

Invoking Solidarity and Engaged Listening in Publicly Active Work: Translating and Transcribing Jorge Velásquez's *Testimonio*

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This article explores publicly active graduate work that engages with survivors of violence as they become testimonial narrators. Drawing on challenges I faced in transcribing and contextualizing the *testimonio* of Jorge Velásquez, who narrates his experience with injustice in post-war Guatemala, this analysis addresses some of the tensions that emerge during textual interactions with violence narratives. I explore second-hand trauma, notions of pornography of violence, and the role of accountability in scholarly and public representations. Paralleling Jorge's testimonial performance, I offer narrative strategies I employed in the process of transcription and ethnographic contextualization into a larger narrative about the lived experience of violence within a culture of impunity.

Engaging Audience

When I first began studying violence, I read scholarly analyses of war, expecting to feel the lived experience of war within the words. Despite descriptions of startling atrocities, I often did not feel war in texts. Then I began reading *testimonio* (testimonial narrative) and oral history, firsthand accounts of dark experiences, community-engaged—if not entrenched—work, aimed at activism as well as scholarship. I realized that I was more responsive to the immediacy of personal narrative and scholarly work with activist potential, but the same words that pulled me into breathing worlds simultaneously built walls for other kinds of listeners. Some audiences view any representation of violence and social justice issue as “pornographic,” obliging narrators and scholars to anticipate this listener skepticism and employ narrative techniques to overcome resistance in order to invoke solidarity. When targeting audiences for activist potential, as is the aim of *testimonio*, popular memory projects and accounts of structural and physical violence within oral history and ethnography, solidarity is at stake. Bringing readers inside texts that illustrate lived experiences of violence implies an accountability to contextualize the representation, making implicit or explicit connections for audiences in order to activate their own judgment and critique, recognizing shared humanity and motivating them into action.


Jorge Velásquez is the father of Claudina Isabel, who was killed on August 13, 2005 in Guatemala City. Since his daughter's murder, Jorge has struggled to bring her case to justice while emerging as an international human rights activist fighting to end femicide (violence against women) in Guatemala, addressing public, academic, and political audiences with his *testimonio*, a first-person account that bears witness to a life shaped by injustice (See Beverley 2005 for further discussion of *testimonio* as genre.). When I was able to arrange for Jorge's March 2007 visit to the University at Buffalo, I knew that, while Jorge would be telling his story and promoting human rights for a public audience, his narrative would allow me closer access to the post-war Guatemala I sought to understand in my ethnographic work on a “culture of impunity” (Kaiser 2005). Before Jorge's arrival, I did everything I could to prepare, but I did not think to emotionally prepare myself. As we exited the airport, Jorge was already talking about death. I had been wondering if it would be something he would save to talk about for quiet moments, when it got dark, but Jorge spoke naturally about Claudina Isabel's murder, revealing an

acceptance of his trauma that I was not prepared to see up close. I became emotionally captivated, caught in a place where I could not find words, but was confronted with the work of presenting, translating, and transcribing Jorge's *testimonio* in the context of a live presentation, as well as the question of representation and contextualization on the page for a wider audience—how to breathe life into a dynamic and multivocal experience that was not my own. Later, I faced intellectual challenges in reconceptualizing my impressions and representations of post-war Guatemala. While I had originally planned to focus my doctoral work on wartime victims narrating the past through *testimonio*, I had not anticipated contemporary victims of violence also employing *testimonio* as calls to solidarity for a violence taking place in the “post-war” present.

Despite notions of narrating violence as passive re-victimization, *testimonio* is most often shared as an active means of initiating social or political activism, a solidarity invoked through shared accountability among narrator(s) and audiences. As Jorge draws on his individual experience to create a collective representation of violence and injustice through his *testimonio*, he exercises his resistance to a culture of impunity, an act of resistance that implores the audience to become accountable for his story as listeners. This shared accountability and solidarity are predicated on an emotional connection between Jorge and his audience, a human bond that is somewhat inevitable in a face-to-face performance but difficult to recreate on the page. We might compare written *testimonio* to Pierre Nora's “lieux de mémoire,” a site of memory (Nora 1989), as it is removed from the embodied experience it seeks to represent, the testimonial performance. Injecting human emotion and movement in the textual memory of the event helps bring audiences closer to the human experience of listening to a voice tell a life. In the case of Jorge's *testimonio*, I found it necessary to account for his pitch, volume, pacing, silences, gestures, as well as incorporate my own presence as co-translator.

This article seeks to explore publicly active graduate work that engages with survivors of violence as they become testimonial narrators of their experiences. Drawing on the challenges I faced in transcribing Jorge's *testimonio*, this analysis addresses some of the larger questions that emerge during textual interactions with stories as personal and traumatic as Jorge's experience with his daughter's death: second-hand trauma that affects scholarly and emotional interactions, as well as representations; working against notions of pornography of violence; and recognizing and reiterating accountability of scholarly and public interactions. I struggled to find a form that best represented a performative, multivocal experience, while acknowledging the reflexive and imperfect nature of representation. I parallel my discussion of Jorge's testimonial performance with narrative strategies I employ in the process of transcription and ethnographic contextualization into a larger narrative about the lived experience of violence within a culture of impunity.

Accountability, Authority, & Activist Aims in Testimonio, Oral History, & Ethnography

 oral history, like *testimonio*, harnesses its power from the authority of the narrator, even though the individual in these genres is meant to represent a larger public. Drawing on Bakhtinian notions of ‘point of view,’ Samuel

Schrager points out that “what is most personal about oral history, namely the particular perspective of the teller...on closer inspection leads as well to whatever there is about oral history that is most social” (Schrager 1998: 285). Ethnographic genre conventions also offer what seems a paradoxical experience: a narrative so specific that it resonates as universal. This movement between individual and collective experience provides a representational tension that allows oral history, *testimonio*, and ethnography to capitalize on their activist potential by implicating audience in their proposed collectivity. John Beverley distinguishes the genre of *testimonio* from oral history on the basis of narrative authority, noting that oral history and life history genres are motivated by the interlocutor’s aims, whereas *testimonio* is primarily motivated by the narrator’s intent (Beverley 2005: 547-548). But what about when these goals are mutual, when works are collaboratively envisioned and carried out with “shared authority” (Frisch 1990)? These collaborative projects transgress genre conventions; in this way, Jorge’s *testimonio* “Femicide in Guatemala” (Velásquez Duran 2007a) is a kind of oral history, as it relied on my translation to reach its intended audience, as well as our understanding that scholarship and activism mutually strengthen one another. This relationship makes me more accountable to representing Jorge’s story with accuracy, empathy, and employing a careful contextualization to activate the consciousness of audience members, our mutual goal.

In narrating his *testimonio*, Jorge’s story becomes a memory performance that forces listeners to be accountable to Jorge, Claudina, all the women she represents, and to ending femicide in Guatemala. Invoking an invisible community, *testimonio* pulls audiences out of passive bystanding; ideally this vicarious witnessing of injustice motivates audiences to take action. As Hannah Arendt says, “Only the spectators, who constitute the space of history (memory) in which all actions and works of art fall . . . can pass ultimate judgment on an event or action by the quality of their attention” (Stern Strom 1994: xi). With this in mind, scholars who represent lived experience of violence cannot ignore their responsibility to audiences to contextualize and frame their representations. Ultimately, testimonial narrators rely on scholars to edit, shape, and motivate textual work so that it represents the worlds within the words.

Initially my co-translator, Jose, and I agreed that a positivist approach to translation and transcription would not consistently convey Jorge’s intentions, so we aimed to translate the “big” ideas Jorge narrated. But when Jorge began, we realized there was no apparent separation between big and small moments, and that it was in fact Jorge’s rhythm and the details of his story that implored audiences to listen. Through hushed moments of consultation, Jose and I worked to reconstruct Jorge’s words promptly, with accuracy and empathy.

...a ella que había disparada a 45 cm de distancia *sin* oportunidad de vida, y digo gracias a Dios que haya sido así, porque la **indiferencia** de nuestro país es tan grande, que si Claudina hubiera sido herida, hubiera muerto de sagrada... si Claudina no hubiera se muerto por la dispada, hubiera se muerto de sagrada. Entonces, gracias Señor, porque murió inmediatamente, porque su muerte de sagrada hubiera sido aún más dura.

...some coward shot Claudina Isabel's face from 45 cm away. She didn't have the opportunity to live, and *thank God*, because if she had, the indifference of our country is so great that if she had only been wounded, she would have bled to death. If Claudina hadn't been killed by the bullet, she would have bled to death. So thank you God for killing her immediately, because bleeding to death would have been more painful.

When I considered how to maintain Jorge's sensibility within a written text, I decided on a poetic approach that would echo Jorge's performative emphasis on reaching the audience through tone and pacing, explicit indicators of emotion. Drawing from Dennis Tedlock's approach to oral storytelling, (1999), I represented pauses with line breaks, gestures in brackets, and used font size to dictate volume. *Testimonio* presents a unique "challenge to the loss of the authority of orality" (Beverley 2005: 549), because it relies so explicitly on the human connection between narrator and audience, but all writing that seeks to motivate activism is obliged to find a space within language to reignite the human dialogic connection. For this reason, contextualizing *testimonio* and accounts of violence requires that we remain close to the original narrative voice, as this is our entryway into the lived experience of violence, the lives our work seeks to represent. When we write with empathy and solidarity, we walk audiences through a human experience that invokes a sense of shared humanity in which we are mutually accountable for our actions and nonactions. When we acknowledge representational distance and our own emotional and intellectual responses via self-reflexivity—even when this interrupts a narrative flow—these interruptions create new spaces for discussion and force audiences to take seriously their own human reactions to the text. When I transcribed, "Claudina is talking about her brother, Pablo Andrew—Pablo Andrés—y ella dice . . . and she is saying . . .," it became clear to me that I was fumbling because of the intellectual translation work confronting the emotional embodiment of Jorge's pain. These moments of self-reflection helped me recognize and elaborate on the nature of collaborative interactions on violence and trauma—the interweaving of our "I"s in this moment becomes its own narrative and stays close to the human connection we shared, including its imperfections.

Resisting and Responding to the Pornography of Violence

When I first learned about Jorge, who has become an international activist on the subject of femicide in contemporary Guatemala, I wondered *why him*—why Jorge and not someone else? With over 3000 cases of murdered women in Guatemala's recent years, why was Jorge's case so well known? While I did not doubt Jorge's sincerity, I wondered whether he was profiting somehow from his international travels, his affiliation with Amnesty International, and his opportunities to speak directly to US Congress. Why would anyone want to relive the pain of this tragedy repeatedly, in front of public audiences, when it clearly caused re-traumatization every time? Of

course, it is as easy to doubt Jorge as it is to defend his sincerity; but if I had not first considered these questions on my own, I would have been ill equipped to answer them when skeptical audiences prejudged Jorge, denouncing him as a pornographer of violence whose *testimonio* reinforced his victimhood. Pornography of violence implies a fetishistic gaze, as those performing are aware of being watched, even deriving pleasure from the attention. This fetishism implies a self-victimization via representational violence, compounded with the initial victimization of physical violence. As a publicly active scholar engaged in questions of social justice, I have been confronted by colleagues who question the authenticity of my scholarly choices: Why Guatemala? Why violence? Why victims? Maintaining a publicly active stance and concern for social justice will undoubtedly bring scholars face to face with these questions. How do we protect ourselves from this kind of academic skepticism? How do we communicate sincerity without pornographing, or pacifying, those we seek to represent? One step we can take is to prepare ourselves for these questions and rhetorically work against them in our representations.

Jorge anticipates audience resistance and inclinations to reduce his efforts to the “pornography of violence” and works dialogically against this anticipated response; in this way, he asserts his agency, authority and sincerity—resisting audience resistance. When Jorge saw the magnitude of errors in Claudina Isabel’s case report, he made the decision to quit his job in order to pursue justice full-time. He saw impunity as “an invitation to kill [his] daughter” (Sanford 2006; Velásquez Duran 2007b) and realized that, without fighting back, impunity, and femicide, would persist. Jorge’s wife and son do not appreciate the financial and emotional burden of his activism, though they understand his urgency. They want to move on from Claudina Isabel’s death, and they see Jorge’s activism as keeping open wounds open, not only making them more susceptible to pain, but also putting them on display, allowing a fetishistic gaze of their private pain in public spaces. Making the private public is one of the elements of *testimonio* that intensifies this narrative, both as an impetus for public activist responses and as an individual account representative of wider collective experience, but Jorge’s family, like many victims’ families, wants to move on from its pain. During Jorge’s *testimonio*, his strategy to overcome audience resistance builds into a discussion of his unwillingness to accept his status as a victim, working against skepticism that he is a pornographer of violence. Although Abu Lughod (1989) warns against romanticizing resistance (Abu-Lughod 1989), Jorge’s insistence that he is a true activist, in pursuit of justice, not vengeance, is significant to the way he constructs his *testimonio*.

yo quiero

yo les pido

que nos ayuden

que esto no sea una charla, que esto no sea una conferencia, que esto no sea una clase, porque estamos hablando de vidas.

One last plea, Guatemala needs your help. I didn’t come to this talk to *talk*. I came to touch hearts. I need your help,

because we're talking about life, we're not
talking about little things, we're talking about
life.

Recognizing, in order to subvert, pornography of violence requires working theoretically and aesthetically against the notion, making representational choices that counter this tendency. In Jorge's case, his emotional range reveals the genuineness of his pain, a vulnerability that needs to be preserved in the transcript.

...y decia y que Claudina Isabel —oigan bien—que Claudina
Isabel había muerto entre 7 y 11 horas después de la autopsia.
Es decir Claudina *estaba viva* cuando hicieron la autopsia, según el
médico forense.

Cómo

puede

resolverse un asesinato

si el mismo médico forense dice que Claudina murió en sus manos,
y no sólo

que murió en sus manos, sino que la torturó durante 7 horas?

... and, when pressed, the medical examiner said that Claudina Isabel—

listen carefully—that Claudina Isabel had died between 7-11 hours
after the autopsy was performed. That means Claudina was *alive* during
the autopsy.

HOW

can we solve a murder

when the medical examiner says that Claudina died in his hands, and not
only died in his hands, but was tortured for seven hours during his
examination?

Jorge subverts his victim status by demonstrating that his inquiries into Claudina's case have outsmarted authorities, causing them to behave in a nervous, inconsistent manner. Unlike similar victims, Jorge does not passively accept official documents as authoritative but insists on accurate and consistent answers, exposing the Guatemalan justice system's inadequacies. When Jorge raises his voice, the audience hears an angry father fighting back rather than a passive victim, a father suffering but also an activist pursuing justice. In this way, Jorge constructs his *testimonio* with narrative interruptions that shift audience response from the inevitable fetishism and voyeurism to the more challenging aim of audience internalization, judgment, and solidarity. Maintaining Jorge's range of emotion in the written transcript ensures that readers, as well as listeners, will interpret these narrative prompts as reminders that Jorge's passion for justice is a plea for audience action, not passive sympathy.

In ethnographic representations of lived experience of violence, strategic narrative choices can similarly undermine audience skepticism in order to invoke solidarity. Movement between specific moments and the broader framing of a work creates

rhetorical reminders for the audience that he/she lives in the same space of injustice, drawing explicit attention to the author's activist aims through telling a life. Incorporating our confrontations with denouncements of victims as pornographers of violence may provide a more forceful textual intrusion, preempting audience distrust. Similarly, scholarly contextualization of *testimonio* may use form and narrative framing to shape the text's meaning: though Jorge's case has still not reached justice, his *testimonio* becomes a public act of his resistance and memory process, both as a father of a murdered daughter and as a human rights activist. Recognizing "the subaltern as a (self-)represented victim, but also as the agent—in that very act of representation—of a transformative project that aspires to become hegemonic in its own right" (Beverley 2005: 553), contextualizing Jorge's story entails a shift in audience perception from victim to actor, so it is imperative that written representations of survivor testimony privilege activism over victimhood.

Transcribing Trauma

Recognizing the tension built into individual representations of collective experiences, we might also consider individual experiences as interlocutors as collectively relevant. When we take our collaborations seriously, we acknowledge that publicly active work requires significant emotional investment, especially when focusing on issues of social justice, "a personal commitment [that] pays back in personal relationships" (Chrisman 2008: 25). Should our scholarly representations then include our emotional collision with the lives we seek to represent, "mak[ing] visible that what happens in *testimonio* is not only the textual staging... but the confrontation through the text of one person...with another" (Beverley 2005: 555)? If we choose to include this reflexivity, how do we articulate our scholarly voices as distinct from—or in solidarity with—the primary voices that allowed us our analysis? How might this tension aesthetically fit into our representations? Mark Klemptner admits to undergoing secondhand trauma in interviewing Holocaust survivors and discusses how "strong emotions such as fear might help the interviewer to empathize with and understand the speaker" (Klemptner 2006: 204), emphasizing that emotional investment strengthens scholarly work. My own fears of violence as a woman in Guatemala pushed me closer to Jorge's *testimonio*. Despite my awareness that I could not misappropriate Jorge's story, I made a place for his pain in my body. I watched myself undergo an emotional reaction that caused an unintentional linguistic division of labor as Spanish became a space of sadness for me, while English became my private language of distance and reflection. Spanish became the language I listened in, sunk into passively, while English offered me a chance to escape myself, articulate myself. I had to work through the immediacy of my emotional engagement to force a linguistic distance in both English and Spanish. In remaining faithful to Jorge's narrative construction, I worked to shape his words as he breathed life into them, working within and against testimonial conventions in order to motivate and implicate his targeted audience.

Though analyzing my internalization of Jorge's pain may be interpreted as gratuitous confessional narrative, I see Jorge's permeations and interruptions in my scholarly and emotional life as relevant to his influence as a speaker of testimonial narrative—"how *testimonio* works ideologically as discourse, rather than what it *is*" (Beverley 2005: 550). Depicting collective experience through an individual story demands representational

emphasis on multivocality, as well as recognition that “in collaborative work there are always multiple competing views” (Chrisman 2008: 25). Transcribing Jorge’s “Femicide in Guatemala,” I struggled with the decision to add yet another voice: my own, fearful that my involvement would disrupt the testimonial balance of individual and collective experience. Initially, I preferred to let Jorge speak his own story in order to absolve my responsibility to represent, but I could not separate myself completely from Jorge’s words. I chose to use four distinct fonts to transcribe Jorge’s *testimonio*: Jorge’s voice as a father, Jorge speaking from the perspective of his daughter Claudina Isabel, and my and my co-translator’s translations; thus, there are two voices in Spanish, balanced by two voices in English, speaking in solidarity with one another.

es muy difícil controlarse
el dolor es muy grande
así que perdonen si la lágrima se cae...
si Claudina estuviera aquí, diría

[Jorge]

Han transcurrido 18 meses desde mi muerte.
Las investigaciones no avanzan.
[Claudina]

It’s very difficult to be stoic while discussing this—it’s very painful, and I ask you to excuse me if a tear comes out...
[Jose]

If Claudina were here, she would say, it’s been 18 months since my death and investigations haven’t advanced at all. **[Michelle]**

By nature of being there and serving as a linguistic filter, I became part of Jorge’s testimonial experience; in writing myself into the text, I posit myself not in competition with, but in solidarity with Jorge, an active listener of his story. Representing Jorge’s *testimonio* on March 7, 2007 in Buffalo, NY becomes its own testimonial record—not of Jorge’s past victimization, but rather of his active and ongoing pursuit of justice. Reframing this narrative structure in solidarity with Jorge gives a collaborative multivocal form to Jorge’s strength and activism. Fueled with urgency, narrated by an ‘I’ whose personal experience offers its own subjective authority, and infused with emotion, Jorge’s voice pulses through his *testimonio*, reaching out to the world for an engaged response.

La pérdida de un hijo es terrible.

Pensar que un cobarde usó a 45 cm un arma [hand motion
mimics pistol at someone’s head] y le disparó en la frente a mi hija
[nodding, arm still out], sin oportunidad de vida. El
ignorancia...
cuando yo reconocí al cadáver
yo dije *hija*,
qué te pasó?

The loss of a child is unbearable. To think that a coward shot a gun 45cm in front of my daughter... she didn't have the opportunity to live... the ignorance... when I saw her body, I said daughter, what happened to you?

Representation in Solidarity



What I did not expect: that Jorge's words would immobilize me while the act of translation split me in two, causing a divide in my emotions, articulation, and sensibility.

I knew that engaging myself as an active listener would make me vulnerable to internalizing Jorge's violence, but I hadn't counted on an emotional engagement that would force me to reconceptualize my scholarly representations. As I struggled to wrap words around a sadness so big, I underwent an emotional response that provoked deeper engagement, while demanding representational attention—I can no longer write about Jorge without writing about myself.

Publicly active work may seek to illustrate scholarly engagement in its reflexivity and multivocality, but works that intend to motivate audiences require representations that incite *civic* engagement, an impulse triggered by feeling the human connection between text and reader. Calling audiences to action requires strategic narrative crafting in order to overcome pornography of violence, subverting skepticism, resistance, and emotional distancing, in order to accomplish what Jorge calls "touching the heart." Scholars whose publicly active work centers on issues of social justice will inevitably be confronted with questions of aesthetic representation, shared narrative authority, and motivating reader activism, thus we should prepare ourselves emotionally, intellectually, and representationally to overcome civic apathy and invoke solidarity.

Meeting Jorge was a turning point for me as a scholar. It changed the particularities of my post-war research, complicating the framework of testimonial narratives on the past within the context of ongoing violence and impunity. But it also opened up a new way of engaging with Guatemala, a connection that shifted my perception of everyday experiences with loss, impotence, and empowerment through narrative and critique. Since Jorge's testimonial performance in New York, I have maintained a collaborative relationship with him and developed a close bond with his family in Guatemala City. I have been fortunate—and unfortunate—enough to accompany Jorge on his frequent visits to the Public Prosecutor's office in Guatemala, occupying a dual role as a researcher engaged in participatory observation for the sake of scholarship, while also serving as an international witness to Jorge's ongoing struggle for justice. My presence during these visits places subtle pressure on the state justice system to listen and respond to Jorge by attending to his daughter's case; my scholarly representations of these visits place explicit pressure on Guatemala, as well as the international community, to respond. In this way, my scholarship is intimately connected to Jorge's activism, just as our human connection

becomes a testament to the power of international solidarity to engage on academic and personal levels.

Links:

WOLA article about Claudina Isabel, Jorge Velasquez's daughter:

http://www.wola.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=viewp&id=550&Itemid=2

<http://www.wola.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=viewp&id=550&Itemid=2>

Article on feminicide in Guatemala, by Victoria Sanford:

<http://www.drclas.harvard.edu/revista/articles/view/1035>

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