"Cada veres que transitan a las semillas": State Violence and the Aporia of Alicia Partnoy’s Poetry

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“La constancia del horror puede no destruir materialmente todo, pero al mismo tiempo nadie se salva de esa presencia permanente.”
—Beatriz Sarlo, “La historia contra el olvido”

Alicia Partnoy was born into a Russian Jewish family in 1955 in Bahía Blanca, Argentina, where she was abducted at gunpoint from her home at noon on 12 January 1977 by uniformed members of the Army representing the military dictatorship of the Junta. She was subsequently incarcerated for almost three years, yet no charges were ever filed against her, nor was she ever formally accused of any crime, named in any court documents, informed of being a political prisoner, or court-martialed. Instead, as Partnoy herself explains, she was loosely “considered a threat to national security” (Little School 16), perhaps due to her Peronista sympathies, and however vague or baseless, such presumptions were sufficient for her to be held indefinitely, incommunicado, and without a writ of habeas corpus via the unconstitutional protocol of the dictatorship.

Partnoy could easily have become one of the estimated 30,000 such desaparecidos from the genocide in Argentina from 1976 to 1983, during which time the “the armed forces . . . regarded much of the civil population as potentially or actually subversive” (McSherry 21; emphasis added). That adverb is crucial here. It introduces one of the discursive origins and aims of the genocide: the eradication of “potential” criminality, meaning the eradication of State-devised and State-defined profiles of those potentially opposing and disrupting the dictatorship’s autocratic rule. Partnoy was apparently identified as one such “potential

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1 Partnoy rememorates her experience as a desaparecida in her memoir The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival in Argentina. Her experience is also officially recorded and recognized by the Argentine government in its inquiry into the genocide, Nunca Más (207–09).

2 In December of 1979 Partnoy was flown into forced exile in the United States directly from a prison cell.

3 At the time of her abduction, Partnoy was a student majoring in literature at Universidad Nacional del Sur, where she was an elected member of the university’s student government and an active member of Juventud Universitaria Peronista.

4 An authoritative text on the lexicon of the era and its resonance is Feitlowitz’s A Lexicon of Terror, where the term “desaparecido” first appears on page ix.
criminal,’’ thereby triggering her abduction, torture, and detention in several of
the dictatorship’s estimated 340 concentration camps, prisons, and torture cen-
ters (Feitlowitz 8). To camouflage such abuses of State power, the dictatorship
publicly announced its Proceso de Reorganización Nacional, invoking a Chris-
tian nationalist rhetoric of exclusion to attempt to paint the dictatorship’s usur-
pation of constitutionality and installation of martial rule as an urgent,
honorable, and patriotic defense of Argentina for “la posterior instauración de una
democracia republicana, representante y federal” (Troncoso iii). Meanwhile, the dicta-
torship was secretly circulating a genocidal discourse detailing, for example,
an explicit protocol for the identification of potential criminals, including chil-
dren and elected officials, to be abducted, tortured, and/or murdered (Feit-
lowitz 50). What was at stake, then, was the power to name.

Ironically, the dictatorship intended for that originary rhetorical violence to
becalm the public, or at least to normalize genocidal violence. To abet this, the
dictatorship in essence criminalized rhetorical and ideological opposition and
alternatives to its authority. As Videla himself explained publicly of his govern-
ment in 1977:

consideramos que es un delito grave atentar contra el estilo de vida occi-
dental y cristiano queriéndolo cambiar. . . . [N]o solamente es conside-
rando como agresor el que agrede a través de la bomba . . . sino
también el que en el plano de las ideas quiere cambiar nuestro sistema de
vida a través de ideas que son justamente subversivas. . . . El terrorista
no sólo es considerado tal por matar con un arma . . . sino también
por activar a través de ideas contrarias a nuestra civilización occidental y
cristiana a otras personas. (Qtd. in Bossié 8; emphasis added)

Yet rather than consolidating the dictatorship’s power (to name), such declara-
tions contributed to the conditions for its disarticulation. That is, not only did
the enunciation of such discursive limitations patently produce its targets
through the intrinsic unsustainability of the prohibitions, but in doing so they
also created social divisions and dissent. Perhaps more damagingly, by intro-
ducing and targeting potential criminality in the form of “ideas contrarias,” for
example, the dictatorship also was unintentionally foregrounding the subversive
force of language in the Argentine imaginary. As a result, the dictatorship’s rhet-
oric was empowering, if not fostering, oppositional and alternative discourses,
thereby undermining both its rule and its intended legacy.

More precisely, with each attempt to articulate and materialize its nationalist
vision of a homogenously “occidental y cristiana” Argentine consciousness, poli-
tics, and economy, the dictatorship was engendering instability, incomple-
tion, and irruption. And how could it be otherwise? The dictatorship was imple-
menting its new order via the violent, sudden, and unexplained disappearance
of thousands of subjects, thereby saturating the national corpus and imaginary
with the spectrality of an irresolvable past born of indelible violence. And this is
precisely where Partnoy’s postdictatorial poetry intervenes, using genre-specific
tropes and figures to contest, rupture, and reconceive dictatorial and postdicta-
torial discourses, historiographies, and cultural production concerning torture
and genocide. Most importantly, Partnoy’s postdictatorial poetry does this by paradoxically making present the absent desaparecidos. That is, through Partnoy’s innovative poetic choices, the desaparecidos are revealed as permanently active and influential in the present, where they irresolvably haunt the Argentine imaginary precisely because of the violence of their “disappearance.” Thus, one of Partnoy’s most important poetic achievement is the resuscitating illumination and transformation of their absence.

Torture, Genocide, and the Poéticas de la Derrota

Through an innovative combination of poetic decisions, Partnoy paradoxically transforms absence into an active and affective presence permeating her two books of postdictatorial poetry, Venganza de la manzana (1992) and Volando bajito (2005). In the latter, Partnoy explicitly names this mode of poetic reproduction of absence a “Poéticas de la derrota” (1), signifying a poetics of non-language, an anti-rhetoric, that strives impossibly yet indefatigably to enact the absent and inarticulable. In the process, it contests and transgresses the limits of antecedent, normative postgenocidal discourses and mourning, thereby producing a vigorous inflection of the two. Moreover, although the label “Poéticas de la derrota” first appears in the second of her two books of postdictatorial poetry, it is arguably the driving force of her entire postdictatorial literary oeuvre to date, including her best-selling memoir The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival (1986), where the most affective writing reads like prose poetry, presenting and transforming absence via a poetic emphasis and richness deriving from an innovative combination of verbal compression, rhythm, metaphor, the musicality of language, and a quintessential prose-poetry tone of synergistic irreverence and irony.

More broadly, then, the Poéticas de la derrota can be read as a mode of contesting the legacy of genocide, which Partnoy portrays as agonistic and inarticulable. Consequently, her postdictatorial poetry can be read as comprising a permanent and irresolvable action: the action of continuously recognizing the impossibility of representing the violence of the genocide, including its thousands of still-missing victims, its use of torture, and its pernicious afterlife. Through her direct, poetic engagement of that impossibility, Partnoy tropologically reveals the present absence of the desaparecidos, who implacably affect the present and make claims to the future, all while resisting representation.

Again, then, the power to name is crucially foregrounded. Partnoy is struggling in her postdictatorial poetry to rearticulate and represent a violence that exceeds representation. And through that struggle one of the most important, contestatory valences of her work emerges: where the dictatorship used the

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5 The use of the term “afterlife” herein develops out of the work of Avery Gordon and Macarena Gómez-Barris, where the term is defined as “the continuing and persistent symbolic and material effects of the original event of violence on people’s daily lives, their social and psychic identities, and their ongoing wrestling with the past in the present” (6).
power to name to exterminate lives, Partnoy redeploys it to struggle to name the deformations and erasures inflicted by that dictatorial violence, and to resurrect symbolically the tortured and murdered, revealing their potential to influence the present, and returning their voices to audibility. And this is important work not only in relation to the desaparecidos, but also to the survivors. Thus, if one were to build upon Partnoy’s advocacy, for example, of the need to recognize how “[w]riting . . . and poetry, have helped victims [to] recover their voices, fragmented by the pain of torture, and . . . to chronicle those events for future generations” (“Poetry as a Strategy” 236), then the Poéticas could be read as highlighting—but intentionally not alleviating—the constitutive fractures in postgenocidal voices, through which the desaparecidos can surge forth to help to “chronicle” the Argentine genocide “for future generations.” In other words, Partnoy’s Poéticas engenders a Benjaminian process of rescue, retrieving the dictatorially shattered, murdered, and banished from the oblivion of History. Yet Partnoy also foreknows such retrieval to be only partial and elusive at best, grounded as it is in the impossible struggle of the postgenocidal subject to represent the genocide, which in its violence exceeds representation.

To clarify that struggle, one might import and extend Giorgio Agamben’s analysis of Nazi death camps. Specifically, in Remnants of Auschwitz he argues that the witnesses of Auschwitz are incomplete witnesses in that they experienced “a reality that necessarily exceeds its factual elements” (12). That is, those witnesses lack the capacity to process and represent the totality of genocidal violence, which exceeds the sum of its parts. Such is its paradoxical excess born of lack, and this is evident in Argentina, too, where one agonistic example of it comes in the form of the paradoxically permanent presence of desaparecidos in postgenocidal Argentine life. Further complicating such notions of incompleteness, the Argentine testimonial subject must also often struggle to recollect experiences during which she slipped in and out of consciousness due to torture, exhaustion, hunger, sexual abuse, and terror. And, finally, such witnesses are incomplete, too, in the phenomenological sense that they ultimately must testify to and represent that which they themselves have not completely experienced: the death of the subject. Thus, building upon Agamben’s analysis, one could argue that the testimony of survivors of genocide, whether from Argentina or Auschwitz, has “at its core an essential lacuna. . . . [T]he survivors bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to” (13). And, consequently, as the Poéticas argues, one must learn to “listen” for, to, and with that lacuna.

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6 Partnoy, too, argues for the comparative analysis of “the Holocaust experience and Latin American genocides” in her essay “Poetry as a Strategy for Resistance” (236). However, where her argument astutely pivots upon poetic modes of honoring “the victims’ resistance to silence,” this essay argues for the fundamental recognition of the important work of their silence in the present, as suggested by Partnoy’s poetic production of the affective, influential silence intrinsic to the experience of torture, and her poetic (re)production of the powerful silence of the desaparecidos in the present.

7 Of note, this is not to devalue the testimonial subject as producer of historical truth, as Sarlo does, for example, in Tiempo pasado (62–63). Rather, as Partnoy’s Poéticas suggests, the testimonial subject is a crucially important producer of historical truth precisely because of her aporetic struggle, her “essential lacunae,” and, therefore, her exposure of the permanent instability and incoherence of postgenocidal ontology and historiography.
In short, then, one could argue the Poéticas to be an innovative and radical mode of listening. Such listening unvels the instability of the present by exposing its elisions, excisions, illusions, and delusions, and, however unintended, this is perhaps one layer of meaning to be extrapolated from Partnoy’s claim in her essay “Cuando Vienen Matando” that “[w]hen considering the contributions of testimonial subjects who have survived the [Argentine] repression, a shift from speaking to listening might prove useful” (1668; emphasis added). In its original context, that claim is a defense of testimonial subjects against challenges to their historiographical reliability. But here that claim could also be read as helping to explain the work of the Poéticas, which creates the conditions for “a shift from speaking to listening” to the present absence of the desaparecidos until what is heard, paradoxically, is their silence, their essential lacunae.

At the risk of circular argument, one could claim such listening to produce new modes of speaking. More precisely, according to Partnoy, postgenocidal cultural production should engender a “speaking with” the desaparecidos (emphasis added), and such speaking with is implicitly contingent upon listening. The listening founds the plurivocal, transhistorical, and atemporal speaking with of Partnoy’s Poéticas, and this is precisely how she contests the aporetic afterlife of genocidal violence. Moreover, this allows the Poéticas to resurrect and rememorate not only Argentine desaparecidos, but also a transnational, transcultural, and transhistorical diversity of other desaparecidos, ranging, for example, from a fourteenth-century anonymous Spanish prisoner in “Romance del prisionero/ Romance de la prisionera” (Volando 12–13) to a Guatemalan feminist resistance fighter kidnapped and murdered in 1980 in “Diálogo con Alaidé Foppa” (56–57) to the immolation of a Chilean youth by the Pinochet dictatorship in 1986 in “A Rodrigo Rojas” (Venganza 82–83) to twenty-first-century victims of rape and murder by Mexican federales in Ciudad Juárez in “Calles” (Volando 64–67). Consequently, then, the Poéticas becomes a compassionate, vigorous, and agonistic action of listening to and speaking with desaparecidos so as to contest, reconceptualize, and rearticulate the foundational aporia intrinsic to postdictatorial and postgenocidal discourses on memory, representation, authority, torture, and justice.

Reading Absence: The Paradoxical Process of a Poéticas de la Derrota

When the Poéticas de la derrota transforms the significance of absence by paradoxically making it present and articulate, it becomes, in the phenomenological language of Achille Mbembe on State violence and sovereign power, a formulation of “the imaginary realized and the real imagined” (On the Postcolony 242). This occurs in the Poéticas through a variation on Mbembe’s “necropolitical” Hegelean process, which posits that “the human being truly becomes a subject . . . in the

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8 Here the use of the term “rememoration” is directly indebted to Gayatri Spivak, who succinctly defines it as “the symbolic reworking of the structures” (195).
struggle and the work through which he or she confronts death” until finally “politics is . . . death that lives a human life” (“Necropolitics” 14–15). More crucially, here those necropolitical conditions are counterhegemonic instead of normative, and they are created *poetically* through the *Poéticas*. That is, through her poetic choices, Partnoy is able to transfigure both the content and theme of a necropolitical absence until it becomes a heterogeneous, layered, and shifting signifier, and this is exemplified by the poem “Torture Machine: Vocabulario” (*Volando* 34–39). There Partnoy gropes in multiple—and multiply unsatisfactory—languages to articulate the experience of torture until ultimately producing a symbolic rendering of its excess born of lack. This emerges chiefly from Partnoy’s structural ingenuity, including her scattering of heterodox, transnational, transhistorical, and transcultural absences throughout the poem. More precisely, absence begins in the poem in the form of silence as a marker of the brute triumph of the torturer in silencing his victims on behalf of the State, but Partnoy then transforms that silence into a symbol of the collective disempowerment, dispossession, and erasure of the victims of torture. The poem reads:

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severe and prolonged...:
amputation of...:
*picana eléctrica*:
¿qué se siente
cuando
el idioma de uno
es el único
adecuado
para nombrar
*wet submarine*...:
*potro*:
no vergüenza
no culpa
*burns*:
*la bandera*...:
¿qué
se siente?
*parrots perch*:
*sexual torture*:
téléphon:
rápido
a corregir
no hay
*ph*
en
*español*
pero...
apollo:...
*diagnosis of*...:
*falanga*:
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português
ellos
¿qué
sienten?
black slave:
cachots noirs:
o
¿qué...?
el quirófano
si dolor
los franceses

si miedo.
Dice el Mingo que es como si miles de terminaciones de cables eléctricos
terewaran de la carne.

Una mujer
con los labios pintados
de azul
le explica
al público
"el dolor físico no solamente
se resiste a ser verbalizado
sino que
destuye el lenguaje,
immediatamente lo
revierte
al estado previo al lenguaje
a los sonidos y gritos
que profiere el ser humano
antes de aprender
la lengua"
le petit déjeuner...;
le déjeuner...;
le rodeo...;
cajones...;
¿qué?
...
...
plantoń:
...
pie
¡dad!

Besides immediately noting the poem’s multilingualism—including its first
line in English, Partnoy’s second language—as a clear and purposeful problema-
tization of representative language responding to torture, one also recognizes the poem’s frequent use of ellipses, which are crucial to the Poéticas. There are eight ellipses in the first stanza, including two in the first two lines; none in the brief second stanza; and eight again in the final stanza, where they appear in eight of the final twelve lines and comprise four of the final seven lines. Thus, the seemingly hyperlingual poem actually pivots upon absences or silences in language, which permeate the poem’s articulation. Those silences make the reader stammer and fragment the potential for narrative, thereby echoing the impact of torture upon its victims, who can only struggle in vain to respond to their experience. In Jean Franco’s words “[v]ictims grope for a language that fails them, so that their narrative of horror is often banal” (242; emphasis added), with that banality being a direct consequence of the inexpressibility of the experience of torture and genocide. They are acts that by definition silence their witnesses, and this contributes to Partnoy’s poem climaxing in her going almost mute in the final lines, where the few scattered fragments of language face annihilation by the silence of the ellipses circumscribing each uttered sound.

In other words, the poem transforms silence by serializing its symbolic functions through poetic decisions, such as its poetic deployment of punctuation like the ellipses. Those ellipses begin by representing the simplest silence: that of the torturer’s success in silencing his victims on behalf of the State, yet they serve finally as a mode of speech for resisting such State-sponsored silence. More precisely, the ellipses come to formulate a language of non-language, an anti-rhetoric, with their eloquent silence signaling the spectral return of the desaparecidos to presence through the portal ellipses. Hence, the ellipses paradoxically articulate the desaparecidos’ silence and absence, speaking eloquently of their traumatic disappearance and re-sounding their influence in the present. Moreover, by resurging through ellipses, the present absence of the desaparecidos unhinges time, and this is a direct consequence of the poetic transformation of the grammatical function of ellipses. They mark the postponement of speech in the poem, and this becomes yet another trope for elucidating the inarticulability of the genocidal past, which leaves its witnesses stammering, grogging for language, struggling impossibly to find modes of speech to represent the unrepresentable violence of torture and genocide. Thus, in their grammatical postponement of speech, the ellipses intrinsically promise speech to come, with that forthcoming speech in the poem implicitly to comprise a critique of State violence. Consequently, those ellipses tropologically promise a post-genocidal justice to come via a rearticulation of the past in the future.

More precisely, one of the most agonistic “derrotas” of the many “defeats” or “failures” comprising the Poéticas de la derrota might be its permanent postponement of any justice to come. This, too, is exemplified by the ellipses in “Torture Machine: Vocabulario.” There they promise justice to come by producing the conditions for the spectral return of the desaparecidos. It is important here to foreground that their return as such is intrinsically disjunctive chronologically: the desaparecidos erupt in the present from a past returned to affect the future. Thus the ellipses destabilize time as the basis for justice. That is, their very specularity, which is the aporetic core of the Poéticas de la derrota, disassembles the
conditions for the possibility of the arrival of a just future because the desaparecidos’ spectral return is as recursive as it is constant. To elucidate this, one might extend Idelber Avelar’s post-phenomenological analysis of genocidal violence in Latin America by paying particular attention to his assertion that “[s]pecters . . . are never coming for the first time. They are always returning” (86). As a result of their oxymoronic destabilizing constancy, it is impossible, as Jacques Derrida argues, “to distinguish between the future-to-come and the coming-back of the specter” (38). Thus, when the desaparecido is (again) made symbolically present through Partnoy’s Poéticas, the desaparecido is permanently postponing the arrival of justice to come by collapsing the divide between the past and future. At best, Partnoy’s poetic return of the desaparecido reasserts in the present the importance of recognizing the impossibility of justice to come due to “the very fallenness of time as the condition of possibility, as the basis, as the foundation for all justice as such” (Avelar 88). And this comprises yet another painful layer of meaning of the term “derrota” in the Poéticas de la derrota: Partnoy foreknows that the aporetic return to presence of the desaparecido ensures the permanent postponement of justice. In this manner, her Poéticas extends to the Argentine genocide the Derridian postulation that “justice as such always means justice to come” (Avelar 88). And in the meantime, while permanently waiting, one is left to struggle with the irresolvable and implacable afterlife of genocide, including the intrinsic, a priori defeats illuminated by a Poéticas de la derrota.

Time, Spectrality, and the Impossibility of Justice

The exposure of the permanent displacement of justice to come counts among the most crucial methodological operations of the Poéticas de la derrota. It allows for the poetic theorization of the collision of justice, spectrality, and the State. This occurs through the symbolic reemergence of those tortured to death during the Argentine genocide, with their continuous spectral return revealing the impossibility of justice because the specter is “that which returns, the one whose essence resides in returning itself . . . [and therefore is] the embodiment of the law of iterability” (Avelar 86). Hence, when the Poéticas inundates the present with an unresolved and irresolvable reiterable past, Partnoy is not espousing the arrival of justice; she is espousing the defeat of justice via its displacement, its inexorable suspension, its permanent postponement. More crucially, she is espousing that defeat as richly generative. That generative defeat positions the Poéticas to do more than merely reiterate familiar claims about the impossibility of representing genocide due to the chasm between language and experience, for example. Rather, the Poéticas elucidates the impossibility of justice due to the fragmentation and dissolution of time as the foundation for justice, with that impossibility itself being profoundly affective and productive.

That affective and productive impossibility is embedded within Partnoy’s ellipses, which contain foreknowledge of the futility and failure of the pursuit of justice. Consequently, while those ellipses signify the place and time of the
paradoxical conversion of absence into presence, as well as the spectral promise of an impossible justice, they also help to construct the Poe’ticas’ tone, which in Volando bajito is that of agonistic yearning for impossible justice. This thereby inflects Derrida’s aforementioned spectral framework, which recognizes both the impossibility of justice and the productive impossibility of nevertheless “yearning for a justice that one day, a quasi-messianic day, would finally be removed from the fatality of vengeance” (21; emphasis added). And Partnoy’s Poe’ticas enacts this. It could in fact be read as the poetics of a struggle to reengage the genocidal past beyond notions of mere vengeance so as to avoid reinscribing into the present a merely traumatizing rememoration. In this manner, it also eschews the reductive collapse of justice into vengeance and/or restitution. Thus, the ellipses not only mark the impossibility of the desaparecido to haunt the present and lay claim to the future, but also the critical importance of that struggle.

In this context, one can understand how Partnoy’s opening claim of her torture as “severe and prolonged” is accentuated non-linguistically by the ellipsis, which prolongs that first remembrance of the experience of torture. Similarly, a reconsideration of “amputation” again plummets her into a silent vacuum of voiceless suffering. This effect is then intensified linguistically by the poem’s invocation of nouns introducing the names of forms of torture, like the “picana eléctrica” and “wet submarine.” Like the aforementioned ellipsis and “amputation,” these nouns silence the speaker yet again, and in compounding ways. For example, their mere mention seems to silence the speaker by forcing her into the unspeakable, harrowing rememoration of her specific experience of torture. More broadly, those nouns also simultaneously reassert the State’s power to name, which it has wielded in a sustained and violent campaign to consolidate a national univocity by discursively and physically silencing its opponents. Nouns like “picana eléctrica” and “wet submarine” perpetuate the conditions of the emergence and maintenance of the dictatorial State by operating as both the action and the threat of silence. Consequently one might see a threshold of possibility in suggestions like Avelar’s that “the objective [of torture] is to produce an effect within the tortured subject . . . that eventually buries the subject into silence altogether” (45). However Partnoy’s Poe’ticas symbolically contests such thresholds of absolute silence. The power of her poetry lies in its defiance of a burial of victims’ voices in mute oblivion. She transforms the silence of the tortured into speech.

In other words, from and through silence, Partnoy devises a symbolic mode of articulating that which cannot be named—the silence of the desaparecidos. Her innovative use of nouns therefore functions in the poem much like its ellipses. Both elements symbolically make absence present, contributing to Partnoy’s poetic construction of a grammar of silence. That grammar is further developed by other marks of punctuation, such as the Poe’ticas’ use of colons to equate language to silence and absence. Those colons disorientate the reader by confusing the institutional systematicity of representative language through their ungrammatical usage between nouns and ellipses, for example. In this manner, the poem becomes metonymic of the broader political work of the Poe’ticas as a mode of resisting sanitized, coherent, and/or completed official forms of histori-
ography. Thus, when the poem’s final four ellipses signal a surge of violence pushing the victim to the brink of an absolute silence, she writhes and resists annihilation by eking out fragments of speech, with that speech poetically structured by non-speech. And those complex utterances enable the reader to (re)consider the (re)formulation of speech through and after torture, thereby granting the victims’ silence a generative agency: it can redeploy absence against itself to resist the afterlife of State terror.

This poetic political resistance also illuminates torture’s legacy as the inexorable deformation of language, which contains newfound potentiality in silence. In a sense, the poem could be thought of as a protracted silence ruptured only by disjointed, fragmentary utterances. This is epitomized by the cry for help at the poem’s conclusion where the speaker begs the “plantón,” or “guard/torturer,” to have pity on her. Even the enunciation of the word pity itself, “pie / ¡dad!,” enacts the violence of the speaker’s confrontation with absolute silence. But it does so not through language but through the non-language of the Poéticas. More precisely, in this case, the word “piedad” follows an ellipsis, is split violently by enjambment, and concludes the poem’s pained attempt at a speech act with an eruption of failed language dissolving into silence. Thus, that confrontation with silence might seemingly emerge through language (i.e., the disjointed “pie / dad”), but in actuality it is poetically produced through a poetic grammar of silence (i.e., the use of the ellipses, enjambment, and white space) privileging non-language.

“Labios pintados de azul” and the Inexpressibility of Physical Pain

Despite being predominantly produced by non-language, the agonistic and violent processes of the Poéticas de la derrota also include the innovative poetic manipulation of language. In a more conventionally verbal sense, Partnoy transforms traditional poetic tropes, for example, into new forms of communicating genocidal violence. One such trope is the metaphor, which she converts into a mode of producing what might be termed a “language of the resurgent fragment.” And despite its emergence through language, this is yet another iteration of the Poéticas’ primary aporia: the paradoxical struggle to make absence present in an impossible effort to represent that which exceeds representation. But in this case, rather than resurging through non-language like the spectral white space or the ellipses in “Torture Machine: Vocabulario,” the desaparecidos’ absence is made present through verbal metaphor. A good example of this comes in the spectral “labios pintados / de azul” in “Torture Machine: Vocabulario,” where those lips formulate a profound metonym for the poem’s—and the Poéticas’—representation of the process and impact of enduring torture. More precisely, those lips implicitly circumscribe the void of a mouth, from whose darkness emerges a ghostly voice that “le explica / al público” that “dolor físico no solamente / se resiste a ser verbalizado / sino que / destruye el lenguaje.”

Of further note, those “labios pintados / de azul” also metonymically espouse
the rich intertextuality of Partnoy’s Poéticas. More specifically, the blue-lipped speaker in the poem is the scholar Elaine Scarry, and her blue-lipped “explanation” of torture in the poem is a quote from her book The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World. That quotation comes from a section of the book subtitled “The Inexpressibility of Physical Pain,” where the original text reads: “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (4). This certainly overlaps with some of the Poéticas’ central arguments and insights about torture, absence, silence, and death. Yet such intertextuality can be developed further, especially on phenomenological grounds exploring the relation of torture to pain within the context of world-building.

For example, one could extend the intertextual dialogue about torture and pain between Partnoy and Scarry to Avelar’s postphenomenological work on torture, justice, and mourning in The Letter of Violence: Essays on Narrative, Ethics, and Politics. There he directly contests Scarry’s claim in The Body in Pain that “torture ‘unmakes’ the world,” calling such a perspective “naïve” and instead encouraging his readers to recognize violence as constitutive and propulsive of worlds. And Partnoy’s Poéticas shares in his disposition. More specifically, one of the foremost “derrotas” of the Poéticas de la derrota resides inexorably in its foreknowledge and re-presentation of violence as complicit in, if not constitutive of, the action of making worlds through language. That is, the Poéticas is as agonistically self-aware of its constitutive violence as it is aware of the violence it contests. In other words, just as the Poéticas agonistically exposes the constitutive violence of the Videla dictatorship’s discursive attempts at (“occidental y cristiana”) world-making, so, too, is the Poéticas aware of its own constitutive violence, which is the violence of rupture, of irruption, of contestation, and of revelation. Thus, when Avelar chides Scarry for philosophizing “as if this world had even been constituted independently of pain” (31), he could be read intertextually here as arguing in explanatory critical prose what Partnoy enacts through her Poéticas: the struggle to represent the originary, inarticulable, and unrepresentable violence of world-making. Quite perilously, then, to avoid such a struggle altogether might be to abet the perpetuation of dangerous contortions, dissimulations, and/or elisions of the constitutive violence of world-making. In other words, to ignore or overlook this agonistic aporia is to risk its dangerous displacement to utopian musings of worlds beyond suffering, with one such nightmarish, genocidal version being Videla’s teleological, perfectionist vision of a forcibly homogeneous “occidental y cristiana” Argentina.

To intensify reflection on the intertextual analysis of violence intrinsic to Partnoy’s Poéticas, one might further note that she has translated Scarry’s quote into Spanish in “Torture Machine: Vocabulario.” As such, the translated excerpt metonymically represents the very stakes of a poem about the impossibility of speech.

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9 See Avelar 29–33. There Avelar contests Scarry by advocating instead for the recognition of a fundamental “connection or complicity between civilization and atrocity . . . [whereby] torture has always entered into the very construction of what is understood and experienced anthropologically as ‘civilization,’ politically as ‘democracy,’ and philosophically and juridically as ‘truth’” (32).
about torture. That is, both the act and appearance of translation in this multilingual poem highlight its argument about language as always already mediated, and therefore approximate, imprecise, inadequate, and “defeated” or “failed.” And not only does that complicate linguistic acts of representation, but, to extend the work of Nelly Richard on postdictatorial cultural production, it avails them to poetic processes that “provide certain aesthetic-critical counterpoints suggesting conflicting representations of the relationship between history and memory” (19). This is clear in “Torture Machine: Vocabulario,” where the act of translation can be read as emphasizing the self-alienating impact of a language of torture. It distances the victim from acts of both intrapersonal and interpersonal communication of the always already incomprehensible and inexpressible experience of torture. Thus the suffering of the victim is intensified by the foreknown assurance of a self-destructive isolation in her harrowing realization of the “unsharability” of torture. And that violence infuses the poem with yet another layer of absence in the form of silence, which sets “history and memory” in conflict.

More precisely, that excruciating, divisive silence emanates through self-alienating linguistic slippage, imprecision, and misdirection. In Richard’s terminology, this creates “a precarious narrative of the residual . . . capable of staging the decomposition of general perspectives, centered visions, and finished portraits” (14). And this again is clearly enacted poetically by Partnoy. Through her innovative combination of lineation with translation in “Torture Machine: Vocabulario,” for example, she poetically conducts and commingles the concomitant actions of mediating, fragmenting, stammering, halting, and beginning anew, all the while reintroducing to the poem the occlusions and obfuscations intrinsic to the difficulty of translating the experience of torture into and between languages, despite the ostensible facility with which torturous regimes discuss, exchange, and implement various “vocabularios” of “torture machines” and torture. This is precisely how the poem might meet Richard’s call for a Benjaminian, postdictatorial aesthetics offering a “critique of monologic totalizations” by creating “plural constellations of dispersed significations . . . [to] enter into a complicity of styles with social imaginaries disintegrated by ruptures in the chain of a historical macrosyntagm” (14).

Again this appears in Partnoy’s Poeíticas through poetic revelations and installations of absence and failure. For example, as aforementioned, Partnoy’s translation of Scarry’s text emphasizes the failure of attempts to communicate the experience of torture, but it can now be recognized as doing so by productively layering forms of failure. For example, in the case of the translation, failure emerges through a double act of poetic transformation and dislocation: first, the agony of torture is represented by the incompletion of Scarry’s inadequate and splintered discursive speech in English. That process itself can be further nuanced by noting Partnoy’s intimation of English, the language of her forced exile, as a “language that I had learned with such difficulty” (You Can’t 12). Second, that inadequate and difficult English speech of Scarry’s is then mediated by its transformation into a Spanish approximation to produce a doubly flawed text regarding Partnoy’s perspective on torture, which she experienced in a Spanish-language context in Argentina. Consequently, the return to Spanish in
the translation of Scarry’s text pertaining to Partnoy’s experience is a paradoxical act of alienation, distancing Partnoy doubly from her native tongue, which is the originary language of not only her experience of torture, but also of the genocide that she seeks to interrogate.

“Aquellos que no fueron salvados”: Solidarity and the Survival of the Subject

Another means to identify and elucidate the deformations of language by torture comes from reading the Poéticas de la derrota through the question of survival. That question in fact permeates the Poéticas, producing a poetry that ultimately transforms the pursuit of that question into an active process of surviving torture, including its violent afterlife. To enact that process, the question of survival is engaged transhistorically and transculturally. Thus, Volando bajito, for example, invokes contexts as diverse as Jerusalem, Ciudad Juárez, Baghdad, and Buenos Aires. Through these various manifestations, that painful and pressing activity of survival transcends the merely personal to gain a collective, counterhegemonic political heft, much like classical testimonio. This is exemplified by the aforementioned juxtaposition of locales of abusive State power in Volando bajito, which offers a political taxonomy of murder victims, including Montoneras, Sandinistas, Zapatistas, Mexican children, Iraqi children, U.S. peace workers, and others. And despite such geographical, temporal, and cultural diversity, the ghosts of those victims coalesce in Volando bajito around a thematic of surviving injustice, with their different experiences being amalgamated poetically by their structural collocation in the book as a mosaic offering a collective call for (impossible) justice for global victims of State violence.

Simultaneous to its international and public iterations in the book, that call for justice is also pursued in excruciatingly personal terms. This is exemplified by the poem “Respuesta” (Volando 28–31), which follows in its entirety:

¿...y vos
COMO TE SALVASTE?

Es casi
acusación.
Es lápida.

Se me congelan
las ganas de contarte
lo de aquellos
que no fueron salvados,
lo de
Zulma María Elena Benjay Braco
Mary Nestor Graciela Rauleugenio
Y el
Proyectodeliberacionacional.
Yo
no me salvé.
Me salvaron
los pies caminadores
de mis padres,
los pies que daban vuelta
a la Pirámide,
las manos
que escribieron una carta,
la "sol
i dar
i dad"
de la Cecilia
y el cachetazo a tiempo
de la suerte,
el dedo de algún dios
desprevenido,
la decisión
de un tribunal de asesinos
que como
dice siempre
don Emilio
estará registrada en microfichas
y escondida en algún caja
fuerte
que se resiste
a todas las Pandoras.

Y ¿por qué me salvé?
Ahora andá y preguntales
a ellos, los milicos.

Ellos sí saben.

Here Partnoy is furiously interrogating her own survival of torture until discovering herself constituted by death. She lives, but her survival is attributable to the deaths of thousands of desaparecidos. Their deaths constitute her; her postdictatorial life is configured by the desaparecidos, whose absences saturate her being in the present. Thus she recognizes herself as a porous materiality, or as the materialization of porosity. And as a result, one of her “responses” to the question of surviving torture is the recognition of the reformulation of postdictatorial life as life lived through death, through absence and loss. Thus the materiality of her life is constructed paradoxically of the absence of those tortured to death during the Argentine genocide: “aquellos / que no fueron salvados.” Those desaparecidos, who are doubled absences in that they signify both the absence of bodies of victims and the absence of discrete explanations for their absence,
found and pervade Partnoy’s postdictatorial life. Their spectral resurgence forms in her a disconcerting collective of formerly singular subjectivities that have returned as a blurry knot by the violence of their erasure and the struggle to resurface from it.

However seemingly counterproductive and aporetic, those disparate desaparecidos convene symbolically as a spectral knot in the postdictatorial present, where they form an affective, counterhegemonic obstacle to their dismissal and obliteration by post-transition rhetoric. For instance, they importantly complicate the postdictatorial imaginary by disallowing the familiar sociopolitical “slogan of transparency that, in the name of the instrumental realism of consensus and of its sociocommunicative logic, attempts to file down every rough spot on the already too-polished and polite surface of the signs of agreement” (Richard 6).

In fact, the symbolic return of the desaparecidos via Partnoy’s Poéticas contributes to a tearing off of the “too-polished and polite surface” of official historiographies and facile postdictatorial cultural production. The force of the Poéticas lies in its probing of the inchoate and ramshackle, through which it produces a nonlinear, non-positivist poetic experience of auto-destabilization, splintering existing phenomenological, linguistic, and cultural systems by incapacitating common discursive modes of articulating torture and survival. Consequently, the Poéticas celebrates the fluidity of identity, the impossibility of legibility, and the delusion of coherence, all of which the genocidal dictatorship would want to oppose to perpetuate a univocal domination of the State. Thus, one of the fundamental powers of a Poéticas de la derrota is its enactment of a generative destabilization of discourse through impurity, dispersal, and incoherence. To build again upon Richard’s work on postdictatorial cultural production, “[i]t is the impurity of that recollection that merits being made productive through a practice of memory unconcerned with the linear restitution of a single history . . . presuming to represent a totality of meaning” (6). And this is precisely the work of the Poéticas. It privileges “impurity” through a logic of “defeat” that derails totalizing and foreclosing historiographies of the genocide and any associated cultural production.

That is the action of survival, and it is actuated poetically by Partnoy. This is again exemplified by “Respuesta,” this time in its poetic use of linguistic compression. For example, Partnoy writes of “ZulmaMaríaElenaBenjayBraco / MaryNestorGracielaRauleugenio” to resurface desaparecidos.10 Here their amal-

10 Interestingly, Partnoy deploys this innovative trope in the poem “Four Postcards” in Venganza de la manzana (54–57), where she compresses the proper nouns of the same desaparecidos to be mentioned in “Respuesta” twenty years later, namely “ZulmaMaríaElenaBenjayBraco” (25). Structurally, that earlier poem is written in four, individually numbered stanzas, with each interrogating a distinct (yet interconnected) mode of death affecting Partnoy’s life, beginning with her brother’s suicide and concluding with Partnoy’s abduction during the dictatorship, with the Junta’s assumption of power signifying the “death” of the country. Of further note, the third section concludes with the lines indicting a female, anthropomorphized death because “llevó a ZulmaMaríaElenaBenjayBraco / que portaban idénticas frazadas. / La muerte calzaba botas militares” (25–27). There the compression evokes the sudden, mass murder of her compañeros, and, more broadly, it creates a metonym for the complexity of the genocidal violence of the dictatorship and its aftermath, particularly through its enactment of the blurring of the space between the indi-
gamation signifies a political aesthetics critiquing abusive State power, with each protracted compression metonymically signifying the genocidal State’s murderous work of “Reorganization” by bluntly clumping together diverse Argentine subjects for disappearance to eradicate subversion. And therein, Partnoy is suggesting another “response” to the agonistic question of surviving genocide: one survives by enduring the injustice of the process, including its seemingly capricious murders. And this is emphasized in “Respuesta” by the naming of a plurality of opponents to abusive State power. This is enhanced grammatically by the linguistic function of the proper nouns, each of which identifies a singular subjectivity and instantiates its absence. Each named desaparecida/o signifies a particular victim and a ciphering of experience as the inarticulable. To build upon an insight from Avelar, “[i]f there is something proper to every proper name it is that it preserves something singular and unconvertible” (47), and in the case of the named desaparecidos in “Respuesta,” their inconvertibility lies in their simultaneous singularization and its inarticulability. Hence the poem’s proper nouns reckon each desaparecida/o as both an individual subject and a silence; each is both a symbolically resurrected presence and agonizingly irretrievable absence. Complicating this further, the names are conjoined, emphasizing through their dense typographical compression a figural reinforcement of the bluntly homogenizing brutality of the State in its quest for univocity through its targeting of any and all opponents.

Partnoy’s invocation of proper nouns in “Respuesta” is therefore as complex as it is poignant. Her articulation of each name serves as an agonistic opportunity to try to resurrect symbolically in the present an individual subjectivity that had been erased in the past, and this intensifies the counterhegemonic, Benjaminian historiographical struggle of the Poéticas, which strives to rescue individual desaparecidos from the historiographical oblivion to which the State had aimed to banish them. One might further illuminate this process of symbolic recovery through the intertextual analysis of Partnoy’s oeuvre. For example, via Partnoy’s memoir, The Little School, one can intertextually infer that the “María Elena” in “Respuesta” is likely María Elena Romero, and that “Benja” is likely Gustavo Marcelo “Benja” Yoti. The couple, age 16 and 17, respectively, was incarcerated and tortured in La escuelita alongside Partnoy, before being anesthetized, transferred, and murdered by the military (106–07). Similarly, “Graciela” likely refers to Graciela Alicia Romero de Metz, one of Partnoy’s closest friends in La escuelita. Graciela was abducted with her husband, Raúl Eugenio Metz, by the military on 16 December 1976, when she was twenty-four years old, a mother of a two-year-old, and five months pregnant. During her abduction, Graciela was repeatedly tortured by the common method of electrocution by cattle prod—the individual and the group, the subject and the State, and the self and society. More precisely, the verbal compression highlights the brutality of genocidal mass murder by juxtaposing the mashed-together, murdered bodies metaphorized in the compressed proper nouns—“ZulmaMaríaElenaBenjayBraco”—with their corpses, exemplifying both the homogenizing violence of their respective murders by “disappearance” and the mass disposal of their corpses in “ideáicas frazadas,” as well as the singularity of each victim as metaphorically implicated by each corpse being differentiated from the rest and encapsulated singularly in its respective proper noun and its individual “frazada.”
“picana eléctrica,” as found in “Torture Machine: Vocabulario,” too, for example—although in this case it was set repeatedly to her pregnant belly. Six days after giving birth to a son on 17 April 1977, she was taken from La escuelita never to be seen again, with her son having been illegally given to one of the torturers at La escuelita according to its guards (105–06). And through “Respuesta,” Partnoy poetically resurrects these disappeared friends, whose absence is made present and agonistically constitutes her survival.

Buried in the Body: Locating the Poéticas de la Derrota

The Poéticas de la derrota utilizes non-language and language to make absence symbolically present through the reader’s body with political, epistemological, ontological, and poetic purpose. This is clear, for example, in the aforementioned protracted utterances. They poetically affect the reader corporally by altering her very breath, which must enact a discomfiting, atypical, and extended rhythm to articulate those conglomerated proper nouns. That act of atypical articulation symbolically de- and re-materializes those desaparecidos in the present. They had disappeared during the genocide, reemerged in print in “Respuesta,” and disappeared again by being simultaneously spoken and unspoken by the reader, through whom the desaparecidos are impossibly rememorated. Thus, the Poéticas instrumentalizes the reader as a vehicle for enacting the symbolic reemergence of the desaparecidos, who are articulated absence. They are the spectrality that haunts life to render it living death, and in this manner, Partnoy’s survival is a necropoetics. It is a poetics of absence, defeat, and death forcing her to endure a complex construction of ciphers and imbuing her readers with similar absences via the verbal and non-verbal grammar of the Poéticas.

That poetically innovative grammar painfully reconstructs life through the materiality of a poetry reproducing absence. To illuminate that grammar quite literally, one could revisit “Respuesta,” for example. There, as aforementioned, lineation becomes a crucial means of composing the breath unit of the line to resist more official forms of postdictatorial historiography. The syllabic density of lines like “ZulmaMaríaelenaBenjayBraco / MaryNestorGracielaRauleugenio” creates suspense through the protracted duration of the compound proper noun(s). That suspense is made more disturbing by the ungrammatical surprises of the capital letters interspersed throughout the “word,” thereby further destabilizing the act of reading via a convolution of normative grammatical standards. This also controls the reader’s breath to the point of exhausting it via the unbroken polysyllabics, with the reader granted only the briefest respite by the single line break before beginning again the exhausting process with the next line’s protracted compression. And, in an infinitesimally minute and approximate way, that use of lineation disturbs, surprises, and exhausts the reader through her breathing to reenact some of the destabilizing shock and complexity of physically and cognitively enduring the dictatorship, with the reader thereby realizing her corporality as permeated by the absent dead.

Of note, this process of symbolically resurrecting the dead through the living is not restricted to the reemergence of dead people; it also includes “dead” or
defeated political ideology. For example, “Respuesta” uses its aforementioned poetic trope of lineation to resurrect the defeated “proyectodeliberacionacional,” which was a counterhegemonic ideology of resistance crushed by the genocidal State. Thus, the poetic reemergence of that movement as a protracted compression illustrates that political project’s defeat by the dictatorship and its reemergence in the living through its defeat and death. Moreover, punctuation becomes poetically purposeful in that line, which is a polysyllabic referent culminating in a period to end-stop the line, which is followed by a stanza break. In essence, then, the line is forcefully and abruptly stopped by a grammar metaphorizing the forceful end of the movement (the period) and the subsequent void left in its wake (the stanza break). More broadly, that punctuation inaugurates a metonymic reference to the sociopolitical voiding of alternative spaces to the dictatorship, as well as the generative potentiality of such violently produced voids.

Thus one mode of survival enacted by the Poéticas comes via its violent production of voids, including the realization of their affirmative, counterhegemonic potentiality. This is exemplified in “Respuesta” by the generative disarticulation of the word “solidaridad” as “sol / i dar / i dad.” More precisely, the Argentine dictatorship aimed to crush oppositional solidarity movements, thus the very word “solidarity” is disarticulated in the poem by violent (de)lineation. That verbal violence poetically signifies the dictatorship’s work to dismantle solidarities of resistance, as well as its overarching attempt to scatter the very possibility of the concept. However, in her survival, Partnoy transforms the violence of fragmentation into a new mode of postdictatorial meaning through fragmentation. Thus, for example, in the fragmentation of the word “solidaridad” one recognizes the sudden reemergence of the “sun” (“sol”). Similarly one can discern the surprising return of variations of “giving” (“dar” and “dad”), with the dictatorial State implicitly counterposed as a mode of taking (e.g. taking freedoms, taking property, taking land, taking life). Hence the shards of State-sponsored violence are collected and reexamined through a Benjaminian historiographical process, reconfiguring defeat as a mode of resistance and hope despite the overwhelming violence of the dictatorship and its afterlife. And ironically, it is the State’s assault on oppositional solidarity that unintentionally creates the conditions for new formations of oppositional solidarity, both during and after the genocide, with those new formations emerging precisely through the rupture, fragmentation, and dispersal that paradoxically reconstitute the survivor’s body.

Thus, the speaker of “Respuesta,” for example, concludes by reiterating her confusion at her own survival, which is the survival through death-as-life and which feels like “el cachetazo a tiempo / de la suerte.” Perhaps more painfully haunting is her survival being directly attributable to “la decisión / de un tribunal de asesinos,” who inaugurated her life’s baffling, agonizing transfiguration by death. As a result of being forced ineluctably to endure postdictatorial life as constituted by death, Partnoy speaks with incandescent indignation, repeatedly asking in agony: “Y ¿por qué me salve?” And the answer to that question is even more painful as it demands the revocation of the survivor’s torturers as yet again founding her postdictatorial life because, unlike her, “los milicos. / . . . sí saben” why she survived. In other words, Partnoy cannot herself
elucidate the central cipher of her existence, which is both reinscribed yet again in her through that painful recognition and rendered extrinsic and inaccessible. This thereby problematizes the question of survival by posing it as an action far more complex than that of existing merely in opposition to the State and/or as the reinscription of its violence. Instead, it enacts the paradoxical processes of the Poéticas, which reconstruct and represent the survivor as a body whose materiality is both painfully and productively riddled with plural, present absences. Thus, the Poéticas again espouses its process of reemergence through absence, which importantly posits more than mere opposition to the genocidal State. Rather, the Poéticas produces a mode of sense-making that has ramifications well beyond a narrow dialectic, however important, of the Argentine dictatorship and its victims. Extending again the work of Nelly Richard on postdictatorial Chilean art, one could read Volando bajito, for example, as aspiring to be more than “merely contrary to the dominant point of view [and instead] taking aim at the larger order of its signifying structure [so as to avoid] remaining inscribed within the same linear duality of a Manichean construction of meaning” (4). And even if Partnoy’s book failed in this ambition, it still would produce a more astute and transformative actuation of the process of surviving torture and genocide.

Concluding the Inconclusive: Absence as Counterhegemonic Weapon

Partnoy’s Poéticas de la derrota is neither innocent nor pacifistic. It responds to State violence by inaugurating its own forms of violence. Principally, that violence is the violence of rupture, and it aims to assault falsely codified, coherent, and institutionalized forms of knowledge and culture. The Poéticas attacks those forms of knowledge and culture in an attempt to make present formerly foreclosed and banished absence without merely retraumatizing the public or perpetuating the tyranny of the State. In other words, the Poéticas works to redress the problem of representation as it pertains to the victim’s experience of torture in relation to official historiographies and discourses. To pursue that, the Poéticas aporetically disrupts, disturbs, and fractures. It then ferrets through the destabilized and dismantled spaces, structures, systems, and rhetoric of the genocidal State in a searching, excruciating effort to reclaim the generative power of absence. In short, then, Partnoy’s cultural production operates through a violence of destruction, although mere destruction is not its purpose. Rather, it splinters lucid and coherent historiographical narratives so as to create from the consequent wreckage the opportunity for new meaning.

This can perhaps be further illuminated by building upon the work of Gilles Deleuze on the modern biopolitical State. His 1986 book on Foucault could herein be read intertextually as speaking prophetically of Partnoy’s 2005 announcement of her necropolitical Poéticas when Deleuze explains that “power does not take life as its objective without revealing or giving rise to a life that resists power; and finally that the force of the outside continues to disrupt the diagrams and turn them upside down” (94). The Poéticas certainly develops
along such lines. It arises through a poet expelled from the social order by both her experience as a desaparecida within Argentina and then as a forced exile in the United States, meaning that the Poéticas certainly strikes in a variety of ways from the “outside” of the “reorganized” Argentine State. Furthermore, in following the logic in the excerpt from Deleuze, the Poéticas also aims to flip “upside down” the State’s official legacies. In fact, the Poéticas aims to shatter the very mechanisms of its oppression by exposing the conditions of genocidal violence and its afterlife as disallowing coherent and lucid representation. The afterlife of genocidal violence renders life always already disordered, disrupted, and instable due to the continuous return to presence of its constitutive desaparecidos.

As such the Poéticas ironically becomes the type of counterhegemonic force that the Videla dictatorship had feared in Partnoy when deciding to kidnap her. The Poéticas seeks to disarm the murderous illogic of the State, contesting the prevarication and dissimulation of the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional. Where the dictatorship espoused it as a defense of “nuestra civilización occidental y cristiana” (emphasis added), the Poéticas unveils the originary violence in the rhetorical sleight of hand in pronouns presupposing and implying claims to a collective, uniform, coherent, and just purpose in usurping democratic power by autocratic force. In other words, the dictatorship was brutally aware of the importance of rhetorical authoritarianism to what Deleuze would later term “societies of control” (“Postscript”), and the action of exposing this is foundational to the political potentiality of the Poéticas. That action positions Volando bajito, for example, as a counterhegemonic, subversive weapon, and this is cause for hope. For if societies of control define themselves by their shift “to rule on death rather than to administer life,” then one potential counterstrike to such control and its violent afterlife might come through Partnoy’s necropoetic wrenching of death from State control by transforming death into life by symbolically making absence present as a newly reconfigured porous materiality.

This coincides with Partnoy’s most direct and assertive claims about her poetics in Volando bajito, such as her ars poetica in the poem “... Poética” (9). There she explains that “[e]scribo rescatoando sedimentos” that include “a veces / un cadáver” in order to reformulate life through death. In this manner, her poetic process makes State-sponsored absence present and eloquent as a critique of the genocidal State and its violent legacy. However, as she aptly declares in the very title of her project as a Poéticas de la derrota, her failure is inevitable. No matter how industriously, innovatively, and valiantly she may attempt to reformulate life through death via poetic modes of “volando bajo,” she will fail. And she will fail because her poetics necessarily contains an essential lacuna at its core: it is founded upon absence, upon the absent, upon their permanent and permanently recursive return. Hence, no matter how meticulously she may scour the postdictatorial landscape for scattered “palabras,” including the most “olvidadita” of them, her aspiration to create a transformative, counterhegemonic poetry can at best function “como la carne / cadáver que transita / a la semillas” (4; emphasis added). That is, the poetic trope of the simile becomes crucial here as a metonym, structurally arguing the failure intrinsic to acts of approximation; the desaparecidos will always be present, but
they will be present as absence; they are permanent absences, but their absence will remain always present. Thus the simile conjures both their availability in the present and their simultaneous unreachability, with the latter signaling the inevitable and intrinsic defeat or failure of actions attempting to approach and (re)present them.

This is the irresolvability of the aporia founding the Poéticas. It paradoxically materializes absence, thereby emphasizing the distance between experience and representation. As a result, the Poéticas at best offers an instable, approximate, and fragmentary discursive mode of living life through defeat, death, and absence. With astute self-awareness, the Poéticas aims to articulate its own undoing. Thus, for example, Partnoy explains in the poem “... Poética” that even when she is able to locate and rescue a forgotten corpse, it evanesces in the poetic process of its (re)production: “Lo traigo a superficie, lo reanimo, / [y] lo despierto / a golpe de verbo y adjetivo,” but that reanimated corpse “... casi siempre / ... me juega la mala pasada de esfumarse / al más leve contacto con mi verso.” And therein one sees yet again both the aim and failure of the aporetic Poéticas. One sees both the poet’s vigorous poetic engagement with death to produce life, and the powerful resistance of death to its reinscription in life, with that antinomy intensifying the stakes of the Poéticas as a possible response to the question of surviving torture and genocide. In other words, the Poéticas may offer a somewhat Benjaminian process of rescuing a forgotten corpse from the past, lodging it in the present, and insisting upon that action as a mode of enduring and evading societies of control. Yet, as a direct consequence of such a mode of rescue and reconstitution of life from historiographical oblivion, the symbolically reemerging desaparecido dissolves and disappears maddeningly again into oblivion, thereby reabsorbing the poet/reader into the violent, historical legacy of the genocidal State.

Nevertheless, such moments of poetic implosion also posit the generative power of the Poéticas, however infinitesimally minute that power may be in relation to the massive and overwhelming historical facticity of genocide and its legacy of suffering. More precisely, the Poéticas’ small but potent generative power lies in the productive potentiality of the aporia of poetically produced absence. This is discernible in the aforementioned adverb “casi” in the line “casi siempre” from the poem “... Poética.” That “casi” emblematically suggests the radical incompletion of defeat and absence. And through that incompletion, the Poéticas can pose poetry as a mode of cultural production reopening the past to the present for critical intervention and reinterpretation. More succinctly, that “casi” metonymically signifies the productive potentiality of the Poéticas to resurrect the desaparecidos as a postdictatorial process of survival that privileges absence and death as constitutive of a mode of resistance to the violent afterlife of the legacy of the genocidal State. In other words, incompletion is the basis of a poetic struggle, however much that struggle self-consciously presupposes itself to fail. And regardless of failure, Partnoy persists in writing and rewriting that (impossible) struggle to try to overcome the dissolution of reemerged life into spectral smoke and then oblivion, with her aim being the necropoetic actuation of that spectrality through the corporality of the reader, to whom Volando bajito
exhaustively presents alternatives to the traumatizing violence of the legacy of the genocidal Argentine State in the Argentine imaginary and beyond.

WORKS CITED


