginable—into the unreal, as with the terror in Argentina during the National Reorganization Process, also the fear of personal erasure—the writer necessarily has to find new ways of reacting to that reality in his or her lines. And when style changes in such moments of historical tension, it is highly indicative of a writer's reaction to that

unreality, and of his or her attempt to make a space in literature in which the writer can become a little unburdened.

When above I write “reflex,” I mean to suggest that the choices a poet makes—toward or away from a reflection of reality within the poetry—are controlled ones in the face of uncontrollable circumstances. The first choice a poet makes is to commit to art; within that, there enters the question of if, then how she will react to and insert various truths. This aesthetic control constitutes her particular ethic: how much of herself and her world will she reveal. For instance, as critic Zachary Pickard notes, the poet Elizabeth Bishop (1911-79) neither commits to a direct, documentary, or testimonial mode nor an entirely aesthetic style of poetry:

Too honest to retreat fully into the aesthetic realm, Bishop creates an aesthetic object that indirectly testifies to her knowledge of what she is not describing. She restricts herself to acknowledging the world, as it were, in a footnote, but she nonetheless acknowledges it. (403)

Bishop’s particular method of “acknowledging the world,” and its impingements on her freedom, mental health, gender rights, and homosexuality, was indirect, as I explore below; but was in its own way daring and socio-political, especially through her employment of voice and stance.

In Chapter 2, I establish the narrative practices of Anne Sexton, Juan Gelman, Francisco “Paco” Urondo, and Rodolfo Walsh; how these confessionalist, witnessing writers used their singular, autobiographical, experience-laden selves within their works of writing—crafted with fictionality, verisimilitude, twisting, rupture, and sound play—in a way that positioned the “I” as a representative of the experience of the many, and accrued socio-political heft. In this chapter, I consider Bishop alongside the Argentine poet Olga Orozco (1920-99), both of whom were very much noted for not allowing themselves to appear in such an exposed manner as subjects in their own poetry. Where in Chapter 2 I argue that confessionalism’s representational positioning of

the autobiographical “I” implicated the poet in a socio-political act, here in this chapter I show how poetry can interact with a historical context in differing, stylistic ways, ones that were not so loud about calling for change.

When a poet like Elizabeth Bishop does turn the lens upon herself in her writing, the instances are focused, powerful, purposeful; in “In the Waiting Room,” of Bishop’s 1976 collection *Geography III*, she writes: “I said to myself: three days / and you’ll be seven years old. / I was saying it to stop / the sensation of falling off / the round, turning world / into cold, blue-black space. / But I felt: you are an *I*, / you are an *Elizabeth*, / you are one of *them*. / I scarcely dared to look / to see what it was I was” (*The Complete Poems* 160) (emphases in original). Here she is perceptive about herself as she is so often perceptive of the details of the scenes and other, usually natural subjects of her poetry. It seems she has so distanced herself as a writer here from the experiencing subject that the narrative split is clean; there is no real instructive tension, no clear representation work happening. In other words, she is not attempting to speak for others who also feel or consider this existential dilemma. She does, however, make a move here to establish her belonging to a world community, tracking an autobiographical shift that tells us how to read her later poems that do represent and are social and political pieces.

Comparing their work from the 1970s, Orozco’s poetic use of the “I” differs greatly from that of Bishop and especially that of Sexton and the Argentine writers I explore in the last chapter; Orozco’s was much more fictional, much less autobiographical. Nonetheless, Orozco’s “I” did serve as a guide in her pieces—often between the realm of the unreal, the mystical, and the real world; Alicia Genovese calls Orozco’s “I” medium-like (26). Her “I” in the poems I observe here, written during the high socio-political tension and repression of the 1970s,

maintain a non-specificity that also seems to speak for more than just an individual, making her poems lean toward social lyric rather than personal.

An important factor that must be considered when reading and analyzing Orozco's poetry of the 1970s is that of censorship, or rather, self-censorship, fostered by the threats from the Argentine state to subversives like writers and intellectuals. Orozco continued to live in the country during the military dictatorships of 1976-83, as did the writer María Elena Walsh, who wrote:

Muchos autores habían seguido escribiendo, pero conservaron sus cuentos en un cajón hasta que amaneciera, es decir, hasta que no se arriesgaran a la censura y por otra parte se abrieran las compuertas de la producción editorial. Todos habíamos incorporado una serie de estereotipos intemporales y un lenguaje temeroso, como si viniéramos exactamente de donde veníamos, de un paréntesis prolongado, de ese corazón de las tinieblas que nos había impedido ver y por lo tanto transcribir la realidad. (58)

Many authors had continued writing, but conserved their stories in a box until the light of day, that is to say, until they weren't risking censorship and for another matter until the doors of editorial production opened. We had all incorporated a series of atemporal stereotypes and a fearful language, as if we came exactly from where we here, which was a prolonged parenthesis, from that heart of shadows that had impeded us from seeing and therefore transcribing reality.

But in the corresponding work of Orozco, we can identify a poetics that does dare to press toward a reflection of the socio-political status of her nation. She used image and symbol to speak beyond the lines, as in "Lugar seguro" ("Safe Place"), from her collection *Noche a la deriva* [*Night Adrift*]:

Por dondequiera que se parta en dos la colmena del sueño,  
poniendo al descubierto la ciudad,  
el panal gigantesco elaborado por abejas dementes,  
no es difícil reconocer mi celda entre otras celdas.  
Mi casa es la que nunca termina de llegar.  
La que deja paredes rezagadas detrás de la intemperie;  
paredes que se acercan después con una escena en la que aúllan las tormentas  
con inscripciones de peligros ardientes que corren como teas en la oscuridad,



con siluetas en negro que se prueban en las caras del terror y de la ausencia:  
trofeos recogidos al azar en las vertiginosas travesías nocturnas. (*Poesía completa* 276)

Wherever the beehive of the dream, gigantic beehive elaborated  
by demented bees, is divided in two, revealing the city  
to discovery, it's not difficult  
to recognize my cell among other cells.  
My house is the one that never stops coming.  
The one that after bad weather abandons its walls;  
walls that draw close afterwards with a scene in which storms howl,  
with inscriptions of burning dangers running like torches in the darkness,  
with silhouettes in black that try on the faces of terror and absence,  
trophies collected by chance in dizzying nocturnal crossings. ("Safe Place")

Here, as in many others of her poems, Orozco's multi-layered symbolic world is fraught with danger and possibly reflective of the tension inherent to the real world in which she lived. And if the poems themselves do not primarily refer to or strive to reveal such tensions, the images she borrows do seem to come from a real, stricken source; instructive of her experience of life under dictatorship. Below, I consider how both Bishop and Orozco were daring, and how their poetry provides powerful and interesting examples of how socio-political representation and criticism can enter from a slant—through image and conversationality, the indirect positioning of the "I," speaking to experience but with a different balance of techniques than the confessionalists I explore in Chapter 2. I use the Argentine prose writer Julio Cortázar as a bridge between the writers of Chapter 2, who performed relation, representation, and advocacy, directly within their lines, and with the two poets of this chapter. Cortázar held strong beliefs about the imperative for writers to make revolution; but more so for their approaches to be literary and technical in new ways, for making a difference by renovating style, as both Bishop and Orozco bravely did.

Cortázar explained in *Casa de las Américas* (1967) how "En la vieja noción de que el estilo es el hombre, yo entendería que el estilo prueba la captación más alta y más rica de la

realidad del hombre, puesto que la devuelve potenciada, nueva, fecunda, inolvidable, a los lectores” ‘From the old notion that style makes the man, my understanding is that style proves the capturing of the highest and most rich realities of man, given that these are returned strengthened, new, fertile, unavoidable, to the reader’ (Collazos 49). In addition, he stipulated that writers must find new enriching formulas, angles, and displacements in order to be revolutionary (Collazos 66). Roque Dalton saw a similar responsibility to art, commenting that “[Un escritor] también sirve a la revolución si es un excelente escritor de ciencia ficción, ya que la literatura, entre otras funciones, cumple la de ampliar los horizontes del hombre” ‘[A writer] also serves the revolution if he is an excellent writer of science fiction, since literature, among other functions, attains that of broadening the horizons of man’ (Benedetti *Los poetas*, 25). Dalton, though, was also a very direct and testimonial poet, who used conversationality and humor to drive at the pain of experiences located within the socio-political reality of his own country and moment.

Cortázar did believe in fighting for his political beliefs, and shared the leftist, revolutionary tendencies of Gelman, Rodolfo Walsh, Urondo, Dalton, and Benedetti. He lived in Paris for over three decades, and part of them because he was officially exiled from Argentina. One of his collections of short stories, *Alguien que anda por ahí* [*Someone Walking out There*] (1977), was banned by the Argentine state; in his 1976 story “Apocalipsis en Solentiname” (“Apocalypse at Solentiname”), the political emerges in content, but it is also the difficult presentation of the difficult truth—his evocation of reality through style, his acknowledgment of the world by other means—that contributes to the revolutionary quality of the writing.<sup>1</sup>

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1. His book *Libro de Manuel* (1973) [*Manuel's Manual*] was most notably centered on an expression of and critical engagement with socio-political reality.

The first signal of “reality” or verisimilitude in “Apocalypse” is its autobiographical posture; a fictional version of Cortázar himself is the narrator and subject, a rare occurrence in his writing. Even though the story develops elements of the fantastic, the suggestion that the reader ease her separation from its events is very present—through the establishment of doubt through the isolation, suspicion, and inebriation of the main character—and integral to the delivery of shock at its climax. Much like in the confessional poetry explored in this dissertation, the narrator-subject’s intimacy and complicity is part of the dynamic that hopes for aid in the form of awareness; though with difference, his writing was much more situated within fiction, and too his exile factored significantly in his address.

The unspeakable in “Apocalypse”—an apt title term, for the implications of world-moving, game-changing extremity—takes shape through slide projections of photographs the narrator-subject snapped while visiting the poet, priest, and revolutionary Ernesto Cardenal in Solentiname in Nicaragua. The developed photographs, viewed from Paris, reveal images that the narrator-subject did not apparently see on his trip, but that he recognizes are entirely truthful of an array of Latin American socio-political realities. Police open fire in Buenos Aires; a woman is vaginally tortured; and he sees Dalton assassinated, and wants to click past the image as if he could save Dalton. As critic Alberto Moreiras argues, the incongruity between the initial snapshot subjects—or the narrator-subject’s recollection of these—and the images projected from the developed photographs is instructive of Cortázar’s ethic. The author is demonstrating the importance of overcoming obliterating memory and ignorance and seeing the truth in order to proceed in a corrected and aware future (Moreiras175). But rather than boldly state the unspeakable or comment on its horror, the author chooses to bury it in the fantastic, receding into his style.

Moreiras notes the author's discontent with the potential for writing to arrive at truth:

“Apocalipsis de Solentiname” is a writing of resistance insofar as it is a writing of mourning for poetic, ontological writing. It is a disutopian writing that not only states the loss of the Orphic function of writing, but that is openly traumatized by it. As such, it is a writing of pain at a distance, a telepathic writing—a writing of solidarity because the very possibility of solidarity is first put into question, and then only accepted as an expression of a thwarted, mimetic desire. It is not really the Solentiname paintings that constitute a “first vision of the world”: They only allegorize it, as they become the encrypture for a reality whose possibility remains only in its ceaseless concealment. And of that possibility, in negation, Cortázar gives testimony: a utopian writing, then, *because* it is prosaic, unholy, translated into destruction. (176)

This attitude falls in line with the disillusioned techniques described by Marianne Dekoven in her discussion of the U.S. American “utopia limited,” and which I explore in relation to the Argentine context in Chapter 1. The impossibility Cortázar encounters manifests in a way not unlike the narrative displacement practiced by Sexton that I discuss in Chapter 2, where diverting an identification of details of abuse with the author-narrator happens in the poem “Briar Rose.” In “Briar Rose,” the troubling of narrative precision involves play with pronouns, compared to Cortázar's troubling of diegetic rules, where the unreal and fictional step in. In their own ways, both authors promote the tension of the discovery, re-enacting its difficulty on the page.

Apart from pursuing revolution in style, Cortázar appears to have felt the requirement from his cohort and country to be present and *comprometido*, committed to fighting against the state and its policies of terror.<sup>2</sup> In the second sentence of “Apocalypse,” he invents an interview upon his arrival on the scene in Nicaragua, and the questions he cites are as follows: “¿Por qué

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2. Other prose writers incorporated treatments of the harms of the dictatorship in Argentina into their work, too, ranging from the obviously denunciatory to the evasive—Haroldo Conti, with his *Mascaró, el cazador americano* (1975); Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976); Griselda Gambaro's *Ganarse la muerte* (1976); David Viñas's *Cuerpo a cuerpo* (1979); Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración artificial* (1980); Juan José Saer's *Lo imborrable* (1980); Jacobo Timerman's *Preso sin nombre, celda sin número* (1980); Luisa Valenzuela's *Cambio de armas* (1982); Miguel Bonasso's *Recuerdo de la muerte* (1984); Héctor Tizón's *La Casa y el viento* (1984); and Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School* (1986), among other works by these and other Argentine writers.

no vivís en tu patria, qué pasó que Blow-Up era tan distinto de tu cuento, te parece que el escritor tiene que estar comprometido?” ‘Why don’t you live in your fatherland, what happened for Blow-Up to turn out so different from your story, do you think that writers have to be committed?’ (*We Love Glenda* 265). In characterizing these questions as typical, pervasive, and invasive, the author signals to the prevalence of that imperative. We also see Cortázar’s stance more directly in his letter to Urondo from 1973:

Y también porque otros leerán esta carta, cerca o lejos de vos, y comprenderán que de alguna manera quise estar con todos, y que mi abrazo con Jaime es el que todos nos damos y nos daremos siempre, hoy de lejos, mañana en esa calle abierta en que nos encontraremos para seguir el largo, necesario y hermoso camino que lleva a nuestro sueño. (“Carta muy abierta” 2014)

And also because others will read this letter, close to or far from you, and they will understand that in a way I wanted to be with you all, and that my embrace with Jaime is one we all give one another and will always give one another, today from afar, tomorrow in that open street in which we will find ourselves and follow the long, necessary, and beautiful path that leads to our dream.

The revolutionary ideology and imaginary is active in his words. Where “Apocalypse” exemplifies Cortázar’s struggle regarding and practicing the intersection of politics and literature, the Argentine evidently held political solidarity as imperative for his country’s recovery—of its future and its memory.

In the United States, during this same period of the early 1970s, writers grappled with social issues in their work, like the Argentine writers some more directly so than others. Adrienne Rich noted the circumstances of opposition and how she saw the need for reaching a culpable public nevertheless: “The question for a North American poet is how to bear witness to a reality from which the public—and maybe part of the poet—wants, or is persuaded it wants, to turn away. Then and only then, when this is said, can we talk about the...problems of creating an

art rooted in language, a social art” (*What Is Found* 115). Rich popularized her style and expanded her scope of advocacy and references to socio-political ills in her early 1970s poetry, as I explore in the next chapter. She also fractured her syntax and enacted confession in her poetic form; as did Sexton, the other primary confessionalist I analyze in this dissertation, with moments of brazen assertion of her experience of social ills. Bishop was daring in her own way, as I examine below.

The act of treating socio-political circumstances in these two countries was daring at any level of directness, though more so in Argentina. Many writers did refuse to incorporate their country’s difficult reality into their work (including Jorge Luis Borges and Victoria Ocampo), or refused to publish their writing during the most difficult years of the dictatorship, from 1976 through the end of the decade.<sup>3</sup> The threat of retaliation for speaking against the Argentine government was tangible and awful.<sup>4</sup> Walsh wrote in his letter to Urondo after the poet’s death regarding the question of leaving and saving himself:

Pudiste irte. En París, en Madrid, en Roma, en Praga, en la Habana, tenías amigos, lectores, traductores. Podías sentarte a ver desfilar en tu memoria el ancho río de tu vida, la vida de los tuyos, volcarlos en páginas cada vez más justas, cada vez más sabias. Con el tiempo quién lo duda, habrías figurado entre esos grandes escritores que eran tus amigos, tu nombre asociado al nombre de tu país, pedirían tu opinión sobre los problemas que agitan al mundo. Preferiste quedarte, despojarte, igualarte a los que tenían menos, a los que no tenían nada. (“Semblanza escrita”)

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3. The majority of disappearances enacted by the Argentine state occurred before 1980; in the new decade, the dictatorship was in decline.

4. Alicia Partnoy and Jacobo Timerman had been forced into clandestine detention centers and tortured; Haroldo Conti and the poet Roberto Santoro were captured, likely tortured, and disappeared; and Urondo and Rodolfo Walsh were executed in public. Juan Gelman’s, Paco Urondo’s, and David Viñas’s children were disappeared. And Julio Cortázar, Miguel Bonasso, Griselda Gambaro, Ricardo Piglia, Manuel Puig, Juan José Saer, Héctor Tizón, David Viñas, and poets Juan Gelman, Julio Huasi, Alberto Szpunberg, Mario Romero and Mario Trejo were all forcibly exiled. Luisa Valenzuela was the only one to not have to live outside of Argentina, though her home was raided by police. Not to mention the writers subjected to state violence elsewhere in the region in the 70s and 80s: Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile, Brazil, Bolivia, and Central America.

You could have gone. In Paris, in Madrid, in Rome, in Prague, in Havana, you had friends, readers, translators. You could have settled down to watch the wide river of your life flow by, of your lives, spill them into pages in turn more just, in turn more wise. With time who can doubt, you would have figured among those great writers who were your friends, your name associated with the name of your country, they would ask your opinion about the problems that rack the world. You preferred to stay, to bare yourself, make yourself an equal to those who had less, to those that had nothing.

Exile afforded protection and new impetuses for writers to produce difficult, baring, and identity-affirming works that alerted an international crowd to what was transpiring in Argentina. The few who stayed had their voices systematically taken from them. At the end of *Disappearing Acts*, a study of gender, politics, violence, and the nation in plays written around the Argentine dictatorship, Diana Taylor writes that it is not until twelve years after the end of the dictatorship that people in Argentina began to speak of the harms that had occurred (256).<sup>5</sup>

Jorge Perednik speaks of the delay in the production of magazines in Argentina that María Elena Walsh references in the quote I cite above:

Hicieron falta tres o cuatro años para organizar estas respuestas al miedo, lo que tiene su explicación: en un ambiente signado por la censura a los escritos y la persecución a las personas, en el que incluso la apariencia de pensar era sospechosa, y donde por otro lado las dificultades económicas eran enormes, la publicación de revistas, rodeada de obstáculos amenazantes, era a la vez una especie de locura y un acto de sensatez. (9)

It took three or four years to organize these responses to fear, which has an explanation: in an atmosphere marked by censorship of writing and the persecution of persons, in which even the appearance of thinking was suspicious, and where on the other hand the economic difficulties were enormous, magazine publication, surrounded by threatening obstacles, was at once a kind of insanity and an act of good sense.

Perednik's characterization of these atmosphere of these years suggests their confused, indefinable, and indefinite nature, beneficial to the dictatorship in its pervasiveness. In a

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5. Interestingly, Taylor notes that it was the confession of the first military officer to the human rights abuses of the dictatorship that initiated this turn (256).

synthesis of his study *Censura, autoritarismo y cultura: Argentina, 1960-1983*, Andrés

Avellaneda further describes the censorship in Argentina:

El discurso represivo no sólo alcanzó a paralizar la cultura y la sociedad concretas con el acto de censura. También logró inmovilizar la cultura y la sociedad posibles por medio del acto de autocensura, lo que pudo ser viable por la gradual (y, por último, acelerada y violenta) internalización del sentido total del discurso en los productores de cultura. Entender con exactitud qué es cada cosa, qué es lo permitido y qué lo prohibido, fue quizás la tarea (a menudo subconsciente) más importante de la cultura argentina en el último cuarto de siglo. (35)

The repressive discourse not only managed to paralyze concrete culture and society with the act of censorship. It also managed to immobilize possible culture and society through the act of self-censorship, which was able to be viable in the gradual (and, ultimately, accelerated and violent) internalization of the total sense of the discourse in the producers of culture. Understanding with exactitude what each thing is, what is permitted and what prohibited, was perhaps the most important task (at times subconscious) of Argentine culture in the last quarter of the century.

The confounding nature of silence and non-recognition of fact subsumed the populace, and their fear persisted, extending the legacy of the dictatorship. The latent and explicit force of this automatically made acknowledgment of it and the truth of the acts of the dictatorship difficult, therefore positioning writing that attempted that acknowledgment—that of Orozco, and Urondo, Gelman, César Fernández Moreno, Noé Jitrik, Miguel Bonasso, Rodolfo Walsh, Haroldo Conti, and others—as confessional. This confessional writing was discursive, as Jeremy Tambling notes is a basic tenet of the mode, though it was not at all times conversational, as Benedetti described some Latin American poetry of the period. Orozco offers an excellent example of how poetic techniques can be used, rather than conversationally, to indirectly address the reality of a country in turmoil.

### **Orozco: Daring Differently**



In an interview collected in Benedetti's *Los poetas comunicantes* [*The Communicative Poets*] in 1972, Fernández Retamar responded to a question about his debt to the Cuban Revolution as a poet: "Lo hago [el realismo poético] porque la realidad tiene ahora, aun más que de costumbre—y es mucho decir—, caracteres irreales" 'I write [poetic realism] because reality now has, more than usual—and that is saying a lot—, unreal characteristics' (210-11). The literary response to trying political times, as I have been exploring, varies between grappling with reality's truth directly and allowing the "unreal" qualities of that reality to seep through the writer's technique indirectly.

Those writers who stayed in Argentina and did not face political consequences from the state for their writing still could be political on the page in alternate, if not risky ways. They followed their own paths, aligning with Cortázar's revolutionary ethic—that, more important than recognizing reality and witnessing in their work, writers must use style in a revolutionary way (Collazos 66). One such writer was Orozco, who was already feminist and political for the departures she practiced away from the masculine literary tradition of her country: "Por siglos la mujer argentina estuvo sometida a una estructura jurídica, social, cultural y literaria que la confinó al mundo doméstico, a una educación limitada, a una alienación del pensamiento universal, a una dependencia familiar, económica y, a menudo, al silencio y a la invisibilidad" 'For centuries the Argentine woman was suppressed by a legal, social, cultural, and literary structure that confined her to the domestic world, to a limited education, to an alienation from universal thought, to a dependency that was familial, economic, and, at times, to silence and invisibility' (Rosman-Askot 79). The content of her writing was symbolically inclined, very illustrative, and not ever directly historical or involving imperatives or calls to action. But her

methods and style lent to questionings of the norm and offered strength and support for upheaval, literary and social, of gender roles.

In addition to the fact that Orozco wrote through the dictatorship, she was her most productive in the 1970s, publishing four collections between 1974 and 1979. She was friends with Alejandra Pizarnik, and kept to the literary family prominently defined by Borges and Oliverio Girondo and the Ultraist/Surrealist strains they had introduced into Argentina. Because of this Orozco's work did away with rhyme and played up imagery as a way of drawing the reader in. Her lines are very long—derivative of Neruda and Darío's expansions into free verse and a more prose-like line—and she frequently uses prose poems, another nod to Surrealism. As Alicia Genovese explains:

Dentro de los nombres que constituyen la generación del 40 y la del 50 en Argentina, cuando Olga Orozco comienza a publicar, no hay muchas mujeres escritoras. Tampoco hay muchas mujeres escritoras o artistas en el surrealismo, ni en el grupo francés donde surge, que es centralmente masculino, ni luego en Argentina. Para el surrealismo la mujer fue transporte hacia lejanas tierras, mediadora, intercesora, objeto fantasma; uno de los puentes entre este mundo y el otro, el surreal, ese espacio de caos que proyectado sobre el mundo cotidiano podía quebrar con convenciones y costumbres. Olga Orozco construyó de diferentes maneras un yo lírico mediúmnico entre este mundo y ese otro. (26)

Among the names that constitute the generation of the 40s and 50s in Argentina, when Olga Orozco begins to publish, there are not many women writers. Neither are there many women writers or artists in Surrealism, nor in the French group from which it emerges, centrally masculine, or later in Argentina. For Surrealism the woman was a transport into foreign lands, a mediator, an intercessor, a ghost object; one of the bridges between this world and the next, the surreal, that space of chaos that, projected on the quotidian world, could break with conventions and customs. Olga Orozco constructed in different ways a medium-like lyrical "I" between this world and that other realm.

This positioning of the author-narrator (without her necessarily functioning as narrator-subject, as can be found in the poetry of Bishop) is crucial to the daring and political elements that Orozco's poems possess, as I have mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. For even if

these elements eschew access and direct socio-political import, they can share ties with the discursive and speak or contribute to a political discussion otherwise, and I believe—as with Bishop—they do as a direct result of the historical moment in which her poems were being written. Jill S. Kuhnheim writes of the politics of her work: “She uses a surer, more mature voice to speak from many places. Her poetic voice is fragmented, not fixed, and therefore neither subordinated nor dominating” (*Gender* 49). This trait hearkens to my discussion of fragmentation within the poetic line and even the written word in the previous chapters, supported by, among others, the critical notions of Nelly Richard, who argues that this practice responded to the experience of fractured reality by writers under dictatorship.<sup>6</sup> A varying voice can certainly be expressive, as well as a power move; as Kuhnheim goes on, “This speaker subverts the concentration of power in one voice by making herself many.... She appears to gain strength by occupying a variety of perspectives” (*Gender* 62). Orozco as author-narrator is hyper-present, observant, and in control.<sup>7</sup>

Kuhnheim notes that the poet becomes more interrogating in her later poems (which recalls Gelman’s development of the use of questions in his poems), perhaps another signal of her experience as an Argentine during the many doubts roiled up by the dictatorship. Too, in her 1979 collection *Mutaciones de la realidad* [*Reality Mutations*]<sup>8</sup>—a title that smacks of implication in the socio-political realm—Orozco treats the postmodern end of utopian possibilities and (re)birth into a hostile world (Kuhnheim *Gender*, 15). As Genovese noted, much of Orozco’s writing delves into the metaphysical, along with the ritualistic; yet the emergence of

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6. See Richard.

7. An interesting related fact about the poet is that Orozco contributed significantly to the magazine *Yo, Claudia*, in which she wrote freely and sometimes controversially—about Carlos Gardel, about Borges, about Marilyn Monroe, and more—yet always under pseudonyms.

this book alongside the darkening of Argentina under dictatorship and concurrent dwindling of revolutionary hope is more than haphazard. In “Brillos, soplos, rumores” (“Gleams, Gusts, Rustlings”) Orozco’s symbolic, rather than discursive writing methods, heighten the sense of interpretability in the poem. Here, her symbols seemingly point to the difficult truth of Argentine life, especially when she lands on the final word, “desaparecidos”—the disappeared—so crucial to the lexicon of the Argentine case (*Poesía completa* 231).

Es exigua esta luz.

Apenas si dibuja escenas inconstantes hechizadas por el fulgor de la corriente  
o pájaros prisioneros en un témpano inmóvil.

Todo lo que se va entre dos golpes de ola, como cambiar los ojos;  
todo lo que se queda como estatua de sal en su visión insomne.

Esta luz es de paso y es mortal.

Nada que me descifre qué puede ser entonces  
esta intención de brillo que llega sin un cuerpo donde poder estar...

.....

Es voraz esta luz.

Absorbe sin piedad al que retorna con su rostro extranjero.

Sólo me deja restos, vestigios insolubles de esos vagos tejidos que fragua la nostalgia.

Aunque quizás se trate de mi propia nostalgia y de otra luz.

¿No soy acaso un brillo, un soplo y un rumor también indescifrables,

allá, donde acudo con mi carne intangible y mis disueltos pies

a una densa reunión de desaparecidos? (*Poesía completa* 231)

This light is scant.

It scarcely paints inconstant scenes entranced by the glint of the current  
or imprisoned birds on a still floe.

All that goes between two beats of a wave, like changing eyes;  
all that stays is like a statue of salt in its sleepless vision.

This light is migrant and is mortal.

Nothing that deciphers me what could it be then  
this intent to gleam that arrives without a body to be in...

.....

This light is voracious.

It absorbs without mercy whoever comes back with a foreign face.

It only leaves me remains,

insoluble vestiges of those vague fabrics that forge nostalgia.

Though it may be it has to do with my own nostalgia and another light.

Am I not a gleam, a gust, and a rustling also indecipherable,  
there, where I turn with my intangible flesh and my broken feet  
to a dense reunion of the disappeared?

Critics have established the distance Orozco's writing maintains from reality, especially political reality; noting that she tends to prefer instead to function abstractly, introspectively, and even intellectually. It is her construction of images that best allows her to communicate and connect with the reader. Yet in *Mutaciones de la realidad* [*Reality Mutations*] and in *Cantos a Berenice* [*Songs for Berenice*] (1977), as Thorpe Running argues, there is present an express doubt in the capacity for language and even image to sufficiently describe reality. I would expand on Running's point to say that the referent, the signified, is highly tumultuous in the poem above and throughout *Mutaciones de la realidad* [*Reality Mutations*]. Her subject is not ever explicitly established, and thus the confessional and instructive potential of it is incomplete; however, through her presentation and methodology Orozco is evoking an instability, a tenuousness, and a brokenness. Whatever is behind her images and however far it extends (whether it is her felt experience or her sensitivity to that of others), it is being threatened.

The examples stack up. In "Presentimientos en traje de ritual" ("Premonitions in Ritual Dress") her opening lines read, "Llegan como ladrones en la noche. / Fuerzan las cerraduras" "They arrive like thieves in the night. They force the locks"; later action-based images include "me saquean a ciegas" "they rob me blind," "hurgan con frías uñas" "they dig with cold nails," and "me arrancan de raíz" "they uproot me." The violence of the language and signifiers is powerful, as is the insecurity of the referent, here presented as "la insoluble sustancia que no soy, / esa marea a tientas que sube cuando bajan los tigres en el alba, / tapiza la pared, / me tapia las ventanas, / destapa los disfraces del verdugo que me mata mejor" "that insoluble substance I am not, / that grappling surge that rises when the tigers descend in the dawn, / it coats the walls, / it

covers my windows, / it uncovers the masks of the murderer who kills me best' (*Poesía completa* 225-6). The existential discussion, and the stifling felt by the narrator, is overwhelming. In "Operación nocturna" ("Night Operation") blackness, abyss, and imprisonment preside in her images. In "Bloques al rojo, bloques en blanco" ("Red-Hot Blocks, White Blocks") the words in the title have strong symbolic connotations, yet other more clearly political terms emerge in the poem such as landscape, exile, destiny, memory, condemnation, oblivion, and history. Her message is, quite philosophical and political, "no solamente sobre piedras se erigieron los reinos de este mundo, / sino también, y más, sobre las mordeduras del hambre y de la ausencia" 'not only upon rocks was the kingdom of this world erected, / but also, and more so, upon the bitemarks of hunger and of absence' (*Poesía completa* 238). The closest Orozco comes to socio-political commentary in the collection is in the poem "Continente vampiro" ("Vampire Continent"), where the continent, laden as it is with symbolic connotation, is abstractly described as plundering and a source of doubt and pain for her, posited as the narrator (*Poesía completa* 251).

Orozco, along with Bishop, seems to be a prime example of how one can speak and yet remain silent—and may be instructive, further, of how to navigate censorship. The information of her poems lies in their expressiveness, though the poet never forms an accessible connection or discourse with the reader; she provides layers of symbols, images, and metaphors without giving any clear instruction for their unpacking. The referents are fleeting as she, the author-narrator, is fleeting; I have borrowed Genovese's term "medium" above, but again the author-narrator is not an intermediary for the reader—only between the poem's system of symbols and the worlds, meanings, or messages they are meant to represent. Kuhnheim describes this phenomenon: "Her poetic speaker is a heroine in motion but is also a mute and anchored object,

unable to search for alternatives” (*Gender* 66). Repeatedly, Orozco presents the narrator-subject in *Mutaciones de la realidad* [*Reality Mutations*] as a statue, or sunk, or erased.

It is not unusual for Orozco to tap into images that are violent, dark, and brooding; much of her poetry explores the mystic and gnostic, contributing to an ethic of knowledge and perception that defines her oeuvre. Her existential preoccupations are highly intimate, and, it seems, made purposefully difficult to be accessed by a readership. Orozco constructs images that are complex, as in her poem “Variaciones sobre el tiempo” (“Variations on Time”):

Tiempo:

te has vestido con la piel carcomida del último profeta;  
te has gastado la cara hasta la extrema palidez;  
te has puesto una corona hecha de espejos rotos y lluviosos jirones,  
y salmodias ahora el balbuceo del porvenir con las desenterradas melodías de antaño,  
mientras vagas en sombras por tu hambriento escorial, como los reyes locos (*Poesía completa* 266)

Time:

you have dressed yourself in the chewed skin of the last prophet;  
you have spent your face to the point of extreme paleness;  
you have put on a crown made of broken mirrors and dampened shreds,  
and you drone the stammering of dawn with the dug-up melodies of yesteryear,  
while you wander in shadows by your starving palace, like the insane kings

One cannot help but feel at least partly eschewed from the text; the images compound in a way that seems to throw us off her track, though here the complication of the poem rests in the congruence of the list of descriptors, one per line, that she provides as a way of developing an understanding of her subject, “time.” In the poem “Brillos, soplos, rumores” (“Gleams, Gusts, Rustlings”) cited above, while Orozco also provides a kind of list as a way of developing her subject, “light”—as “scant,” as “migrant and mortal,” as “voracious”—multiple lines are spent between list items in order to establish how light can be each. Within the lines describing that “how,” her metaphors compound (and confound): light’s scant quality is described as “scarcely

paint[ing]” “inconstant scenes” which are themselves entranced by the current or by birds that are prisoners on a “still floe” (*Poesía completa* 231). The stacking of images which then have their own reasons for being, curious provenances, and qualifications produces a kind of chase on the page; can we as readers keep up with her? In “Variaciones sobre el tiempo” (“Variations on Time”), “Time,” the mental effort required to puzzle out how time can dress “in the chewed skin of the last prophet,” spend its “face to the point of extreme paleness,” “put on a crown made of broken mirrors and dampened shreds,” “drone the stammering of dawn,” etc., is great. However, it is in this very way that Orozco invites the reader to participate. The need for unpacking implicates the reader in the construction of the poems’ meanings. But then—this is where Orozco remains on top, stumping us all—she never quite arrives at a clear resolution, resulting in tension and unease within the poem (Kuhnheim *Gender*, 57). As I demonstrate of Bishop’s poetry below, the U.S. American took an indirect approach that was more patient, rather than complicating. And instead of arriving at (or erupting into) moments of clarity, it is Orozco’s driving and insistence that are the instructive parts of her poetry. As such, her designs on readerly experience rest largely with promoting a sense or sentiment that cannot be arrived at logically but through requiring a giving over to the poem, an attempt to unpack it, and finally observing our own experiences and failures in the process.

Orozco’s musicality also functions to the end of instruction and cohesion, though of a particular ilk. The length of her verses permits her images to compound and her thought units to build, toward that complexity that can result in a reader’s failure to understand and that is, as a result, a kind of exclusive intellectualism. Her use of internal rhyme promotes the cohesion of her images and thoughts and the sense of interplay between ideas. In “El revés de la trama” (“The Backside of Plot”), the lines “Difícultosamente, / como un animal anfibio que trata de



adaptarse” ‘Difficultly, as an amphibian animal tries to adapt,’ the assonances with the “a” and “i” sounds and alliterations of the “f,” “t,” “d,” and “n” sounds interweave Orozco’s words without a discernible methodology. Her meter, though, is more methodical (“absorbo con mi pan la insoluble penuria enmascarada de alimento” ‘I absorb with my bread the insoluble scarcity that’s disguised as sustenance’); by keeping her lines fluid, she at least ensures the reader’s pleasant movement through her difficult themes. Her stanzaic form is nontraditional but also lends organization to her writing (*Poesía completa* 258). The poems flux into and out of transportability, where superficial poetic elements are the beginning access points, but the destination and implication of the poems is disturbed, unfinished.

Kuhnheim also recognizes Orozco’s poems as constituting a process, or in her words, as having a performative function: “The poems are little rituals, momentary apertures through which an idea or a person might emerge.... [B]y stressing the discontinuous elements of language, time subjectivity and poetry itself, Orozco creates a gap that permits her readers an intense perception of the problem she describes” (“Cultural Affirmations” 43). It is interesting to note Kuhnheim’s use of the word “gap,” for that confirms the elusory, slant manner in which I have claimed Orozco permits her readers to enter her poems. Melanie Nicholson interprets the uniqueness of the poet’s approach—along with that of Alejandra Pizarnik and Jacobo Fijman—as preventing a certain kind of reception: “by adopting certain conventions of an esoteric worldview, these writers are able to manipulate a system of tropes that posits the magical power of the poetic word; simultaneously, however, they undermine the efficacy of the word by acknowledging its failure to effect a change in the world” (xv). In other words, the meaning and purpose of poems like Orozco’s are not so transportable as to be socially or politically instructive, as can be the confessional and testimonial works I explored in the previous chapter.

Orozco's brand of daring, gotten through her images and interrogation, places demands on our logical and imaginative capacity—more than it requires us to use historical or contextualizing fact to interpret what she writes. As Nicholson goes on to write, “Though the subject of the book is ‘reality,’ both the poetic speaker and the reader are constantly thwarted in the attempt to grasp that reality as any sort of meaningful whole. The assumption underlying *Mutaciones de la realidad* [*Reality Mutations*], in sum, is that reality is unknowable by rational means” (19). That statement in itself can be seen as a commentary about the difficulty of reality itself, to return to my statement above that the referent for Orozco's images is tumultuous; and so her striving against it—her straining to produce adequate images and accurate names that ultimately fails, leaving the poems to be unresolved—may be reflective of turmoil in the poet's self or life, or even in the lives of those with whom she identifies, Argentine.

Outside of her poetry, Orozco did take more direct political stances under the cover of pseudonyms in her prose contributions to the magazine *Claudia*. With the protection of anonymity, she developed first-person cultural and literary commentaries, including on Borges and Urondo. In this medium, she is more obviously a participant in her social and professional community, and though anonymous, engages with her context in a very head-on, critical, and sometimes lighthearted way. Yet within her poetry, she writes, “¿No soy acaso un brillo, un soplo y un rumor también indescifrables, / allá, donde acudo con mi carne intangible y mis disueltos pies / a una densa reunión de desaparecidos?” ‘Am I not a gleam, a gust, and a rustling also indecipherable, / there, where I turn with my intangible flesh and my broken feet / to a dense reunion of the disappeared?’ (*Poesía completa* 231). She seems, with all her compounding, to not ultimately wish total isolation or burial under her cryptic clues, but for belonging and relation. Her manner of connecting with her reader rests on the process, the exploration; she

speaks through her mediation, through showing and constructing the impossibility of pinning down a hard truth, such as the struggle of living under dictatorship she may have wrestled with more explicitly beyond her poetry.

Orozco's hard-to-see images were purposefully challenging and in accordance with the poet's aesthetic and relationship with clarity of meaning. As I have been arguing, Orozco's ethic in writing poetry primarily honored the beauty of abstraction and intellectualism, but may have also been making meaning through indirect references to the harms of Argentina's dictatorships through which the poet lived. Her writing, until her death in 1999, stayed consistently abstract; perhaps indicative of the lasting legacy of the dictatorship and its pervasive practices of repression, especially, for Orozco, that of its censorship. Her poetry remained distinctively her own during the 1970s, but shifted to reflect a present and a way of living that seems to have affected Orozco deeply—or reflected what she was consciously willing to allow into her work.

### **Bishop's Method of "Acknowledging the World"**

The balance between the unavoidable influence of experience and an author's ethic or intention varies from person to person; in an Argentina under dictatorship, there was great immediacy and urgency to the events unfolding, difficult to ignore, though many tried. Contrastingly, in a United States where social issues were coming to a head, living through socially and politically-imposed silences—surrounding assertions of the fraught natures of depression, alcoholism, homosexuality, and female gender roles, as applied to Elizabeth Bishop—was an endurance race, with less immediacy and urgency. Still, it was daring to address these issues openly, as it was for Orozco to take on senses of the dictatorship's harms in her poetry, if indirectly.

In consonance with Fernández Retamar's quote about reality's then-unreal characteristics, David Kalstone writes of Elizabeth Bishop in *The Five Temperaments*: "She sees with such a rooted, piercing vision, so realistically, because she has never taken our presence in the world as totally real" (32). Octavio Paz, too, notes how her leaping play suggests a unique relationship with reality: "The poem is a powerful lens that plays with distances and presences. The juxtaposition of spaces and perspectives makes the poem a theatre where the oldest and most quotidian of mysteries is represented: reality and its riddles" (15). Bishop is received as a descriptive poet, direct in her observations; a style which progressively over her life she was able to tie more closely to the personal. She struggled with forming that tie, though; her difficult realities as an adult (elements she continuously suppressed from the public) were those of a lesbian and a person who sometimes struggled with alcohol and depression; when she was an infant, her father died, and her mother entered an insane asylum when she was four. Bishop moved quite often in her youth, living with different relatives. Transitoriness of place and home was a major topic of her poetry—she would later live, among other places, in Boston, Key West, New York, San Francisco, and Brazil.

The feel of directness in her writing comes from the short distance between the narrative, seeing "eye" and the reader. Bishop establishes her scene and visual subjects swiftly through an accessibly descriptive language. The visual element of Bishop's work is not static, though, but cinematographic; her visual exploration further grounds the eye, making the reader depend upon and trust her as a narrator-guide. Within her 1976 collection *Geography III*, in the poem "The End of March," she writes:

It was cold and windy, scarcely the day  
to take a walk on that long beach.  
Everything was withdrawn as far as possible,

indrawn: the tide far out, the ocean shrunken,  
seabirds in ones or twos.  
The rackety, icy, offshore wind  
numbed our faces on one side;  
disrupted the formation  
of a lone flight of Canada geese;  
and blew back the low, inaudible rollers  
in upright, steely mist. (*The Complete Poems* 179)

We are presented along with this beach scene an awareness of the figure of the narrator-subject walking there. Here Bishop is established, if not in plain sight, as a definitive figure in her own poem, though in her earlier work this was rarer. Otherwise Bishop hid; as Adam Kirsch writes in *The Wounded Surgeon*, “Seeing, for her, is not a luxurious pleasure, but a means of escape, and finally an ordeal” (66). Later in the poem “The End of March,” Bishop enters into a sort of daydream depicting an ideal scene within the beach house at which she as a narrator-subject never physically arrives within the course of the poem, a scene of isolation and contentment, with Bishop alone, writing, and with drink to accompany her. That craved, imagined scene is visually explored as carefully as was the earlier, literal scene in which the poet establishes herself as a narrator. It seems Bishop has taken care to usher along the possibility for the mental departure, and not just this, but that the visual tangibility of the thought-scape mirrors the quality of the real scene and, thus, attracts, distracts, and releases the poet from the confines of her present.

This is the reticence (toward direct or real statement, referring succinctly to reality) to which people refer when discussing this poet.<sup>8</sup> The prominence of the visual and her leaping

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8. Such people include prominent scholars on Bishop’s work Thomas Travisano and Lloyd Schwartz; poets and critics Seamus Heaney, James Longenbach, and David Shapiro; and even Octavio Paz, who wrote an essay on Bishop entitled “Elizabeth Bishop, o el poder de la reticencia” (“Elizabeth Bishop, or the Power of Reticence”). Paz also translated “The End of March” as “El fin de marzo, Duxbury” in the October, 1975 issue of *Plural*.

between observations is a front for establishing the intellectual workings-through of her reality, processes which rarely instruct the reader about Bishop's identity—only providing fleeting clues about the ways in which her mind travels, makes sense, interprets, or connects. Paz also comments on this fleeting element in Bishop's work:

In the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop things waver between being what they are and being something distinct from what they are. This uncertainty is manifested at times as humor and at other times as metaphor. In both cases it is resolved, invariably, in a leap that is a paradox: things become other things without ceasing to be the things they are. This leap has two names: one is imagination, the other is freedom... Imagination describes the poetic act as a gratuitous game; freedom defines it as moral choice. The poetry of Elizabeth Bishop has the lightness of a game and the gravity of a decision. ("Elizabeth Bishop" 15)

In addition to homing in on the tentativeness of meaning in Bishop's poetry, Paz points out how her silence provides opportunities for instruction, how she is able to speak within her pauses; which recalls Orozco's engagement with referents through image and symbol ("Elizabeth Bishop" 15). Bishop's silence, like Orozco's, does not preclude her ability to be political. She moves through it, signaling its weight when she remains behind the scenes as a narrating poet-subject, and breaking it with significance when she does assert historicity, acknowledging the poem's presence in a historical context.

We can especially see this acknowledgment of a place and time in which political events deeply affected daily life in Brazil in her uncollected poem, "Suicide of a Moderate Dictator." Though this is perhaps a poem which most clearly promises political content, Bishop turns away from direct acknowledgment of the significance of Getúlio Vargas's death in 1954, instead turning her camera's eye onto the behaviors of the public and the nature of the day, communicating indirectly about her own perspective and the observed perspective of others.

A curious aspect of this poem is its visual resonance with “The End of March,” and how each poem’s shared use of images shapes distinct awarenesses and acknowledgments. Though “Suicide of a Moderate Dictator” predates “The End of March” and *Geography III* by at least a decade (it is unclear when, between the event and 1967, Bishop produced the poem), the imagery and its symbols resonate closely with one another. The final image in “Suicide of a Moderate Dictator” is nearly parallel to that in the second and last stanzas of “The End of March”. Here is the scene in “Suicide of a Moderate Dictator”:

This is a day that’s beautiful as well,  
and warm and clear. At seven o’clock I saw  
the dogs being walked along the famous beach  
as usual, in a shiny gray-green dawn,  
leaving their paw prints draining in the wet.  
The line of breakers was steady and the pinkish,  
segmented rainbow steadily hung above it.  
At eight two little boys were flying kites. (*Edgar Allan Poe* 104)

Here is the beach of “The End of March”:

The sky was darker than the water  
—*it* was the color of mutton-fat jade.  
Along the wet sand, in rubber boots, we followed  
a track of big dog-prints (so big  
they were more like lion-prints). Then we came on  
lengths and lengths, endless, of wet white string,  
looping up to the tide-line, down to the water,  
over and over. Finally, they did end:  
a thick white snarl, man-size, awash,  
rising on every wave, a sodden ghost,  
falling back, sodden, giving up the ghost....  
A kite string?—But no kite.  
.....  
On the way back our faces froze on the other side.  
The sun came out for just a minute.  
For just a minute, set in their bezels of sand,  
the drab, damp, scattered stones  
were multi-colored,

and all those high enough threw out long shadows,  
individual shadows, then pulled them in again.  
They could have been teasing the lion sun,  
except that now he was behind them  
—a sun who'd walked the beach the last low tide,  
making those big, majestic paw-prints,  
who perhaps had batted a kite out of the sky to play with. (*The Complete Poems* 179-80)

The overlaps are such that one could reasonably wonder if the later poem is in fact a response to the earlier, especially given the emphasis of the italicization in the second line of the first cited stanza of “The End of March,” figuring as the second stanza of the full poem. The “it” is nearly ambiguous, attached as it is to the em dash and heading the new line; does it in fact refer to the sky, to the water, or to another, separate conversation the poet has in mind? The first stanza bears no mention of color; only the first line of the second stanza, “The sky was darker than the water,” sets up the discussion of shade. That the water is of a jade hue, resembling the color of mutton fat, is a curiously involved and nearly overly emphatic distinction to make from the darker sky. Why does it matter to insist that it is so? (*The Complete Poems* 179).

Of course, poets repurpose imagery, language, and even relations and positionings of poetic elements throughout their years of work (consciously or not), so it is likely not the case that “The End of March” picks up where “Suicide of a Moderate Dictator” leaves off. Still, the connections are fodder for conjectures and contemplations, especially knowing that “Suicide of a Moderate Dictator” was an incomplete work (Longenbach 468).<sup>9</sup> The uncanniness of the shiny gray-green dawn, the wet prints, the kite flying, and the line drawn by the waves (though in the early case, this line rests on the surface of the body of the impending ocean, instead of shaped by the reach of the waves’ wash on the beach) more usefully tells us as readers about what

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9. It is also interesting to note that Bishop bought her house in Duxbury in 1953, a year before Vargas’s death.



fascinates the poet, setting her up for delivering thought and compelling her to produce a poem concerning that thought.

The two poems also, instructively for us, pause to create the opportunity for building up the grandness of that thought. Bishop had a view overlooking the Copacabana beach from her apartment in Rio de Janeiro; in “Suicide of a Moderate Dictator” she establishes the calm and continuous beauty of an hour-long gap—further implicated in suspension by the hanging rainbows and flying kites. In “The End of March,” she takes care to insert that appearance of the sun in Duxbury, which apparently miraculously and drastically changed the color and presence of the landscape from the previous drab and dragging quality it held. By making each of these moves in her pieces, the poet is creating the spatial, temporal, and emotional room in which her most important musings can reside. Both moments are constructed around very imagistically rich, positive scenes that the poet pauses on, and are interestingly contrasting with the overtones of earlier parts of each poem; this contrast constitutes another kind of opportunity for the poet to imply or assert meaning, besides the visual and temporal suspension. It is in these two moments that the effect of each poem lands: though Bishop keeps very strictly to a visual approach to her writing, in her presentations, and in her pausings, we come to understand that in “Suicide of a Moderate Dictator” life goes on despite a major political event; and in “The End of March,” that there is potential and validity in the imaginative, that the sun is a lion and resident of the beach, playing with kites, as fleetingly possible as the ideal life she dreams of having in her “proto-dream-house,” her “crypto-dream-house,” retired, doing nothing, and blissfully alone (*Edgar Allan Poe* 104) (*The Complete Poems* 179-80).

In “The Morality of Aesthetic Action: Elizabeth Bishop, Randall Jarrell, and the Politics of Poetry,” Pickard explores the significance of Bishop’s poetry’s overwhelmingly visual nature.

He hinges his opening argument on a quote from Randall Jarrell about the awareness and understanding implicit in Bishop's approach: "Her work is unusually personal and honest in its wit, perception, and sensitivity—and in its restrictions too; all her poems have written underneath, *I have seen it*" (Jarrell 499) (emphasis in original). Pickard goes on to explain that the "it" points to the specific referent in a given poem as well as to the world at large and its horrors, a multiplying move. The same comment can be extended to Orozco's work; in addition, I would add that sense and feeling (*I have sensed it*)—what is left to hold onto, as she points by obfuscation and intimation—contribute to the reader's digging up of her buried representations of reality.

Pickard picks up the notion of reticence in connection to Bishop's work, explaining how she makes an ethic of it: "Knowing that it is beyond her power to say anything useful about the world, Bishop accompanies each poem with a promise to limit herself to those things about which she can speak with authority. Rather than crying out, that is, she sticks to a realm in which she can maintain 'restraint, calm, and proportion'" (402). Instead of tasking herself with speaking directly about political, social, or any subject matter—which she did sense a need for doing, though she disapproved of its resulting aesthetic quite vociferously (more on this below)—she sticks with writing in a way that is manageable for her and consistent with her poetic talents.

The ethic Bishop upholds is very much akin to that which Cortázar proposed and which Orozco practiced. She was insistent upon not being contained by labels and schools as a woman writing in the trajectory of contemporary American poetry. While one of these labels she rejected was that of a confessionalist, especially because of the baring practice it entailed, she did admit that "one does use 'painful experiences'—ALL experiences—how else could one write anything

at all?" (Bishop and Lowell 758). Beyond writing directly and in the confessionalist mode, Bishop, like Cortázar, believed that "the *real* expression of tragedy...lies exactly in man's ability to construct, to use form" (*Prose* 433). This enactment of the real—of acknowledging the world—within a writer's style did not mean that an author was apolitical in his or her personal stance; Bishop was a self-proclaimed Socialist in her youth, and was later invested in the Black Revolution. In an interview in 1966 she was quoted as saying she was "much more interested in social problems and politics now than I was in the '30s" (Erkkila 305). Critics have argued opposing stances about her politics: that Bishop was more political in her earlier work or that she became more political in her later work. James Longenbach smoothes out this discrepancy:

Responding in 1938 to Marianne Moore's sense of the 'tentativeness' of her poems, Bishop wondered if the problem were her unwillingness to delineate a coherent political position—though she hastened to add, 'I'm a 'Radical,' of course.'" The problem for Bishop, early and late, was not her values as such but her discomfort—nurtured in the thirties—with the conventions of political poetry. (Longenbach 468)

I maintain that Bishop's writing may yet be political precisely in her aesthetic presentation and maneuvering of experience—as Orozco was political in her complex, compounding images that required reader participation in their unpacking. Political activism does not always entail shouting at the top of one's lungs; in their indirect methods, these two poets acknowledged the difficulties inherent to their experienced worlds, and in acknowledging enacted a response detectable by their readers. In a sense, they placed more responsibility in the hands of the reader, in the form of knowledge. What they knew, preserved as sense—as in Orozco's dark images and usage of the dictatorship's repressive vocabulary, or as scene in Bishop's poems, shifting between images lightly marked by her presence as a narrator-subject and her narrative commentary—was passed to others so that they might carry that information on.

Both women, too, were solidly independent as purveyors of an individual poetic style—a bold and daring act in itself. It seems the consensus about Cortázar and Bishop’s preference to allow reality and experience to shape the delivery of a piece of writing rather than to have it enter explicitly is that the ethic is an old one; making these writers’ efforts to be, in a new sense, revolutionary among the revolutionaries. In this sense, while both Bishop and Orozco did evolve stylistically and their new methodologies do embody political stance and awareness, it can be considered revolutionary, too, that they remained steady, true to the realm of their talents.

In response to a letter from Robert Lowell in which he described Marianne Moore’s “strange revolutionary poetry” and the contemporary absence of an inclination to make more of that kind, Bishop said, “But I wonder—isn’t there? Isn’t there even more—only it’s terribly hard to find the exact and right and surprising enough, or un-surprising enough, point at which to revolt now? The Beats have just fallen back on an old corpse-strewn or monument-strewn battlefield—the real real protest I suspect is something quite different. (If only I could find it....)” (Bishop and Lowell 364). Moore of course was revolutionary in that she struck her own path, writing in a way no one else had (or really, has since); her technique involved, too, a direct engagement with current events, though ones not so polemical. Here we can see Bishop’s desire to be so inventive—but more purposefully, so that the protest of her writing would enact change. Alas, she never became even as direct as Sexton or the Argentine poets Urondo or Gelman; but again, this did not mean her writing was not revolutionary, nor that her life’s work was devoid of political effect. Many have found her poetry, especially since her death, to be highly meaningful socially and politically; feminists, to name one group, co-opted Bishop as a feminist writer only in and after the 1970s.

Rich, in 1985, wrote of Bishop's exceptionalism, her radicalness because of who she was and how she lived: "In particular I am concerned with her experience of outsiderhood, closely—though not exclusively—linked with the essential outsiderhood of a lesbian identity; and with how the outsider's eye enables Bishop to perceive other kinds of outsiders and to identify, or try to identify, with them" ("The Eye"). Other scholars have noted how a marginal position afforded Bishop a particular means to observe marginality.<sup>10</sup> Betsy Erkkila is one; "when the confessional poems of Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and others were focusing on the dark interiors of self as historical allegory, Bishop's poems seem at once more postmodern and more postcolonial in their focus on 'questions' of cultural encounter, difference, knowledge, and representation" (297). Bishop located her own questioning of self within trajectories of progress, in which her musings and probings of herself informed her curiosity about the world.

Bishop's exposure to a second culture and nation in Brazil between 1951 and 1967 led Bishop to treat the subjects of poverty and race in her work, though as per her style, never within an explicit framing for action. Many critics connect Bishop's easy affiliation with the South American country to the rootlessness that had been a defining part of who Bishop was since her early childhood. Kirsch sees Bishop's presence in Brazil as a factor in the shift in Bishop's writing toward the autobiographical: "Now, thanks to Lota, Bishop had found at the age of forty-one the safe harbor that was denied her as a child. And this newfound security allowed her to write about her painful early experiences more directly than ever before" (86). Instead of entering into auto-censorship (due to the lower presence of state violence at the time) as did

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10. In his book *Midcentury Quartet*, Thomas Travisano argues that it is this outsiderhood that sustains Bishop and Robert Lowell's mutual affinity and that simultaneously allows for the two to both pertain to the same literary circle and, moreover, to the confessionalist paradigm.

Orozco, Bishop blossomed. Kirsch valued this work over her previous writing; “Freed by her new life and the changing times to be more directly personal—though always decorous, and by contrast to her contemporaries positively reticent—Bishop wrote the best poems of her final period” (89). Erkkila saw the poet’s time in Brazil as less of a positive influence, though one that led to the same end:

In Bishop’s view the political situation in Brazil was largely responsible for the emotional stress that led to the death of Macedo Soares—an apparent suicide—in 1967. After Macedo Soares’s death Bishop returned to the US of the ‘60s. Although she continued to write about Brazil for the rest of her life, in her final collection of poems, *Geography III* (1976), she turned to a more autobiographical focus on her personal past. (303)

Having Brazil as a home and source for her poetic explorations distinguishes Bishop not only because it expanded her work and affected her approach greatly, but because it makes of Bishop a transnational figure influenced by the language, literature, and culture of the United States as well as of a direct neighbor of Argentina. The parallels between the political histories of Brazil and Argentina put Bishop into a useful comparative position, particularly in relation to the work of Orozco explored in this chapter. Bishop lived in a Brazilian society marked by the presence and pressures of military governance, and her experience there affected the sense of awareness and interaction in her poetry with the “world” constituted by both Brazilian and United States socio-political reality.

Corinne Blackmer writes about the extent of the poet’s Brazilianness: “She felt much more comfortable in her poetic calling in Brazil, where divisions between high and popular culture were not so rigid, and where poets enjoyed widespread acclaim. Brazilians still claim Bishop as a Brazilian poet, and for these reasons, and others, she seems the least American of American women poets” (149). Blackmer’s observation is very curious, knowing the direction

Bishop takes with her writing after Lota's death in 1967 and moving to San Francisco. Over the course of sixteen years, Bishop owned a house and lived with a life partner in the country; she translated its poetry; and Brazil entered into her writing thematically. She did not write bilingually, though. She kept up very much with her English-language career and with friends and relationships in the United States. In these ways, Bishop remained very American. As Blackmer notes, though, Brazil forever altered her conceptions about publicness, providing levels of acceptance—as I have already mentioned, it gave her Lota and that immense and life-changing sense of security Bishop had lacked; but the position of poets there also, in a sense, gave Bishop permission not to hide. She never explicitly moved to represent the multitudes in her lines in a way that was on the rise via conversational and testimonial literature in Latin America while she was there, though Brazilian literature did not accrue the same protest quality as in the rest of the region—in inserting and discussing direct socio-political truths—until the 1980s. Tropicália, the musical trend led by Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, was the prominent artistic outlet for political commentary. Concurrently, verse form passed through concrete poetry into an oppositional and stylistically inconsistent marginal poetry. Despite Brazilian national literary trends, the generally popular nature of poetry in Brazil did lead Bishop to open up about her experience in her own way. Perhaps she felt that in doing so she was being more instructive and generous to her reader, and thus more participatory in society.

Bishop's directness is rare and is frequently couched in a way that hardly asserts its presence in her poems. In "The End of March," Bishop inserts into a set of parentheses the line "Many things about this place are dubious" (*The Complete Poems* 179). It serves as a kind of aside, a casual remark, and an intimate link to her reader, as if a secret. At the same time, it is honest; it steps out of the development of the poem in order to make a concise observation about

it. We feel as if we are receiving word from a truer Elizabeth—one more aware of the expressive demands of the situation and the needs of the reader. The same move occurs in the poem “One Art,” also from *Geography III*. That moment in which Bishop commits to paper the command “(Write it!)” is heartbreakingly telling: she must force herself to address the pain of losing a lover (*The Complete Poems* 178).<sup>11</sup> The occasion for the poem is such that Bishop cannot avoid, needs, this directness:

In “One Art,” the usual opposition between personal and impersonal falls away, or simply fails to arise. The poem’s “I” speaks forthrightly, and the details, as a reader familiar with Bishop’s biography can tell, come straight from her own life. Yet the concision and confidence of Bishop’s language, and the universality of her theme, make even these contingent details seem like symbols. The very form of the poem—it is a villanelle, like the sestina an extremely strict form—tends to evacuate self-expression in favor of a craftsman’s discipline. (Kirsch 96)

That the parenthetical insertion of this kind of commentary occurs within the taut structure of the villanelle is a further argument for its directness and imperativeness, fighting against rhythm and repetition. According to Kirsch, this breaking-through, emotional as it is, is the closest Bishop gets to writing confessional poetry; I argue it is when she writes confessionally. The intent to tap into sources of experience, he argues—and I agree—follows Bishop throughout her career:

In Bishop’s major poetry, beginning with *A Cold Spring*, her poems have careful visual description, conversational tone, and vast reserve; and others that show Bishop experimenting with a more direct and emotional kind of statement, almost but not quite the kind associated with confessional poetry. Having achieved a mature, distinctive style, Bishop’s poetic challenge would be to find the right balance between reserve and confession, observation and emotion. (74)

Again, it bears noting that the start of this period in Bishop’s work coincides with her presence in and involvement with Brazil; *A Cold Spring* was published in 1955. Kirsch and multiple sources

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11. Lloyd Schwartz notes that this lover was not Bishop’s Lota but Alice Methfessel. Schwartz also attributes some of the “opening up” in *Geography III*—dedicated to Methfessel—to this relationship. See Marquard.



mention the conversational quality of the poems; this, apart from Bishop's exposition of the visual in her thoroughly aesthetic pieces, constitutes the other major quality of her poetry that makes it an engagement with the real. Instead of serving to paint a literal scene, Bishop's conversationalism serves to promote the personal, intimate, and truthful feel of her lines—it gives her readers an ease of access to the cinematographic construction of scene superimposed over her meaning and implications. In fact, Bishop preferred the feel of free verse over metrical (despite using the latter frequently), claiming that, for her, this form permitting speech-based cadences was the more literary and self-conscious (Anderson 127).

We can see this conversational tone at work in "Suicide of a Moderate Dictator," though here too there is some end and internal rhyme and small, sustained moments of even meter. In her middle stanza, she writes, "Today's a day when those who work / are idling. Those who played must work / and hurry, too, to get it done, / with little dignity or none"—the music here carries the reader through more scene-making (*Edgar Allan Poe* 104). At the beginning of the poem, when she establishes her frame and what to keep in mind throughout her subsequent visual work, she writes, "This is a day when truths will out, perhaps;" and at the other end of the scene, where ash trays are unremarkably emptied and newspapers are sold, she writes, mid-stanza, "But anyway, in the night / the headlines wrote themselves, see" (*Edgar Allan Poe* 104). The "perhaps," the "anyway," and the "see" function colloquially and to the end of showing the author's accessibility and even her imperfection.

The work of the poem refers us to that political event, the death of Vargas; but saying that the headlines wrote themselves and spread to everyone, or even that some unpopular truths about him might emerge, is not very political of Bishop. Just noting the continued beauty of the day and the "moderate" nature of the dictator does not speak to specific elements of his time in

power. She merely expresses apathy, and makes no moves to call anyone to action. Therefore, while the poem may be the most political in topic, I would disagree with critics who claim the poem is the most political from her oeuvre; not in style. “One Art” has much more tension, and others possess more directness, commentary, and conversation that converge to make those pieces actionable, formed with a mind to positively instruct the reader.

Thomas Travisano argues, regarding confessionalism—which he saw Bishop as definitively participating in—that it is about both technical and personal risk, and is more exploratory in nature than other scholars of the mode perceive it. The works of his “midcentury quartet,” made up of Bishop, Lowell, Randall Jarrell, and John Berryman, explore—in the “‘realm of necessity’—many of the starkest forms of human constraint, isolation, and loss” (49). To this end, he stresses that what is withheld, along with expressions of emotional uncertainty and a drive toward being self-exploratory, are important factors often overlooked in considerations of confessionalism (51; 66). We can see how Orozco and Bishop adhere to this definition easily. Travisano also notes the tendency in these confessionalist poems to aim for positive, redeeming purposes: “Their poems represent individual attempts to negotiate survival, self-realization, and even tentative forms of recovery and renewal by means of a range of tactics including camouflage, intransigent resistance, the skillful (or desperate) parrying of overwhelming external forces, and the power that comes from voicing what is silenced” (68). Others have noted the will to betterment present in Bishop’s poems. In “The End of March,” part of the appeal of the proto-dream-house/crypto-dream-house, along with the primary and secret desire for isolation, is its protective, controlled nature, which is reflected in how she includes alcohol consumption within it; just one “grog a l’americaine” at night, providing, along with the other circumstances she delineates, a confined release of the imagination and will—ideal

conditions, seemingly, for poetic production. We know from Bishop's biographies that she struggled with alcoholism in moments throughout her life. Here, the poem comes across as intending to get a handle on that which may spin her out of control and away from her cherished ability to produce good poetry, as it lands on that hopeful tone, in that imagined space where her dream is possible.

In Bishop, primarily, the visual serves as surface information, symbolic, a link to meaning; her movement *between* images constitutes her method of acknowledging the world, of putting forth social arguments and with a mind to change oneself and others. It is her poetry's ability to be made into one's own that gives it a sense of solidarity. Indirect but immensely personal—instructive of not just the camera's view, but of the camerawoman and her context—this poetry, once only recognized in its poignancy by Lowell, Jarrell, Moore, Merrill, and Pinsky, is now read with care, posthumously, for its relations to her biography; and beyond this, permits the reader to establish her own relations to the poems, finally purposeful in a social way.

### **To Write, to Speak, to Tell, to Change**

Of Cortázar's story, "Apocalipsis en Solentiname," Moreiras writes that, as Jacques Derrida comments on Benjamin's translation text, "Cortázar's task is the task of the translator—that is, 'to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his recreation of that work'" (175). The movement from the snapshots of the Primitivist Nicaraguan paintings to images of assassination and torture of Latin American subversives by government forces is of course fictional; but Cortázar's own insertion into the story as the agent who makes possible that shift is telling. Moreiras is commenting on how in "showing" the final images, Cortázar constructs an argument about the

necessity and impossibility of compelling, communicative accounts about the horrors that the Latin American political reality of the latter half of the twentieth century presented.

Cortázar showed how his fictionalized attempt to directly intervene in the fates of his friends failed; but in questioning writing's pointing ability, its ability to capture truth, he contributed importantly to the discussion about literature of witness and even tested the limits of his own capacity (a revolutionary act in itself, as he would claim). Even in indirectness, poets can be political; and in such an approach, actually signal the pressures from without. What political writing comes down to, in light of Bishop and Orozco's examples, is an inevitable, personal need to address and explore what troubles them in order to connect with a sympathetic audience; keeping close to their established styles, but employing and embodying methods of acknowledging the world. Bishop juxtaposes silences that threaten her by asserting herself as subject, asserting her voice, and suggesting her stance in the overlay of her scenes. In Orozco's writing, she interacts with her context via allowing brokenness to come through her lines; allowing the reader to sense the tumult of the referent; using connotations and a lexicon that belongs also to another, separate, inconceivable world—that of dictatorial Argentina; taking a stance by thwarting reality; and daring because what she was doing was so new, and powerful, and doing it as a woman amid a male-heavy tradition. There are multifarious ways of being bold in writing, and these do not have to dictate any one kind of form be used, free or structured.

As far as effectively daring writing, coming to say directly and conversationally (personally and socially) will achieve the swiftest and surest transportability. Perhaps one of the most poetic (here, I use the term abstractly) gestures pertaining to my argument is the move in the very last collected poem of Bishop's, published in 1979 in *The New Yorker*, three weeks after the poet's death. She is, ultimately, unable to speak—though in expressing the tension produced

by the attempt, Bishop confirms elements of her identity that essentially do communicate, just indirectly. In “Sonnet,” she writes,

Caught—the bubble  
in the spirit-level,  
a creature divided;  
and the compass needle  
wobbling and wavering,  
undecided.  
Freed—the broken  
thermometer’s mercury  
running away;  
and the rainbow-bird  
from the narrow bevel  
of the empty mirror,  
flying wherever  
it feels like, gay! (*The Complete Poems* 192)

Coming out directly in her poem (the whole literary community knew about her homosexuality, though she shied away from discussing it) would have had powerful social implications. But that the final word of her final poem is a homograph for her identity and she does not use it with that meaning is, in a sense, a frustrated opportunity; and indicates some of the difficulty she experienced in sharing that identity.

Bishop’s and Orozco’s methods of acknowledging the world, though unique, both depended highly on form and style and on the intellectual, suggestive leaps between images. This kind of poetry places the poets in the role of mediator, or of medium, as critics have described Orozco. Such a position is one of power; power come from knowledge and experience, which is then meted out line by line, thought by thought, and scene by scene. The challenge of the consistency of both poetries—at once dense and full of silences—instructs the reader, but also trusts her to be able to derive meaning from each poem. This approach is very different from the overt telling practiced by poets like Sexton, Urondo, and Gelman, and makes their political

poems more easily mistakable for non-political writing. Yet, there is a place and a need for a variety of approaches to the political. Though the narrator-subject is much less present in Bishop's and Orozco's work and the autobiographical content much less evident, the control over delivery enables us to experience visual scenes and thought processes intimately, as if the absence of an assertive "I" requires us as readers to step further in to the poems. We come to feel what it was like to stand on that beach in Duxbury as Bishop did, that longing and possibility; and we sense keenly how complicated a subject like time was for Orozco, especially when it accrued the events and characteristics of the dictatorships. With those understandings rooted in us as if we have experienced them, we can then source an expanded imperative and greater compassion within ourselves and seek more impassioned socio-political change as a result without being told to—simply shown the need.

## Chapter 4. Engaging the Other: Inclusivity and Expanded Scope in Adrienne Rich and Francisco Urondo

Poets Francisco “Paco” Urondo and Adrienne Rich, embodying an activist confessionalist poetics, gave themselves over as directly and urgently as they could in their poetry, committing their art to the act. They put value on providing their audiences direct access to their poems, and by extension, to themselves as subjects. To this end they employed, candidly and insistently, a *proximal voice* that aimed at authentic representation and constructing solidarity. With this “proximal voice,” Urondo and Rich called on their audience members to access shared and taboo socio-political experience, to more fully understand the complexity and extensiveness of their own individual and national/international experiences, and to use that understanding to act critically, politically, and with empathy in the world. However solidary Rich and Urondo were with their public in actuality and attempted to be in their writing, their position was nevertheless one of power over the other, a problem for the persuasiveness of their poetry, and which they combated with differing techniques I explore here. Too, their distinct historical contexts and biographies influenced their approaches to confession, and I outline these in the present chapter. Why these writers began to directly engage the witnessed experiences of the many in a discursive, activist way has everything to do with the socio-political circumstances and repression those writers lived through—their individual access points to relation.

I mark their emergence out of their early literary development through intensifying historical periods of protest, from which they themselves drew motivation, support, and solidarity: Peronism and workers’ rights, civil rights, feminism, and the sexual revolution. I ultimately compare their collections from the 1970s (*The Dream of a Common Language* and

*Poemas póstumos*, or “Posthumous Poems”) as their first and most compelling examples of a highly effective culmination of poetic elements that contributed to the relational access of their writing—including techniques for urgency and narrative documentation. Rich and Urondo were of course not alone in their pursuits, and other activist poets wrote in the twentieth century with urgency and documentation as well—among others, Juan Gelman, César Fernández Moreno, Mario Benedetti, Carlos María Gutierrez, Gonzalo Rojas, Enrique Lihn, Julio Huasi, Javier Heraud, Carmen Ollé, Jorge Adoum, Giaconda Belli, Ernesto Cardenal, Claribel Alegría, Roque Dalton, Otto René Castillo, Rosario Castellanos, Heberto Padilla, and Fayad Jamís from Latin America; and Langston Hughes, Kenneth Rexroth, Muriel Rukeyser, Robert Lowell, Gwendolyn Brooks, Denise Levertov, Carolyn Kizer, Audre Lorde, Amiri Baraka, Robert Hass, Marilyn Hacker, Nikki Giovanni, Carolyn Forché, Jorie Graham, and Brenda Hillman from the United States—though not all of them confessionally. Apart from Rich’s and Urondo’s confessionality, these two poets in particular utilized an effective balance of fact with a proximal voice to produce an effective, action-ready poetry in which they as activist subjects entered and infused their poems.

The term “proximal voice,” which I have created to describe the poets’ technique espousing their desire for relation and change, is largely influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussion of addressivity.<sup>1</sup> As he writes in “The Problems of Speech Genres” (1953), some poetry approximates utterance with its addressivity and manifests its desire for merging with its addressee in a way that bolsters its candor and intimacy (230-1). Inherent to this desire for merging with an addressee is the difficulty of their separateness; merging would not be desired

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1. “Proximal voice” is not considered in phonetic terms here.



were it already achieved. Edouard Glissant writes, “Distancings are necessary to Relation and depend on it: like the coexistence of sea olive and manchineel” (157). The auto-positioning of Rich and Urondo as representatives of the harmed constitutes a place of privilege, though not as transposed and appropriating as some testimonial or translation practices can be. The distance poets like them fought to overcome with their techniques was that between the traditional linguistic and intellectual sophistication of the literati to which they belonged, striving for a proximity in technique precisely constructed upon the popularity of the experience they themselves had known.<sup>2</sup> Still, these poets, as individuals whose bodies or identities had been threatened, were not writing from the belief that they were the first or the most significantly impacted victims of repressive regimes. They, linked experientially to a mass of “others”—and “othered” themselves by their state—sought to return to the detail and emotion of that experience to garner further connection, acknowledgment, and dissemination of information by their audiences. Jeremy Tambling writes that confessional poets possess competing desires: “the desire for recognition by the Other,” “for the Other to recognize [their] value, for [their] autonomy to be what the Other desires” (206). They used the tools available to them: in what Bruce Bond describes as “art’s paradoxical means of engagement,” they depended upon poetry’s beauty, in musicality and form, to pair with the narrative truths of their experiences and their critical unpacking of the socio-political events (103). In solidarity, they reconstructed the events; they did so not to harm readers—though urgency and shock were employed for persuasion—but to coax them into realization and action. Bond writes, “intellect takes the watch of the world apart; love informs the care that puts it back together” (109).

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2. Rich wrote in *What Is Found There*, “I’ve also lived with other voices whispering that poetry might be little more than self-indulgence in a society so howling with unmet human needs—an elite art, finally, even when practiced by those among us who are most materially at risk” (18).

When Martin Jay analyzes the arguments of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin in his essay “Is Experience Still in Crisis?” he claims that in order for experience to be redeemed, it must entail a nondominating relationship between subject and object (35). The subject, here, as an experience-laden reader being represented in the art, is not encouraged to regress into innocence or be subsumed by a utopian future; the artist restores a “passive suffering” or an “encounter with the new and the other” such that the art itself “moves us beyond where we, as subjects, were before the experience began” (35). The work of art constitutes a processing mechanism in Jay’s line of thinking. Writers like Urondo and Rich, who lived social and political repression and were active in advocating for awareness and change, including in public venues (readings, for Rich, and journalism, for Urondo), were certainly implicated in their socio-political contexts and in processes of accessing and interpreting these for themselves and others. As already matured writers by the early 1970s, they possessed poetry as a tool—like having a language—for processing their experiences and those of others and for conveying their messages about what to do with those experiences.

Per the ideology of poets like Rich and Urondo that is visible and pervasive in their form, they worked to establish proximity and authenticity in their poetry, to provide an access to their audience at large, an open link, rather than shutting down in fear of being seen or heard. This bold step in the direction of knowledge advocacy, and of the fight for giving the unspeakable a medium, was necessarily generous and open. This ideology did not require the poetry always to be direct; an indirect conveying of meaning also contributed significantly to the delivery of emotional accounts tied to the experiences these poets wished to express. Their proximal voices were in part designed to confess in a way that *narrativized*—connected—individual experience to multitudinous experience, and the memory of these experiences as

part of a broader national history. “Narrativizing,” a term I nuance alongside the “proximal voice” for this chapter, is one I see as not separate from the narrative technique in poetry that progressively emerged over the twentieth century. The precision of the narrative line, as opposed to the abstraction, juxtaposition, and metalinguistic meaning-making of the lyric, became used more and more broadly, accompanying the larger movement into free verse. And as remembering, in awful detail, the extrajudicial executions or microaggressions against women became a necessary task, this documentary, narrative line was one poets adopted with a testimonial, memorable, accessible effect in their literary production.

Though discussing the testimonial mode as it concerns works of prose, George Yúdice offers an interesting insight about the function of narrative in representation. He argues that the constitution of the narrative perspective itself leaves no room for the practice of othering; otherwise, the power of the writing and the solidifying nature of the experience being narrated would be undermined:

Tampoco es pertinente la dicotomía yo/otro, pues el discurso testimonial no busca proyectar ni una otredad abstracta ni demonizar a otros específicos. Más bien narra la experiencia de sujetos que se constituyen en la lucha contra su alteración. Y esta lucha no es la experiencia de un *cogito* ni la *jouissance* de un sujeto en proceso de disolución, sino la lucha por el valor que resulta del enfrentamiento del sujeto testimonialista con los discursos que lo/la han alterizado/a. El énfasis ya no está en la diferencia entre yo y otro sino en la experiencia de un yo/tú expuesto a la alterización que la resiste. (221)

Neither is the I/other dichotomy pertinent, for the testimonial discourse does not seek to project an abstract otherness nor demonize specific others. Rather, it narrates the experience of subjects who constitute themselves in the fight against their alterity. And this fight is not the experience of a *cogito* nor the *jouissance* of a subject in the process of dissolution, but a fight for the valor that results from the confrontation of the testimonial subject with the discourses that have othered him/her. The emphasis is no longer on the difference between I and other but on the experience of an I/you exposed to the alterity that resists it.

It is essential to the testimonial mode, and to this confessional poetry testifying to the self, that the people represented maintain credibility in the text, and consistently assert their identity by making their story heard—without “demonizing” their aggressors or any party, for that matter, and not “othering” anyone else, but remaining victimized and worthy of aid throughout.

Violence is still inherent to these experiences, and the expression of hurt is necessary in order for a reader to know and empathize with the extent of the subject’s pain.<sup>3</sup> It is human in itself to lose control in anger; in the face of abuse and violence, to retaliate in kind. It is hurt, too, and ignorance and repression, that initiate the need for such writing. But writers following an ethic of solidarity practice limits restraining violent reactions toward their perpetrators; their ethic merges with one of instruction, enforcing the peaceful power of language and communication.

Another way of conceiving of the techniques of the two poets of this chapter is that they effectively cashed in on the ritualistic aspect of lyric. As Jonathan Culler argues about the lyrical poetic mode in *The Theory of the Lyric*, it is ritualistic, made for reperformance (37). And even though Rich and Urondo approach memorability more through the narrative and non-musical capacities of language, they do treat their musicality as opportunities for memory-making, or at least for enacting the effect of their experiences. Regardless of technique, they depended upon the motion of reconstructing experience as one that transfers through their readers, beyond, expanding awareness. They present to sympathetic audiences the truths the latter already know:

The great paradox of lyric, as a ritualistic form with occasional fictional elements, is that while frequently it constitutes a complaint about or resistance to the status quo, its social effectiveness may ultimately depend upon some sort of catchiness or memorability. One way to succeed is by being read and assimilated in some form, conscious or unconscious, so that its language infiltrates the ideology that it may have sought to engage. Vast numbers of poets have sought to challenge common sense, stretch the language, present

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3. See my discussion in Chapter 2 of Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* for more on the effect and purpose of responding to violence with violence.

unimagined or unexpected juxtapositions, in poems that can be presented as “purifying the language of the tribe” or as undertaking guerrilla action against it, but often readers of these poems have not yet given effect to their performance. It is when poems establish themselves as memorable, live as poems, that they are most likely to tincture or fracture ideology, to structure our approach to the world, and thus to have a chance of bringing into play their critical edge, but they also run the risk that what readers will find most memorable is what neatly formulates an insight readers might already be inclined to espouse. (337)

Culler goes on to articulate how a poem can transcend the individual, and, by poising effectively, enter the social—through its musicality. Such lyrical poems approach a sense of timelessness in history that lends them greatness and memorability; he uses Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken” as an example. It is easier, perhaps, for poems like “The Road Not Taken” to be memorable for their lack of specific historicity (“And both that morning equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black. / Oh, I kept the first for another day! / Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back.”) (Frost). But details with socio-political veracity afford poems an authenticity that, in the 1970s and forward, may be more believable and broadly applicable, and thus may provide a better relational access point for Rich and Urondo’s purposes.<sup>4</sup>

Useful for further distinguishing the representative functions of the poems of Rich and Urondo, the poet Gregory Orr, in his critical work *Poetry as Survival*, discusses the personal and the social lyric, the difference between the two dependent upon “where the poet locates his or her ordering power” (213). “The social lyric,” Orr writes, “uses the attitudes and conventions of the

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4. This happens for example, as Culler later describes, in the appropriation of W.H. Auden’s poem “September 1, 1939” by a United States public coping with the September 11 World Trade Center attacks. The poem’s coincidental, testimonial content gave readers respite, but as Culler points out, it was the poem’s autonomy, its separation from other media or forms of writing that enhanced its circulation (342). He writes, “It is the more pointedly effective for not being written about the event: a poem composed on September 12 about the attack would have lacked the potency of autonomous poetry but would have been just another piece of commentary” (342).

Overculture to control its disorderings, whereas in the dramas of the personal lyric we have a sense that the self is thrown back on his or her own resources and must wrestle with real passions in order to master the poem's disorderings" (223). In the poetry of the 1970s—in that, more broadly, of Rich, Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop, Juan Gelman, Urondo, and more—there is a complicated and varying combination of the personal and the social lyric wherein each complements and accentuates the other. The large and shared issues presented in their lines (abuse, exile, alcoholism; or the capture, death, or disappearance of loved ones) are made potent precisely because these poets possessed intimate personal experiences that their reading public knew intimately, too. And conversely, their personal experiences gained heft through their writing, and as such attained an urgency and a charge for change, placing responsibility for doing so upon their reading audiences.

In the twentieth century in particular, but also within poetry or writing as a language act, the question arises of whether the narrator or any "I" within a poem—autobiographical or not—can ever be truly isolated. Adorno counters the possibility of solitariness in the lyric poem, referring to that of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in his chapter "On Poetry and Society" in his 1958 work *Noten zur Literatur* [*Notes to Literature*]:

Even lyric works in which no trace of conventional and concrete existence, no crude materiality remains, the greatest lyric works in our language, owe their quality to the force with which the "I" creates the illusion of nature emerging from alienation. Their pure subjectivity, the aspect of them that appears seamless and harmonious, bears witness to its opposite, to suffering in an existence alien to the subject and to love for it as well—indeed, their harmoniousness is actually nothing but the mutual suffering for this accord. (41)

According to Adorno, lyric poetry is consistently an assertion of self that "bears in mind the whole," however antagonistic or positive toward that greater group; the lyrical "I" is always in relation to it (45). Within expressions of individuality in poetry, the collective undercurrent—the

social element—can surface in various ways, argues Adorno.<sup>5</sup> Jay reads Adorno as stipulating a general attitude from the writer toward experience, which can be found in the poetry of Rich and Urondo of the 1970s: When they reference not just their own suffering or that of their fellow citizens, but issues affecting completely separate groups, they enact an expanded attentiveness. As Rich writes in “Hunger,” “Something that kills us or leaves us half-alive / is raging under the name of an “act of god” / in Chad, in Niger, in the Upper Volta” (*Later Poems*, 38).

Bakhtin writes that lyrical speakers “perceive their addressees...more or less outside the framework of the social hierarchy and social conventions, ‘without rank,’ as it were.... In intimate styles this is expressed in an apparent desire for the speaker and addressee to merge completely” (231). This abstraction of the addressee matches Adorno’s description of the lyric perspective as constituting a self bearing in mind the whole. The exceptional nature of the speakers and readers, as Bakhtin has it, are further supported in their exception with Culler’s description of the autonomy of the poem. Poetry is thus excellent for further practicing relation and subversion, apart from its sometimes brief, episodic, and transportable nature. And, subsequently, the proximal voice suggests a hope for not only the approach and mindfulness of the reader, but for a commitment, and even action beyond the ideological conversion or convincing the poem enacts.

With shocking, lived experiences alongside a processed, narrativized, historical experience, Urondo’s and Rich’s poetry and the poetry of Gelman and Sexton became evocative

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5. He cites García Lorca as an example of a lyric poet “whom Franco’s henchmen murdered and whom no totalitarian regime could have tolerated,” a “bearer of the force” of the collective, or rather, an individual who transcended the subjectivity and solitariness of the “I” in his poetry (46). As a key forebear to political poetry in the Spanish language written in the twentieth century, García Lorca’s exemplary functioning in this history of the collectively representative lyric is important to note.

and emotionally driven for a reparative audience.<sup>6</sup> Part of their success is they *sought*, they wrote toward, a mutual acknowledgement from their readership leading to complicity and a responsibility to do something about that knowledge. The poets' personal understanding and socio-political awareness—comprised on the page in confessional technique—was conveyed through the transcendence and movement from detail into commentary and prescription. They thus converted their poetry into a weapon, an agent for change.

### **Urondo's History**

Urondo's poetic career was set forth within a countercurrent that held as imperative both innovation in language and the link between the poem and the world (Grasselli 155). Early on, he was a part of the Poesía Buenos Aires group that placed its objectives in opposition to those of the official literature put forth in Argentine publications like *Sur*, *La Nación*, and *La Prensa*.<sup>7</sup> Beyond this group, Urondo had recognized in Argentine poetry from the mid-1950s on a synthesis of differently textured aesthetics and experiences (Porrúa 308). His own oeuvre displays such insertions, sprung from the possibility that Ernesto Cardenal credited Ezra Pound as initiating: “abrió los límites de la poesía, de manera que en ella cabe todo lo que se puede expresar con el lenguaje” ‘he opened the limits of poetry, so that in it can fit anything one can express with language’ (101). Reviews of *Historia antigua* [*Ancient History*] (1956) made note of the poet's early conversationality—his adoption of narrative forms, his colloquial tone—as well as his conversion of himself into a subject figuring directly in his work. The

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6. See Sedgwick.

7. Poesía Buenos Aires was a magazine, a book publisher, and a literary group with members including Ángel Rama, Nicolás Olivari, Edgar Bayley, and Juan L. Ortiz; it also notably included work in translation, such as that of Catullus, Dylan Thomas, Keats, Emily Dickinson, René Char, and more. It functioned from 1950-60.



Urondo-Gelman link was established around this time, soon after the two began publishing—their debut poetry collections emerged in the same year, 1956. Urondo's participation in the literary group *La rosa blindada* from 1964 to 1966 was crucial for the link it gave him to Raúl González Tuñón, who was also integral to Gelman's early poetic activity. Other contemporary poets had large roles in supporting Urondo's literary development, especially Edgar Bayley, César Fernández Moreno, and Noé Jitrik when the four worked together on the literary publication *Zona* beginning in 1963.

Urondo's poetic voice bloomed into a conversationality and direct political address that nevertheless he was wary of: he wrote, "Tuve miedo de hacer una escritura poco ceñida, caer en la facilidad de poesía conversacional" 'I was afraid of producing careless writing, falling into the facileness of conversational poetry' (*Veinte años* 198). Beginning in the 1950s, Urondo's and his contemporaries' poetry began to borrow elements from outside the lyrical mode, but this trend became particularly visible in the early 1970s. Poets like Cardenal, Dalton, Jamís, María Gutiérrez, Lihn, Benedetti, and Gelman contemporaneously challenged poetic form such that it arrived at a new intersection of the narrative, epic, and lyric modes: they employed the narrative mode's act of speaking in one's (the author's) own name, the epic mode's expression of knowledge, and the lyric mode's evocation of feeling and its power in song (music and rhythm) (Genette 20; 26).

Urondo's experience in the late 1960s and early 70s was more marked by political upheaval, but nonetheless he also endured major changes and likely life-altering, eye-opening occurrences. Jitrik noted how Urondo's traveling to Cuba for writing congresses influenced the scope of Urondo's consideration and interest: "Yo creo que Paco allí [Cuba] se deslumbró por lo otro.... Me parece que ese es el punto de la partida del cambio de él" 'I think that there [Cuba]

Paco became fascinated with the other... It seems that that's the starting point of his change' (*Paco Urondo, la palabra justa*). Opposition to state violence, especially after the murderous squandering of a workers' uprising in 1969 known as the Cordobazo, was increasing; the government under General Lanusse was cracking down on subversive activity, and one of the major displays of this was the execution of escaped guerrillas in the 1971 Trelew Massacre. When Urondo was imprisoned in 1973 for participation in the Revolutionary Armed Forces, he was able to conduct an interview with the three survivors of the Trelew Massacre, and published it upon exiting the prison at Villa Devoto as *La patria fusilada* [*The Country Fired Upon*], which gained a great deal of critical attention. He would be released under the change in government from the dictator Lanusse to Peronist Cámpora in May of that year, granted amnesty on the date of Cámpora's installment; while in prison, many international writers came together protesting his stay, including prominent figures such as Simone de Beauvoir, Jean Paul Sartre, Régis Debray, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, and Gabriel García Márquez, petitioned for his release from Villa Devoto (Fontanet *The Unfinished Song*, 134). Urondo immediately entered into the position of Minister of Culture of Santa Fe after his imprisonment.

The main afflicting entity for leftist Argentines was their militarized national government, which increasingly over the 1970s made use of both military and police forces to carry out extrajudicial executions of those suspected of subversive behaviors. Organizations formed to build ideological and militant defenses against the state, and many writers joined the Argentine Communist Party, Montoneros, and Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias 'Revolutionary Armed Forces.' In their writings, they spoke out, naming the harms of the dictatorships. Some participated in attacks and held leadership positions within these organizations, like Urondo, who was a captain within the Montoneros. Urondo acted in one of the first Montoneros armed attacks,

the taking of the city La Calera within the province of Córdoba in 1970 (*Paco Urondo, la palabra justa*).

Despite the high functioning of these leftist organizations, they themselves were divided ideologically. Though Socialist and egalitarian regarding classes, the Montoneros as an entity upheld traditional social values, especially those concerning family structure and sexuality. In 1974 Urondo fell in love with a *compañera*, Alicia Raboy, who also worked with him on the staff of the periodical *Noticias*, of which he was the editor in chief (Fontanet *The Unfinished Song*, 144). They had a child outside of wedlock, Angela. According to Horacio Verbitsky, a colleague of theirs, the Montoneros disapproved of this situation so much that Urondo was demoted and sent away from Buenos Aires to work within the Mendoza chapter (*Paco Urondo, la palabra justa*). The problem with this move was that Urondo was very recognizable in Mendoza; he had a history there, and if seen by the police, would easily be apprehended. Verbitsky argued that those behind sending Urondo to Mendoza knew of the danger, and were simply punishing him for his behavior. Indeed, within a month of his transfer the writer and activist was killed; in the same event, Raboy was disappeared, and their child, Angela, handed to distant relatives (*Paco Urondo, la palabra justa*).

Beyond this social traditionalism and religiosity, the Communist party, the Montoneros, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) in Argentina upheld gender normativity and homophobia. Urondo both displayed and rejected these stances, as I show below. His arguments for solidarity, however, largely fought to assert egalitarianism and empathy. Pervasiveness of control made uniform the identification of subversives by the state, and it also made aligning against the state a solidifying pursuit. Separate groups aligned together against their common, terrible enemy—to an extent. Despite the urgency of the terror that washed over Argentina in the

1976-83 dictatorships, organized factions consisting of targeted people who congealed around identity ideologies did not break down the walls of their differences to reciprocate aid. The small contingencies of supporters of gay rights did take up women's rights, especially their reproductive rights, for example; but there was little support for homosexuals, and groups like the Homosexual Liberation Front (FLH) were ignored and even attacked. In a public appearance at the Plaza de Mayo in 1973, they were met with the chant, "No somos putos, no somos faloperos, somos soldados de FAR y Montoneros" 'We aren't fags, we aren't junkies, we are soldiers of FAR and Montoneros' (Felitti 799). Homosexuals were targeted in Argentina in 1974 by paramilitaries functioning under Isabel Perón, and FLH participants were reduced to a dozen from one hundred; the group subsequently dissolved (Brown 120-21).

Despite the prominence of some women in Argentina's political history—Eva Perón; the *soladeras* Juana Robles and María Loreto Sánchez Peón who acted with significance during the country's fight for independence from Spain; and even the prominent *montonera* Norma Arrostito—femininity in the country was observed and performed according to rigidly traditional expectations. The notion of the "patria," the fatherland, was gendered as feminine and desirable, a source of respite and supposed asylum for its doting citizens. The dream of a better, improved *patria*, though sometimes starkly contrasting, was one that various socio-political groups appropriated—including the dictatorship.<sup>8</sup>

Barbara Sutton and Melisa Anabella Salermo both describe, with the use of multiple testimonies, the dictatorship's explicit shows of heteronormativity. These appeared in the rules followed for both identifying subversives and for considering a female captive to be "on the

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8. See Ezequiel Adamovsky's *Historia de las clases populares en la Argentina* (2012), Jane L. Christie's *Negotiating Gendered Discourses* (2015), and Karin Grammatico's "Populist Continuities in 'Revolutionary' Peronism?" in Kampwirth.

mend.” Long hair for men and short skirts for women were signs of rebellion; wearing makeup and jewelry, a practice also mirrored in Luisa Valenzuela’s short stories about military men dressing their female prisoners up and taking them out on dates, signaled, within the dictatorship’s system, appropriate, dominable, According to Salerno, clothing choices were interpreted according to elements other than normative gender role adherence, as well:

Por un lado, el jean representó una ruptura de las distinciones de género y clase de la modernidad. Por otra parte, implicó un distanciamiento respecto de los ciclos de cambio impulsados por el consumismo. Mientras tanto, el pelo largo y la barba se encontraron asociados con la pérdida de disciplina ejercida sobre el cabello. Por último, el empleo de prendas de colores estridentes constituyó—además de una simple alegoría a la psicodelia—un escape a las tendencias de moda. A los rasgos descritos se sumaron elementos confeccionados con técnicas aborígenes y criollas. Los mismos representaron un enfrentamiento contra la homogenización cultural y la consecuente defensa de las tradiciones locales. (Salerno 42)

On one hand, the jean represented a rupture in gender and class distinctions from modernity. From another perspective, it implicated a distancing from the cycles of change propelled by consumerism. At the same time, long hair and long beards became associated with loss of discipline exerted upon the hair. Lastly, the use of garments of strident colors constituted—apart from a simple allegory to the psychedelic—an escape from fashion tendencies. To the described characteristics was added elements made with aboriginal and creole techniques. These represented an affront to cultural homogenization and a consequent defense of local traditions.

All of these assertions, socially implicated, were interpreted by the paranoid state as not just anti-Argentine, but part of a campaign—even an international one—designed to bring the government down.

In a fictional scene also set during a demonstration at the Plaza de Mayo in Julio Cortázar’s novel *Examen* [*Exam*], antiperonist participants turned to stereotype Peronist activists, the precursors to the Montoneros, and very grounded in class disparity awareness and workers’ rights, as from the province and having darker skin; a characterization echoed throughout Argentine elite, military, and religious groups from the 20s to the 70s (*El Examen* 89-90). As in

the United States, there was also antisemitism in Argentina, and a Jewish immigrant population that grew in the twentieth century. Jacobo Timerman, a writer and journalist mentioned above, details the antisemitism and grotesque racism he was subjected to while imprisoned and tortured by the dictatorship in the 1970s in his testimonial work, *Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number*.

It was conformity—to rigid standards of normal, gender-exclusive, culturally dominant grooming and clothing—that the Argentine state wished to maintain, just another link in its chain of methods for drawing compliance from the populace. Sutton uses this term, “compliance,” with military members’ expectations from women: that they submit both in appearance and sexually (*Bodies in Crisis*). So too Diana Taylor establishes the high functioning of required submission from the military forces; she writes, “Military’s political discourse...relocates the masculinist desire for domination onto the feminized population, claiming that “she” desires to be dominated; “she” willingly offers up her subjectivity, even her life, to the superior power” (Taylor 6). The extension of forceful compliance to rooms where torture was practiced is obvious, and the further and myriad ways in which subjugation and repression occurred under the National Reorganization Process is evidenced by the lexicon of the dictatorship.<sup>9</sup>

Thus the threat to the body that Urondo and Gelman were also subject to, for their ideological contrariness, their dealings in journalism and poetry, and for their militant practices, was very much wrapped in the dictatorship’s general pervasive and trigger-happy wariness of the other. The dictatorship’s concerns were both social and political, wanting to establish control on all facets of Argentine life; though its responses to otherness, unlike in the United States to taboo issues, were violently devastating. In writing to advocate for awareness of the dictatorship’s

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9. See Feitlowitz.

harms, within poetry's exceptionalism and employing methods for accessibility, these poets were poised to represent the many, and conveyed such a scope.

### **Rich's History**

Rich embodied an inclusiveness in her poetry out of anger and of love for not only those who shared her experiences of having abject identities—female, homosexual, Jewish—but for others living in her own country and under separate regimes elsewhere in the world. As she writes in *Arts of the Possible*, her travel and exposure through reading to the realities of other women reinforced her awareness. Because of this, she came to feel more fully the “necessity to go on speaking of [the subjection of women]...., speaking where silence has been advised and enforced, not just about our subjection, but about our active presence and practice as women” (66).

Whereas Urondo began writing publicly in 1952, at the age of 22, Rich published her first book in 1951, also at the age of 22. Rich's career initiated with much more recognition and acclaim, however; her first book won the Yale Younger Poets Prize (selected by W. H. Auden) and the following year she was awarded a Guggenheim. But her early work, like Urondo's, only insinuated the politics and directness she would come to be famous for. A decade later, her collection *Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law* (1963) emerged and marked a turning point in that lucidity, immediacy, and fluent sharpness of social address, though even here she did not fully own her bravery, keeping, for instance to the pronoun “she” in her poems instead of asserting an “I” (Ostriker *Writing*, 106; 107). *Snapshots* was reviewed with negativity, and she herself recognized the noncommittal failure of the personal access of her narrator. Similarly, Urondo's mid-career, fourth—to Rich's third—collection *Nombres [Names]* (1959) broke partially into a

stride with colloquial explicitness that nevertheless also received critical negativity (Fontanet *The Unfinished Song*, 64). What occurred next, for both poets, seems to have been a period of taking account, recuperating behind the scenes, and in the meantime producing lackluster collections which corresponded with the years of heightened international protest. Past the border of the end of the 1960s, each came into his and her most accomplished writing.

It is notable that Rich's emergence into lucidity and assertion of the self as an acting and narrating subject within the difficult reconstruction of reality within her poetry, initiated in the collection *Diving into the Wreck* (1973) and sharpened in *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978), was preceded by several years of intense translation work and participation in activism for civil rights and in protests against the Vietnam War. On a personal biographical level, there was upheaval in Rich's life, too; she left her husband, Alfred Conrad, in 1970; in the same year, he committed suicide.

Rich won the National Book Award for *Diving into the Wreck* in 1974 and used the opportunity, along with the other winners of the award, Audre Lorde and Alice Walker, to turn down the award individually but on behalf of all women. By this time, the feminism in her writing had become consistent and loud, and she was coming to be recognized as a figure capable of such an artistic and active stance. As Alicia Ostriker notes in *Writing Like a Woman*, "[Rich] identifies with other women and attempts to understand their common history in order to organize a collective, not an individual, escape" (111). In her personal life she was becoming increasingly politically active as much as her writing was becoming politically poised while incorporating deep personal experience attached to an autobiographical "I." In short, her personal truths put forth in *Diving into the Wreck* and explored in subsequent collections were immersed in, and themselves fueled, her intensely advocated politics.



Beyond the socio-political, literary influence and implications of *Diving into the Wreck*, Rich lived out an influential and exteriorized career through which she exerted her politics; an exteriority that supplemented and was supplemented by her poetry. In 1976 she gave the speech “It Is the Lesbian in Us” at the MLA conference; she taught at Stanford; she received honorary doctorates from Harvard and elsewhere; she received a McArthur Genius Grant in 1994. In 1997, much like how Haroldo Conti refused a Guggenheim, Rich turned down the National Medal of Arts because of the political dissonance she felt with the Clinton administration, but more precisely, the dissonance between art and politics that she saw the administration as embodying. From her position of power within academia and feminist and gay activism, Rich delivered not only poetry that took a stance, but speeches, lectures, and prose works that formed powerful elements of her socio-political ethos—that there is a natural “impulse to enter, with other humans, through language, into the order and disorder of the world;” that this “is poetic at its root surely as it is political at its root”; and that writing, especially in the United States, must be used to reflect publically and socially upon the theretofore unspeakable problems of the country (Rich *What Is Found*, 6). She infiltrated institutions and modes; she was the example of openness, lucidity, and surety that she wanted to be made possible for marginalized peoples.

Rich, in her chapter “A Communal Poetry” of her *Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, describes feminist poetic activity in the decade of the 70s, when women accrued volume, stepping up to counter the establishment of the male voice even within the community of poetry. She lists Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, Patricia Jones, Marilyn Hacker, and dozens more poets affiliated with this trend; in addition she names multiple new feminist presses and magazines that were founded at this time and that contributed to the momentum of what she refers to as the “women’s poetry movement” (*What Is Found* 175). Rich unflinchingly cites the origins of this

movement in the politics of the women's movement and in the African American Civil Rights Movement, which also had a huge effect upon her own poetics:

When the civil rights movement came along in the late 1950s, early 1960s, and I began to hear black voices describing and analyzing what were the concrete issues for black people—like segregation, like racism—it came to me as a great relief. It was like finding a language for something that I'd needed a language for all along. That was the first place where I heard a language to name oppression. (Montenegro 11)

Rich names other literary forebears, Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg, and Rexroth, who she claims importantly established the “not just personal but communal” nature of poetry (*What Is Found* 175). They certainly led to a poetry that learned to be discursive, accusatory, and a medium for social advocacy, but the issue with these poets and others from the Beat and Black Mountain generation is their poor representationality, namely in their inclusion of women and people of color as subjects with important agency within their poems. The women's poetry of the 1970s was welcoming of more marginalized groups. This characteristic was reflected in the political movement, too. The radical Second Wave feminist organizations, the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance (ALFA) and the Women's International Resource Exchange (WIRE), began to “illuminat[e] larger issues involved in transnational revolutionary movements as well as the complicated nature of solidarity between First World and Third World feminism” (Churchill 11). The year 1975 was named the International Women's Year by the United Nations, and the subsequent decade the Decade for Women.

“The personal is political” was a hallmark slogan of feminism in the 1970s (coined by Carol Hanisch in 1968), and speaks to the interior-exterior move that exposed social repression, situating the isolated family experience among the similar experiences of masses. The slogan reflects the aesthetic and narrative mode of the writing that was emerging at this time, too, and not just among United States women but in the Black American movement; and within the

writing of Latin American countries under dictatorship. The intense personal applicability of experience gains literature power; each piece and each voice becomes a testament to the righteousness of each particular struggle, but also to the need for equality among the greater network of marginalized voices. There is a universality to the mode that displays the personal and the political at once, as one.

A twin slogan was being cast around in Argentina at the same time as “the personal is political”—but with an inverse implication. Instead of empowering voices, the phrase “todo es politico” ‘everything is political’ was cautionary and confining. Language acts, especially, could be interpreted as subversive on a whim; every move made by members of the public was scrutinized. This was particular to the totalitarian Argentine context in which the personal link to the political was damning (De Diego) (Grasselli).

Within this socio-historical context, Rich and Urondo respectively upheld a strong ethic for reproducing the autobiographical, and thus socio-political, real in their poetry; an ethic that was radical within their separate national contexts and within the literary legacies to which they each belonged. The truths they conveyed through their poetry were difficult to speak in the historical moment of the early 1970s, and to find a passageway for them in poetic art was bold and produced a challengingly new aesthetic possibility for poetry.

I have devoted space in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 explaining the pertinence of the confessional mode to the poetry of Rich, Urondo, Sexton, and Gelman. Beyond the time period of this dissertation’s focus, a new mode evolved in the United States, that of postconfessionalism, which is useful to distinguish from the confessionalism of Rich and Urondo in particular because of their expansive consideration of issues affecting multitudes and the same quality of this new mode. Rich can be said to be both a confessionalist and postconfessionalist,

among poets like Frank Bidart, Jorie Graham, and Carolyn Forché who sought out the information of external struggle and incorporated it in their lines, descendants of those who opened poetry to the discussion of the intimately personal. In *The Post-Confessionals: Conversations with American Poets of the Eighties*, Stan Sanvel Rubin calls postconfessionalism a more tempered mode than that of the urgent poetry of protest from the 1960s, but still “a poetry which characteristically accepts the essentially political ramifications of any public utterance of language in our time” (19-20). Rubin discusses a commitment to audience with the postconfessionals, distinguishing it from confessionalism (20). He quotes critic Ed Hirsch, who blamed the confessionals for being too self-centered and “prizing their experience over the experiences of other people,” or “centering [their] suffering” above that of others (20). However, the “breakthroughs” and “emotional risks” he proposes to admire in confessionalism in actuality (and in the poetry from Sexton, Rich, Gelman, and Urondo) went hand in hand with a representation that, though at times more indirectly composed (as in Elizabeth Bishop and Olga Orozco’s poetics), still spoke to the realities of many that were taboo and unspeakable. Jo Gill too carves out a space between confessionalism and postconfessionalism for Anne Sexton, which could be argued for Rich just as successfully:

The received history of American poetry is the history of a movement from an impersonal, modernist aesthetic to a personal, lyrical, confessional narcissism and on to a cool, self-reflexive, linguistically sophisticated postmodernism. Sexton’s poetry, I have suggested, transgresses received generic boundaries and problematizes this trajectory. By redefining our understanding of the apparent narcissism of her early work we can see that the profound self-reflexivity, the language play, and the undermining of processes of representation and revelation that are thought to characterize avant-garde and postmodernist poetic forms alone are, in fact, central to Sexton’s poetics. (“Textual Confessions” 83)

While postconfessionalism centered on the ability to comment on the experience it was conveying and placed it more observably within the social, less concerned with communicating

effect through the telling of the experience, it still showed overlapping with confessionalism. In an anthologized article on the postconfessionalist mode, Gregory Orr discusses how confessional and postconfessional works are both “solidly in that tradition by which poetry is seen to change through its desire and ability to incorporate new subject matter—hitherto unarticulated manifestations of disorder that it orders and thus restores to human meaning” (Orr “The Postconfessional,” 654). I would add that poetry changed in response to the availability of new subject matter; as journalism spread news of struggles worldwide, poets became able to access other experiences; and as political movements increased discourse on gender, sexual, and civil rights, the discussion through poetry of intimate issues related to a marginal status became possible, heard, and purposeful.

Rich’s and Urondo’s poems began to manifest an access only within the 1970s. This took hold through several methods, including the use of pointed, discursive language by which a reader could clearly grasp the content and its socio-political significance. Beyond this, there was a consciousness of the self’s location within the historical moment that fueled the narrativizing, analytical aspect of the work. Supporting these discursive and narrativizing assertions was a willingness to renovate poetic form into a site for confession.

### **The New, Expansive Poetics**

In “Fuego nocturno” (“Nocturnal Fire”), Urondo’s optimism about a free future is nearly electric:

Los sueños dejan ver las libres gaviotas. Es con el hueso de tus ojos, es tu corazón que arde, atrás con los pajonales.

Y luego la calma chica, el aire enrarecido y el deseo de volver a vivir. (52)

Dreams make the freed gulls visible. With the bone of your eyes—it's your heart that burns, behind, along with the scrublands.

And then a brief calm, the charged air, and a desire to live again.

He was at work evolving the possibility of poetic language and form to more closely incorporate the reality of his historical context, and to reflect how he as a thinking, critical actor in the present was situated within that context. From the 1950s forward, Urondo began constructing poems in which he was a speaking actor, a subject moving in his lines, and a narrator centering his explorations of experience. This insertion can be seen in a poem from that first collection, “Leña y fuego” (“Fuel and Fire”):

Tus labios palpitan en la roja y fluctuante llama. Tus labios y esa dura leña que gira en el espacio. Todo es manso y soberbio: el terso amanecer, el suave seno.

Alguien se salva masticando su culpa y tirando las ilusiones a los perros.

Tus labios se mueven; bailan al ritmo de las caprichosas idas y venidas del fuego del mundo.

Amo el viento y el ardor del verano. (70)

Your lips pulse in the red and fluctuating flame. Your lips and that hard firewood that seems to turn in space. Everything is quiet and magnificent: the fluid daybreak, your smooth breast.

Someone escapes by chewing their guilt, throwing their illusions to the dogs.

Your lips move, dance to the rhythm of the capricious comings and goings of the fire of the world.

I love the wind, the burning of summer.

The presiding “I” that comes in at the end of the poem emanates an intellectual and ideological control, one that is omniscient, boundless, and timeless (“the capricious comings and goings of the fire of the world”). It sees, intensely, the actions of the “you,” as well as those of the

“they;” and is able to depict, abstract (“chewing their guilt, throwing their illusions”), and roll them into a unified political context, all the while making them beautiful. The poem’s tone establishes a goal for clarity and assertion, if the precedent is not yet fully practiced in these lines by the poet himself; there is guilt, illusion, escape, and a recognition of the world that itself moves and that moves all of the subjects within the poem, but it implies rather than states directly.

Comparing these two poems with the tone of Urondo’s later poem from *Poemas póstumos* [*Posthumous Poems*] (1972), “Por soledades” (“For Loneliness”), a sea change is evident in his outlook and what he chooses to put forth as reflective and indicative of the outlook of his contemporaries over less than two decades later:

Y ésta  
es la triste historia de los pueblos  
derrotados, de las familias envilecidas,  
de las organizaciones inútiles, de los hombres solitarios, la  
llama que se consume sin el viento, los aires  
que soplan sin amor, los amores que se marchitan  
sobre la memoria del amor o sus fatuas presunciones. (*Obra poética* 473)

And this  
is the sad story of a defeated  
people, of degraded families,  
of useless organizations, of lonely men, the  
flame that consumes itself without wind, the airs  
that blow without love, the love that withers  
on the memory of love or its fatuous presumptions.

The poem is defeated, degraded. This is not to say that Urondo was or was not as dragged down by this time; his sustained participation in activist organizations of both journalistic and guerrilla pursuits do not suggest a loss of purpose. Contextually, the circumstances in Argentina and in Urondo’s life did evolve and darken—with the deaths of workers and political individuals and

*compañeros*, with the Cordobazo and Rosario, with Urondo's imprisonment—and the poetry by him and by his contemporaries reflected this shift in socio-political mood, which I explore in Chapter 1 as a limited-utopian consciousness, skeptical and vulnerable.<sup>10</sup>

“Burning Oneself Out,” a poem written by Rich—in 1972, leaps away from the context of “Fuel and Fire”—similarly uses fire imagery to heighten the magnificence of a moment and to draw out the fire-like qualities and urgencies of the subjects. Where Urondo's poem establishes a human pliancy, subject to the powers of fire and political events and love (though not without subjectivity), Rich's, on the other hand, turns to the recognition of the fire within, even to the point of exhaustion. Edouard Glissant refers to this kind of focus as pertaining to a “poetics of depth,” wherein the self serves as a fount for exploration and relation (24). Through their consuming and representative nature Rich's poetic formulations of thought and experience can have an historical and lasting effect:

We can look into the stove tonight  
as into a mirror, yes,

the serrated log, the yellow-blue gaseous core

the crimson-flittered grey ash, yes.  
I know inside my eyelids  
and underneath my skin

Time takes hold of us like a draft  
upward, drawing at the heats  
in the belly, in the brain

You told me of setting your hand  
into the print of a long-dead Indian  
and for a moment, I knew that hand,

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10. See DeKoven.



that print, that rock,  
the sun producing powerful dreams  
A word can do this

or, as tonight, the mirror of the fire  
of my mind, burning as if it could go on  
burning itself, burning down

feeding on everything  
till there is nothing in life  
that has not fed that fire (*Diving* 47)

She writes with that same urgency, surety, and commentary found in Urondo's poem, but with slightly more conversational lucidity that seems to be on the cusp of possibility in Urondo's "Fuel and Fire." Hers is an accustomed tone, and the poem does not depend upon surprise as Urondo does in order to communicate its stance. Rich is even weary; "burning oneself out," "burning down" are real threats to an individual pursuing the power of language, but she converts the metaphor of burning into productively idealistic act, a burning not of consumption, but feeding a greater fire.

This poem forms part of the turn in United States poetry that reflected a shift in social and political currents—the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.; the emergence of the "second wave" of feminism; and the Stonewall Riots—different in timbre and repercussion than the events in Argentina, of course, but denoting Rich's poetry's integration with external life; the poet's necessary use of the form to make sense of the world around him or her, and poetry's flexibility to accommodate new urgencies from reality. This turning point underlies my reasoning for observing the literary works of writers during the 1970s in Argentina, along with the increasing repression from the state at that time. In the United States, too, the decade of the 70s turned over a newness in poetic style that had been born out of the movements for civil rights, women's rights, and gay rights in the 1960s.

The motion to merge the self with the other (as in Bakhtin's addressivity) had a counterpart in criticism of Latin American poetry in the 1960s and 70s in the literary community's call for writers to be revolutionary. Jean Franco writes about the negativity around Padilla's poetry in 1968 regarding this intersection of art and political activism, though this poet would receive enormous backlash from Castro about the very politics of his writing in the famous Padilla Case of 1971: "*Fuera del juego* was criticized for its 'ambiguity' and because of a detachment contrary to 'the active engagement which characterizes revolutionaries,' it was the logical outcome of a position which defined revolutionary praxis primarily as participation in the armed struggle or on the economic front in Cuba itself" (83). Though some poets did choose to militate against their repressive national governments, even these—such as Urondo, Dalton, and Benedetti—explicitly wrote about their intentions to uphold the ethic of producing art above that of pamphletary, explicit political writing, nevertheless emerging as three of the most pointedly political poets in their countries of the 1970s. Dalton wrote, "el poeta debe ser fundamentalmente fiel con la poesía, con la belleza" 'the poet should be fundamentally faithful to poetry, to beauty' (16).

The call for writers and intellectuals to serve their public is not always one that a given writer will be willing to take up. For example, though illustrious and renowned worldwide, Borges lived through the turmoil of the 1960s and 70s just as Gelman and Urondo did, and would not enter that reality into his art, at the very least not to the same degree of precision in the details of his reconstruction of or reference to it. His realm of imagination and philosophy in literature was highly intellectual and interesting, but was achieved through being insular; "I write for myself and my friends, and I write to ease the passing of time," Ned Davison quotes the Argentine in a review of a collection of his later poems (98). In the same 1978 review, Davison

does, curiously, note the “surprising...directness and somewhat *confessional* tone of several of the poems,” though he advises us to resist an autobiographical reading of them (96) (my emphasis). His reflection of a tangible reality is comparatively distant, although perhaps closer to the forefront here than in many others of his works, as we can see in lines like in “El Suicida” (“The Suicide”) from *La rosa profunda* [*The Profound Rose*] (1975):

Not a single star will be left in the night.  
The night will not be left.  
I will die and, with me,  
the weight of the intolerable universe.  
I shall erase the pyramids, the medallions.  
the continents and faces.  
I shall erase the accumulated past.  
I shall make dust of history, dust of dust.  
Now I am looking on the final sunset.  
I am hearing the last bird.  
I bequeath nothingness to no one. (Davison 97)

The centeredness of these lines on the self precludes any contextualizing detail, relevant to Borges let alone to the events of his nation in the 1970s. This kind of poetry, lyrical and symbolic, offers a contrast to the urgent and narrativized writing of Rich and Urondo; its grandiose approach, however, recalls Culler and the possibility for musicality to achieve memorability.<sup>11</sup>

Urondo, in “Solicitada” (“Solicited”) from *Poemas póstumos* [*Posthumous Poems*], differently musical, more variously textured, incorporates his very commentary on the role of a poet within a poem:

Fue Baudelaire poeta  
de transición y Talero; lo fueron el Ab-zul Agrib y Rosario  
que cerraba los portales de las casas  
de tolerancia; burdeles con quesos y vinos y jamones del diablo y

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11. For some research on Borges and his politics, see Kovacs, James, and Hernández Moreno (173-92).

jarana agitando polleras y otros pabellones. Fueron  
poetas de transición, los llantos y los crímenes en lugares  
atroces y momentos inconvenientes; Dios mío, cuánta  
poesía de transición fue grabada a cuchilla en la corteza  
de las virginidades perdidas; cuánto baptisterio ha lamido  
la sal de la transición, ha flameado  
al son de los monaguillos: Giacopo de la Quercia fue hombre  
de la transición, hasta la condesa  
de Noailles debió escribir  
poesía de transición. Y se me olvidan personas,  
soplos que se esconden con los parches  
transitorios, con los tránsitos de la gente desprevenida  
que va despacito en busca de aguas y cielos  
transitivos. (*Obra poética* 456)

Baudelaire was a poet  
of transition, as was Talero; and Abz-ul-Agrib and Rosario,  
who closed the doors to the houses  
of tolerance; brothels with cheeses and wines and devil-hams and  
the jarana agitating skirts and other flags. The cries and crimes  
in atrocious places and untimely moments were poets  
of transition; my God, how much  
poetry of transition was engraved in the knife used to cut  
virginities; how much baptistery has licked  
the salt of transition, has fluttered  
at the sound of altar boys: Jacopo della Quercia was a man  
of transition, even the countess  
de Noailles must have written  
poetry of transition. And I'm forgetting people,  
leaks covered by transitory  
patches, by the transiting of the unprepared masses  
that go slowly in search of water and transitive  
skies.

The transitions discussed by Urondo, in effect, describe a history of the role of the poet—as an intellectual, and a representative—who must make sense of and commit various experiences to language (and more abstractly, the presence and necessity of poetry in moments of upheaval, suggesting the instructive and analytical capacities of the genre). His form is free-verse, his lines straying from evenness in meter as is visible at a first glance; but it is tethered with the repetition

of the key word, “transición” ‘transition,’ which occurs five times in the ten lines constituting the entire second sentence of the quoted stanza. Then, Urondo begins to release the reader, turning to write of the “parches / transitorios, con los tránsitos de la gente desprevenida / que va despacito en busca de aguas y cielos / transitivos” ‘transitory / patches, by the transiting of the unprepared masses / that go slowly in search of water and transitive / skies’ (*Obra poética* 456). The references to figures he makes are multiple, interconnecting a series of people with experiences that have changed them deeply and so they, the poet suggests, served as examples or proponents of the inevitability of transition in our lives.

In “Adioses” (“Goodbyes”), the poet goes on to list more people, this time representing the goodbyes he has made: “Mis hijos viven, pero ya ni se acuerdan / de quién era la tía Teodolinda / que también murió” ‘My children live, but no longer remember / who their Aunt Teodolinda was / who also died’ (*Obra poética* 435-36). This death of the narrator’s sister enters into the whole group of dead entities that Urondo constructs for the poem, recording and also renouncing the importance of this personal loss. And then he himself enters as a subject confronting this loss: “Puedo estar contento / de estar vivo: abro los ojos, salto / de la cama, me visto, salgo a esperar otros años” ‘I can be content / to be living: I open my eyes, jump / from the bed, dress, leave to wait for other years’ (*Obra poética* 456). Urondo moves from testimony to consideration of the meaning of being a part of a historical moment with rapidly increasing death tolls and the ensuing difficulty of lucid and accountable memory. His arguments in “Solicitada” (“Solicited”) and “Adioses” (“Goodbyes”) take shape not only in direct statements such as that which begins the poem “Solicitada” (“Solicited”): “Siempre los poetas fueron, en efecto, hombres / de transición” ‘Poets were always, effectively, men / of transition,’ but in their form (*Obra poética* 456). The applicability of this statement to readers is proved by the many

instances Urondo includes as proof, rather than creating abstractly applicable statements or images, as Borges used (“I will die and, with me, / the weight of the intolerable universe”) (Davison 97).<sup>12</sup> By stringing together the examples in these and other poems, Urondo in effect constructs a history—a narrativizing—of victims, using his insistence to comment on the imperative of recognizing each individual element (and encouraging the reader to insert her own experience or instance among the rest). This effect is enhanced by the continuation of his sentences with commas and semicolons past their easy cohesion—another manifestation of commentary, that this narrativizing and history-making is uncomfortable and also bursting with example.

Their poetry’s versatile textures allowed writers like Urondo and Rich to move nearer to and farther from the specificity of their repressive contexts, between lines and stanzas as must be done for the poem’s own success, but also between individual poems within the collections. Such variation does not break or renounce the proximal voice, but rather expands its capacity and address. Nearly paradoxical, having a narrator that navigates particulars alongside generalizations gains all the examples a tangibility and breadth of reach. In Urondo’s poem discussed just above, “Adioses” (“Goodbyes”), he writes:

Murió mi eternidad,  
pero nadie se ha dispuesto a velarla; a lo mejor  
muere Beatriz con quien jugamos siempre  
como si fuéramos criaturas predestinadas, secretamente,  
para no romper el sortilegio y perder blasones y ganar  
realidades. Murió el bravo capoeirista frente a la obra  
en construcción, entre un agitar de sotanas  
enfiladas sobre rumbos inciertos. En fin, murieron  
algunas personas de mi amistad; otras que conozco

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12. Poetry can rely on a heavy presence of image or abstraction in poetry and, with assertions and acknowledgements of the world in turmoil that serves as the referent, still falls within the realm of witness and confession—see Chapter 3.

de vista seguramente han muerto. Celia murió, pero  
hace muchos años, aunque a veces sueño con ella desnuda  
y viva como los arcángeles con toda su música. Murió Moisés  
Lebensohn y no podía ocurrir otra cosa  
con ciertas ideas: hubo muchos infartos  
y cirrosis —oh gran rey— en la boca  
de mis pulmones que recuerdan  
a presión que olvidan  
a sabiendas. Mis hijos viven, pero ya ni se acuerdan  
de quién era la tía Teodolinda  
que también murió. Compañeros del colegio han muerto, apóstoles  
y simples camaradas de armas y deportes. Hasta enemigos  
y también hombres, a quienes me ligaban simpatías enfermas —me  
refiero a algunos comerciantes fallecidos—, pero justas, inevitables  
como la muerte. Puedo estar contento  
de estar vivo... (*Obra poética* 435-36)

The brave capoeirista died before a work  
in progress, among a shifting of robes  
strung on uncertain tracks. In sum,  
people who were my friends died; others whom I  
could recognize surely have also died. Celia did, but  
years ago, though sometimes I dream of her naked  
and alive like the archangels in full chorus. Moisés  
Lebensohn died and no other thing could have happened  
given his mind: there were heart attacks  
and cirrhosis—oh great king—in the opening  
of my lungs that remember  
under pressure, that forget  
in full knowledge. My children live, but no longer know  
who their Aunt Teodolinda was  
who died. Classmates have died, teammates, apostles,  
simple comrades in arms. Even enemies  
who were also human—I'm referring to a few fallen businessmen—  
who attached to me with sickened sympathies, but fair, inevitable  
as death. I can be content  
to be living...

Urondo moves between the particular and the broad, touching upon content here and throughout

*Poemas póstumos* [*Posthumous Poems*] that is more relevant to his present moment than in his

earliest collections. The particular figures he introduces to his lines (Celia, Lebensohn)—though they were individuals—can stand in as representatives for other figures that readers might call to mind. The classmates and teammates and enemies are more obviously able to be used by a reader for inserting personal examples, but these general figures are less evocative in their descriptions in the poem. They do not have cirrhosis, nor are they dreamt about glorious and naked. Through Urondo’s use and movement between these broad and particular figures, he provides ample opportunities for readers who have experienced losses to attach meaning to this poem.

In “Benefacción” (“Kindness”), Urondo progresses through asking forgiveness for entities that can be more and less facily attached to both a political context and to himself: “los equivocados” ‘the mistaken,’ “los que apuraron el paso y los torpes / de lentitud” ‘those who quickened their step and those clumsily slow,’ “los que hablaron bajo tortura / o presión de cualquier tipo” ‘those who spoke under torture or whatever kind of pressure,’ “los que supieron / callar a tiempo o no pudieron mover / un dedo” ‘those who knew to quiet in time or could not move a finger’ (*Obra poética* 451). These kinds of people, brought into the poem based on their behaviors and vacillations, become progressively more contextualized as we come to realize that wavering is a product of the tension and baffling horror of an Argentina governed by threat. Urondo comes to a moment of heightened personal relevance with “perdón por los desaires con que me trata / la suerte; por titubeos y balbuceos” ‘forgive the manner with which luck has treated me, for my hesitations and mutterings’ before opening the poem back up to broad references and abstractions (*Obra poética* 451). And, with increasing brevity in his list elements, he proceeds from there to broaden the poem once again, finishing it with poise.

Arguably, the art of the poem begets its relationality; it would be flat if it did not explore differing behaviors that among themselves hold an interesting or beautiful movement. The poet’s



sense for the need to shape the content in a receivable and attractive way brings levels of specificity into the lines and different opportunities for a reader to consider the poem's applicability to her own experience. The voice guiding the poem becomes sage and empathetic, encouraging the reader to view those applicable experiences as falling within a narrative—a line, a pattern—of related experiences.

The movement between specificity and breadth occurs between “Benefacción” (“Kindness”) and “Adioses” (“Goodbyes”); the latter is textured with many more documentary and specific references than the former, achieving an even greater sense of awareness and solidarity for the poet than within any of his individual poems. Rich's *The Dream of a Common Language* displays the same variety as Urondo's collection. “On Broadway” functions at a sustained level of abstraction:

I have written so many words  
wanting to live inside you  
to be of use to you

Now I must write for myself for this blind  
woman scratching the pavement with her wand of thought  
this slipped crone inching on icy streets  
reaching into wire trashbaskets pulling out  
what was thrown away and infinitely precious

I look at my hands and see they are still unfinished  
I look at the vine and see the leafbud  
inching towards life

I look at my face in the glass and see  
a halfborn woman (*Later Poems* 57)

Within the collection and next to poems like “Toward the Solstice” and “Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff,” this poem incorporates much broader content. The blind woman is akin to the figures of “Benefacción” (“Kindness”), lacking in particularity compared to the Celia and Lebensohn

figures of “Adioses” (“Goodbyes”). The “infinitely precious” trash, “unfinished” hands, and “halfborn woman” are even more abstracted, and accrue a utopian tinge. They suggest there is work to be done by many people in concert, and hopeful work at that. The poem is part of that work, for in disseminating knowledge, forming arguments for change, and posing opportunities for readers to enter into the lines in relation to the voice there, Rich is striving for progress. Through her various approaches in poems, like Urondo’s, we see that the convincing is a long task. Through variety, these poets make their art balanced, take a critical approach, and grow their readers’ awareness and own empathy; and as I argue in Chapter 1, this insistence or struggle or striving serves to promote the humanity, individuality, and accessibility of each poet—and per one thesis in Chapter 3, such struggle is a testament to the difficulty of the poems’ circumstances themselves.

### **Some Considerations**

From Bakhtin’s theoretical perspective, the self as subject in Rich’s and Urondo’s poems can be analyzed as being bolstered and poured into relation with the difficult truths of reality in their poems in the forms of anger and sympathy. Their approaches were not without error in either poet’s constructions of representation, however. Ostriker carefully notes this about Rich: “A more dismaying aspect of Rich’s work to me is her partisanship. Explicitly or implicitly, since *Snapshots*, Rich’s position has depended on the idea of an enemy. Her ‘I’ affirms by excluding, her communal ‘we’ implies a hostile ‘they’” (“Her Cargo” 8). Such partisanship is protective; it allows a bracing against attack, strength and comfort in numbers, and even a freeing from the bodiliness that would register the pain. But it undermines the project of freedom, generosity, and equality that Rich sought, especially when, as Ostriker notes of *Diving*

*into the Wreck*, the presentation of the male figure is non-*representative* in the patient or thorough sense; when the men in her collection are parasitic on women, emotionally threatened by them—brutal (“Her Cargo” 8) (emphasis in original). Urondo, too, consistently fell short of representing women with agency in his poems.

This is very much a question of ideology, but it can also—and must also, within this particular dissertation—be a question of form. Developing a poetics that denounces harms by speaking the unspeakable, representing the self’s and its community’s negative experiences, will necessarily incorporate expressions of the ideal alternative, which we have seen in the hope and love in the poems of Rich and Urondo. That assertion of ideology can incorporate the violent or abusive insertion of the perpetrator into poetry, especially if poetry covers a variety of emotional angles and tones related to experience from poem to poem, for being brief in length. Such an insertion would be consistent with the project of utilizing poetry and language as a weapon—as proof and rhetoric.

Rich’s and Urondo’s best work toward access and relation is done when these poets inductively move from the intimate to the global, showing their breadth of reach technically and ideologically. This transcendent move is one Orr calls a “survivors’ skill” that reconciles the autobiographical with the historical (667). It straddles the social and the personal and uses both connecting points, the thirst for close understanding and for community. Orr cites Rich’s “Twenty-One Love Sonnets and a Song of Despair” from *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978) as exemplary of the intersection of life and world. This, the twelfth numbered section, uses the power of intimacy, imagery, and directness to come out as lesbian in her poetry, and is the first such moment within the poem itself:

Sleeping, turning in turn like planets

rotating in their midnight meadow:  
a touch is enough to let us know  
we're not alone in the universe, even in sleep:  
the dream-ghosts of two worlds  
walking their ghost-towns, almost address each other.  
I've walked to your muttered words  
spoken light—or dark—years away,  
as if my own voice had spoken.  
But we have different voices, even in sleep,  
and our bodies, so alike, are yet so different  
and the past echoing through our bloodstreams  
is freighted with different language, different meanings—  
though in any chronicle of the world we share  
it could be written with new meaning  
we were two lovers of one gender,  
we were two women of one generation. (*The Dream* 149)

The distance between the images she uses of bloodstreams and the universe, dream-worlds and shared worlds, and even between a word and its meaning traverse an enormity and eternity mirrored in the significance of identifying herself and her lover as lesbians. Through all these elements there is tenderness and tenuousness that serve multiple purposes—to paint, to comment, to testify, and to say.

The entire poem sequence achieves even more, all the while maintaining immediacy and proximity in sometimes even greater individual detail, as in the unnumbered poem about sex (150). Rich discusses issues attached to being a lesbian; to being female (“Every peak is a crater. This is the law of volcanoes, / making them eternally and visibly female”); to being in a relationship with someone else (“two people together is a work / heroic in its ordinariness”); to law; to suicide; to loneliness; and to the responsibilities of being a person in the world who acknowledges and fights for truth (*The Dream* 148; 153):

I open the mail,  
drinking delicious coffee, delicious music,  
my body still both light and heavy with you. The mail

lets fall a Xerox of something written by a man  
aged 27, a hostage, tortured in prison... (*The Dream* 145)

The poem allows itself enthusiasms and anxieties that lead back to a more thorough understanding of the self in love, contributing to a controlled, artistic whole that both achieves cohesion and release; accessing and allowing a reader access to not just another human, but to human ethic. This is why the intimate element, fictionalized, dramatized, or actual, is imperative for effective representation and conveyance in confessional poetry. Rich implicated herself and her work deeply in the act of being in the world—a practice we can see in “Twenty-One Love Poems.” It is even present in the small gesture she undertook when she initiated her habit of dating each of her poems, signaling its existence within history and a historical context.

It is true that Urondo’s poems were effective in that he was published and won prizes and acclaim among his friends. Devastatingly, his assassination also confirms the access and threat of his poetry to the Argentine state he was interpreted as constituting—like Haroldo Conti’s writing, and like Rodolfo Walsh’s writing. His politics were unmistakable. He refused to go into exile and did not alter the visibility of his criticism and ideology in his work, though most of the other writers of his time who even showed ounces of political content in their work left the country, some begging him to join them. He stayed in his country, and his poems reflect this brand of devotion in an insistence if not a conviction.

The belief in poetry as a weapon is a peaceful belief, even if it supplements a militant life and contexts of increased violence and protest. As these poets believed in their abilities to make change through language, they found the precise language and form for their reader’s access and development of knowledge, they accommodated the truths of themselves and others through a charged and conversational line. The poem as a mirror between the proximal voice and the

reader roused to action must be—if it cannot be truly or purely reflective—constructed on verisimilitude and generosity.

## Conclusion: Confession, Relation, and the Abyss

For though this experience made you, original victim floating toward the sea's abysses, an exception, it became something shared and made us...one people among others. People do not live on exception. Relation is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge. This experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of exchange. (Glissant *The Poetics of Relation*, 8)

As I have established in this dissertation, the instigating experiences for the confessional poetics of Argentina and the United States in the early 1970s differed significantly in the oppressor's use of violence. Against and because of their experiences, the impulse of Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, Francisco "Paco" Urondo, Olga Orozco, and Juan Gelman was to enter the dark and unspeakable nature of their truths, through beauty, into a poetic mode of awareness designed to continue to combat silence. They hoped their readers would trust in the ability of poetry to establish relation—to convey information, and support a world in which individual meaning is relevant and welcomed by all, forming what Glissant calls a "poetics of depth" (24). They made themselves vulnerable; they made themselves spokespeople, narrators and subjects in their poems.

They wrote from Glissant's abyss, and through their intimate standpoints, they called upon their readers to recognize themselves. Sexton confessed,

drunkenly bent over my bed,  
circling the abyss like a shark,  
my father thick upon me  
like some sleeping jellyfish. (*Transformations* 112)

Her collection *Transformations* slipped from the singular to the universal, telling of not just hers but the experiences of women, of marriage, of mental illness, of abuse. She wrote with self-deprecation and an ironic tone, protective from the hurt. Just as the experiences of these poets were disparate, and so the immediacy of the threats they received to body and identity produced

a disparate result in their poetic language and form. Urondo wrote with sad humor, Gelman with a helpless infuriation or nostalgia. Rich was indignant; Bishop reticent; and Orozco, fleeting.

Sexton's suicide in 1974, unlike Urondo's assassination two years later, was not a result of the confessional writing she produced. She was subversive of topic and form, but the page was a place for catharsis and therapy through the promise of connection, of relation. Urondo militated in guerrilla organizations and his subversion entered his poems, which the Argentine state deemed punishable, and which he continued nevertheless—

Hago  
esta denuncia,  
especialmente por la pérdida  
de armas y poemas, ya que ambos son irreparables. Han  
sido robados al pueblo de la república, a  
quien naturalmente pertenecían. (471)

I file  
this report,  
especially for the loss  
of weapons and poems, since both are unrecoverable. They  
have been stolen from the people of the republic,  
to whom they naturally belonged.

Poems were weapons, for Urondo and for Gelman. Gelman entered into exile in Mexico at the start of the Dirty War, and his confessional poetics fractured further upon the ruptures he had just established in his early 1970s collections. The site of the poem was one for not just coming to say directly and with daring, but to risk the poetic language and form, enacting the experience of harm in striking line breaks, fragments of proof, naming and accusation, colloquial diction, and asserting the self in crisis—attempting to establish meaning on multiple fronts and to process their experience therapeutically and so that others might also find solace and motivation in recognizing their shared experience, just as in the cases of Rich and Sexton.



Sometimes the site of the poem proved the silencing effect of the regimes that repressed the poets. Orozco and Bishop were two examples: reticent and buried autobiographically, they nevertheless performed political poetry with mentions, glimpses, and symbols that suggested more than they confirmed their referents. Orozco's techniques, especially twisting and compounding sense, were testament to the turmoil of early-1970s Argentina, and a product of her self-censorship. The fact of the poets' distance as narrating subjects in their poems of this period does not preclude relation. Rather, their poetics called upon readers to unpack their referents, to use their knowledge of the world to participate in the meaning-making and the process of transferring real and felt experience. They each trained a light on the potential to speak through silences.

They were all witnesses and victims, daring to testify. They developed a conversationality to that end, and Mario Benedetti's description of this trend in Latin American poetry, as I have noted, validates my own argument about this poetry's confessionalism:

Los nuevos poetas experimentan, vanguardizan, tienen osadía; pero eso también pudo y puede decirse de sus mayores. En todo caso, lo que cambió fue el lenguaje (cada vez más despojado) y la clave comunicativa (cada vez más abierta). Pero no hubo grandes conmutaciones en el afán experimental, ni mucho menos, en la persistente intención de llegar hasta el hueso. (*Los poetas* 13)

The new poets experiment, vanguardize, are daring; but the same was and can be said of their forebears. In any case, what changed was the language (increasingly more stripped) and the communicative key (increasingly more open). But there were no great changes in their experimental eagerness, and especially not in their persistent intention to arrive at the bone.

Benedetti falls short of recognizing that some of this Latin American poetry—that of Gelman and Orozco and Urondo—was daring in that it confessed difficult socio-political truths, along with daring to experiment with form. If not for the lack of room in this project, I would welcome examples from César Fernández Moreno, Roque Dalton, Fayad Jamís, Raúl Zurita, and

Benedetti, from other contexts of socio-political repression, into this comparative analysis of confessional poetry. An assumption that confessionalism is tied only to the United States or Argentina is misplaced (Jo Gill's collection of essays in *Modern Confessional Poetry* includes analyses of British and South African literature as confessional). Too, the time period of the 1960s to the 1980s may not constitute the only opening in history or in socio-political contexts for confessional poetry to emerge. And further, as Gill's collection shows, confessionalism is not exclusive to poetry. Such branchings out in research would constitute productive and interesting future paths of study.

As I have demonstrated in this dissertation, the line drawn by Marianne DeKoven in U.S. American history, over which attitudes and outlooks shift in literature toward the disillusioned, is a line that exists in Argentine history. However, she groups the years from 1959 to 1976 into a single period in which political change was possible and in which intellectuals had a role in that change; but I quote Gelman describing his shift in the early 1970s and I observe the shift in the confessional poetry of the other poets in this dissertation's set at least from the late 1960s through the decade of the 1970s. This period follows the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. and in Argentina the popular uprisings in Córdoba and Rosario that were squandered with violence in 1969. The ensuing, responsive literature peaks and tragically ends for Sexton, Urondo, and Bishop with their deaths in the 1970s. Rich, Orozco, and Gelman go on to write more poetry of relation, but their styles stretch and contract and become something else.

The poets of this dissertation infused their lines with their experiences, countering the relegation to the sidelines of their personal-collective truths per the homogenizing, obliterating impulses of their national governments and fellow citizens. The poets took a stand for otherness; but at times, like with the work of Rich and Urondo, they did not perform the inclusivity that

accompanies their poetic and ideological solidarity, lashing out at overgeneralized entities (Rich) or continuing attitudes of heteronormativity (Urondo). An unrelenting stance of generosity fosters a poetics of relation, born from Glissant's abyss.

A natural step forth from this analysis of confessionalism would be to the poetry of black writers of the United States—Audre Lorde, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Langston Hughes, that centered upon their advocacy for civil rights—during this time period, continuing the notions I develop here about solidarity, popular techniques, history-making, the poets' activism and ethic, and the positioning of the self in relation to others. Amiri Baraka, like Urondo, traveled to Fidel Castro's Cuba and this exposure, above all to other artists, had a profound effect upon his expansion of consciousness in his poetry. Too, black citizens were physically persecuted—beaten and killed—by police and citizens, and this experience enters into poems by black U.S. American poets as a topic and influences their style. There would be much to compare between this poetry and that of Argentina in the 1960s and 70s.

In 1960, M. L. Rosenthal, who first coined the term "confessional poetry," wrote about the poet's role as intermediary when he said, "the poet who speaks for us...transforms and reveals far more" (*The Modern* 3). This is confessional poetry's special capacity: to confess metalinguistically and to say the thing outright in the same poem, and to find a new angle in the next poem, to accommodate various textures of voice, colloquial, intellectual. To self-assert and explore, and model that vulnerability or curiosity or therapy. To support the individual reader as one and one of many, offering warmth. The confessional poem is a call for truth's admission. It advocates for poetry and for the poet's public. Glissant says, "This is why we stay with poetry.... We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry the cry of

poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone” (9). Confessional poetry is a poetics of relation and of depth and a testament of the self, against oblivion.

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## Appendix: Primary Collections Discussed in the Dissertation

Elizabeth Bishop: *Geography III* (1976), *The Complete Poems* (1983), *Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments* (2006)

Julio Cortázar: *Alguien que anda por ahí* [*Someone Walking out There*] (1977)

Juan Gelman: *Cólera buey* [*Oxen Rage*] (1965/1971), *Fábulas* [*Fables*] (1971), and *Relaciones* [*Relations*] (1973)

Olga Orozco: *Cantos a Berenice* [*Songs for Berenice*] (1977), *Mutaciones de la realidad* [*Reality Mutations*] (1979)

Adrienne Rich: *Necessities of Life* (1966), *Leaflets* (1969), *Diving into the Wreck* (1973), *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978)

Anne Sexton: *Love Poems* (1969), *Transformations* (1971)

Francisco “Paco” Urondo: *Nombres* [*Names*] (1959), *Del otro lado* [*From the Other Side*] (1965), *Son memorias* [*They Are Memories*] (1969), *Poemas póstumos* [*Posthumous Poems*] (1972)

Rodolfo Walsh: *Operación masacre* [*Operation Massacre*] (1957)