

DESDEMONA'S LAMENT

I remember a very funny scene from prison, around Christmas, I think. We prisoners were doing Othello. Mari had painted herself all black with cork, and she had curled her hair in order to be Othello. The others were all very disguised. We were in the midst of this and the guard of the women's pavilion arrives, and she says "What are you doing?" So all the costumed participants --- taking on responsibility since there were people in the pavilion who did not want to run a risk of punishment because of theater --- all of us go over to the bars to convince the guard that it was Christmas. And I remember Mary all painted black and the rest of us disguised, talking to the woman guard -- - and all of a sudden she starts to cry --- do you remember: Yes, it was your hand that she took and cried and said "I understand you because I think about my son, because I too --- it is Christmas and my son is far away and I can't be with him. I am in jail as well." And she kept on crying and all of us in our costumes, when we saw her cry, without knowing if she was going to punish us or not, we didn't know whether to laugh. The fact is that we ended up consoling her.

And finally the guard went off without punishing us. A scene from Dante.

This scene emerges from tape recordings made during meetings of a group of women who had been political prisoners held by the Argentine military dictatorship, *El Proceso de re-organización nacional*, popularly known as El Proceso, between 1976 and 1983.ⁱ The group of women met in a newly democratic Argentina, after years that for many had been spent under house arrest and in exile once released from prison, attempting to make sense of their experience and of the conflicts they continued to feel concerning what they had been through. They worked together in what looks like the usual Argentine form of *taller*, or workshop, a frequent way that Argentines deal with common artistic interests, therapeutic concerns, or intellectual activities. The questions they pose, concerning violence, its aftermath, and hopes for its cure, are still open in Argentina.

These women hoped not only to reach some understanding of their experience, but also to be able to communicate it to others. Their hopes were not easily realized: their experience was savagely unexpected and had even been disbelieved initially in their social context. But beyond that they actively discarded more recognizable individual approaches to their situation and

opted for innovative collective expressions, therapies, and politics.

The transcripts of their meetings repeatedly make the explicit point that imprisonment and torture were not individual traumas but rather social traumas. While making this clear, they struggle with two central problems: 1) how can these women *construct* their own subjectivity --- their agency, their responsibility --- in the face of such an experience? 2) how can they *represent* their experience itself as well as the agency that emerges from it? They find solutions to these dilemmas in their political practices, in forms of nurturance that they provide each other, in drama performances in jail, and in their meetings once freed. They enact an inclusionary politics, both as ideology and as a practice. This is closely related to practices of mutual nurturing that sustain them. Drama is important to them as process and participation as well as in the presentation of the content of a text. Politics, nurturing, and theater all provide them with ways to enact collective agency and a subjectivity that is not monolithically coherent. These different forms, in many ways closely linked with bodily experience and practices, all contrast with the rationalism, social atomization, and the highly individualistic values that were represented not only by the Proceso but also by its opposition in both armed and unarmed resistance on the Left.

This paper suggests that such practices and forms of agency may have been more available to women than to men. The centrality here to women of bodily nurturance and related modes of inclusion and consensus could of course be characterized as behavior so clearly culturally prescribed as to leave no choice for women. But many of the women who compiled the archive at hand had chosen on other occasions political interventions that involved both high levels of expertise, for example, in organizing labor strikes and protests, as well as individualistic and hierarchical activism, criticized in the archive itself in retrospect as "omnipotence" (#8, p. 5). Their choices of practices broadly construed as nurturant and consensual, are choices of political alternatives -- if sometimes not in the act, at least in the reporting of them in the archive. As such, they are feminine practices often found in a domestic context and directed toward ends of domestic tasks or domestic pleasures, but *here* they have been mobilized for other purposes and replace more specifically "political" activism. Panjabi makes a related observation in the comparison of Argentine and Indian woman prisoners: "Emphasizing the women's standpoint and the epistemic privilege they enjoy with respect to their knowledge of their own lives and the worlds they inhabit, these narratives confront the dominant patriarchal capitalist modes of functioning" (Panjabi 1997). Panjabi's

reference to the relevance of intersubjectivity (see also Habermas 1970, and Benhabib and Cornell 1987) would be fleshed out by reference to Jessica Benjamin's elaboration of this notion and its origins in child rearing and related pedagogies, often delegated to women (Benjamin 1988). I find it particularly useful to underline that the epistemic privilege held by women in these extreme situations as well as others less extreme is based on knowledges derived from the sensual experiences of food, cosmetics, and other ways of ministering to the body, including art. These sources of knowledge, usually overlooked, were responsible for *temporary* reversals of power in the prison context, as Panjabi points out for the Indian context and as is underlined by the tragi-comic case of the performance of Othello that introduces this study. The Argentine women themselves, as university graduates in some cases and members of a highly educated middle class, make an eloquent plea to formulate their insights in concrete terms, explicitly rejecting theory (#2, pp. 14-15; see below p. 10).

The women resort to drama for many reasons, amongst them its well-known collaborative potential. However, they repeatedly and explicitly stress the capacity of theater to articulate the different facets of a deeply contradictory reality. In response to the need for a genre that expressed the collapse of contradiction, they invented what they termed *visagra*, or hinge

(#6, p. 8; #7, pp. 1, 3). Visagra was an essentially dramatic genre --- hinge not only in the sense of the meeting point between contradictory terms but also hinge in the sense of providing a meeting point between the prisoners and an outside world. Like other prisoners of the dictatorship (see Partnoy 1986:13) they remembered staging plays in prison, but they associate their prison plays with the contradictory themes that preoccupied them.

"In every theater piece one leaves with the sensation of having seen something with a resolution, and here that doesn't happen. I mean, when I ask myself what is the conflict here, I have to say that better said this is a description, because the conflict here is something between what was inside and what was outside [prison], no? This is about how to survive that inside, and how inside that conflict between inside and outside, stories occur, situations seem to mature, to become more intense. But to say that this is a conventional play where something is resolved, I don't think so. [...] Here that is impossible, because there is no beginning, nor end: there is only an experience, *un vivir*" (#3, p. 2).

But the hinge involved more than the simultaneity of the worlds "inside" and "outside" the prison, imprisoned and free. The idea of the hinge also resonates with a kind of inclusionary politics

incorporating different realities, political gestures that in turn seem to echo mutual nurturing in ways relatively inaccessible to men. Drama, politics, and nurturance are all practices that allow the prisoners to construct a subjectivity that involves deep contradictions and a collective agency for themselves.

BACKGROUND

These women were jailed and tortured during the decade of terror that Argentina suffered between 1973 and 1983. The coup that launched the brutal military dictatorship of that era, the one usually credited with the world's first systematic use of "disappearing" as a political tool, occurred in 1976. In broad brushstrokes, the Junta's rule was characterized by savage anti-Communist paranoia and by equally savage free market policies. But in the previous three years, 1973-1976, violence had been on the increase under the disintegrating Peronist government of Isabel Perón, "Isabelita" as this third wife of Perón was known. Isabelita took the crucial measure of handing complete *carte blanche* to the military for policing. Para-military death squads were also well established by the end of her regime. In this period, an important way of controlling Argentina's highly literate population, with its particularly large middle class, was through random arrests and kidnappings that paralyzed people

with fear precisely because they could not fathom the reasoning behind the "disappearances."

El Proceso claimed that its tactics were necessary to halt a highly efficient leftist urban guerrilla, which they supposed might also become a force in rural Argentina. The active resistance to state terror in Argentina in the 1970s took many forms, both armed and unarmed. The Proceso hunted down resistance of both types, literally killing off the opposition. Both armed and unarmed groups tended to be highly organized and hierarchized. The armed resistance, as reflected in the names of many groups, such as the FAP (the Armed Forces of the People), ERP (the Revolutionary Army of the People), and the FAR (the Revolutionary Armed Forces), took on forms of the state military, often using similar paraphernalia including fatigues and uniforms as well as stripes indicating rank. Both armed and unarmed organizations espoused particular ideologies involving different currents of revolutionary thought considered viable at the time, including different admixtures of Peronism. Minimal tolerance of each other was displayed amongst the organizations during the years of the Proceso, both among activists and militants in the resistance, and among those who were in jail. In the same sense, there was bitter disagreement about the necessity of taking up arms.

The women who created the documents that I address here had been mostly political activists such as union organizers --- or university professors. But they easily could have been apolitical and completely uninvolved in any activity that could logically implicate them. There was no apparent method in the fate of those "disappeared." These women express often their awareness of the "luck" that had ended them up in prison, rather than the notorious concentration camps where the regime tortured and killed wholesale throughout the country.

A word about the prisons: these institutions were meant to come as close as possible to what we know as the panopticon, with its elaborate and constant mechanisms of observation of the prisoners. Part of this system also incurred an intricate system of discipline and punishment. This meant that one day a failure to button the top button on a shirt could send a prisoner to solitary or deprive him or her of a crucial visit --- possibly the visit of a child that had been born since the prisoner's sentence and had scarcely been seen by the parent. Torture was not inflicted with the constancy of the concentration camps. Virtually all the prisoners were tortured during the first weeks of their arrest before being "legalized" as political prisoners and sent to prison instead of a death camp.

These prisoners were convinced that they had something very important to say: they represented a specific experience of

prison under the Junta. As political prisoners they were confined in an official jail rather than a secret detention center. While many had been tortured before arriving at the jail, and while they were subject to severe disciplinary measures such as body searches and solitary confinement, nevertheless they were in touch with loved ones and were physically capable of responding to one another. Their children had been delivered to relatives, unlike children of those in concentration camps, whose fate was left uncertain, often later proving to have been appropriated by military families. Very significantly, these prisoners were capable of reflecting on their experience as they lived it. This difference from prisoners in concentration camps in Argentina and under Germany's Third Reich (see Pollack 1990:236 and Levi 1993) gave them a particular view of the two worlds, "inside" and "outside," as well as of the way that neither sphere excluded the other, while "freedom" was elusive in both.

THEMES: POLITICS, NURTURING, DRAMA

The processes delineated by Elaine Scarry's study of torture and war, the unmaking and remaking of bodies and worlds, are echoed here. After the unmaking of both social communities and human bodies in violent kidnapping and torture, these women actively engaged in their re-making as they reinvented their

politics, nurtured their battered bodies, and braved prison discipline to stage drama performances. In the words of Diana Taylor, describing the writing of Alicia Partnoy, a "reappeared" victim of the Argentine extermination camps to whom performance had also been important, "the decomposition, [...] gives way to recomposition --- the recuperation of a lost community, the reaffirmation of a besieged self, and the recovery of the disappeared" (Taylor 1997:151, 170).

Of the three processes to reconstitute community in jail, the political was the one that the women most explicitly defined as an innovative form of solidarity. On the one hand, they rejected what they considered the exclusionary practices of the activist and guerrilla "organizations" to which some of them had belonged, implying changing assessments of political activism. Initially such hierarchical exclusion had been attributed to the military apparatus of the terrorist state. Gradually the Dirty War came to be seen even by many members of the Leftist resistance as a struggle between two militarized apparatuses, one of them generated by the resistance itself. On the other hand, the women engaged in discussions of relative responsibility and liberty, suggesting solidarities across traditional "political" divides.

Ironically, the gesture most remembered as central to an inclusive politics was one that paid for solidarity by

acquiescing to bodily invasion in the form of body searches. The episode was known as the "panty incident" [*asunto bombacha*], to which references are made throughout the transcripts rather to the initial bewilderment of an outsider. Upon re-reading and consulting friends and family of one of the women, I was able to reconstruct the protest: Body searches were initiated by the order given to the women to pull down their underpants. If the order were not immediately obeyed, punishment was meted out. Women who identified with the highly structured organizations of resistance, such as the Revolutionary Army of the People (ERP) or the Montoneros, demanded that all the prisoners refuse to lower their panties in collective protest against the body searches. But this led to disagreement. Other women who had also risked their lives for their political beliefs argued now for other priorities. They insisted that since the form of punishment was often the prohibition of family visits, that the political protest was less important than their contact with their children. They maintained that they should just lower their panties and get the body search over with, but insure their family visits. The "panty incident," then, became a protest against the kind of politics that characterized activism on the Left for which the women had been jailed. The women who protested the protest, as it were, explicitly criticized the "orgas" (organizations) for valuing abstract political goals

over human relations. Implicitly, they also criticized underlying ideas of leadership and vertical hierarchies that allowed ranking members of the "orgas" to give orders (e.g., #5, p. 5; # 12; #2, p.14-18; see Diana 1997:145).

"All of a sudden you would see cases inside [the prison] and you would find some woman who would be knitting all day long and she would tell you the truth of the situation [*te bate la justa*] and you would say 'How in the world? What party does she belong to?' And the lady wasn't in any party, the lady knitted, the lady sang, the lady cooked *empanadas*, and the lady made flowers grow inside your head. And there, you began to respect a lot of things that previously you considered shit. [...] Even though I was an activist in a non-militarist [no foquista] organization, I had a deep problem with lack of respect for other people of different ideas. I believe that this was one of the most important legacies of jail, and one that could not be individual. I believe that here is a triumph: our triumph, one that is collective, and that was born out of different political horizons [sic] [...] when society permits more, these things will emerge [...] I believe that this, in our work of art, in the film, the book [...] in whatever comes out, this has to be there, but it has to be there very

concretely, in things and not with theories, like our conversations now, in concrete examples" (#2, pp. 14-15).

In conversation with other ex-prisoners, I found some men to be surprised at this early form of auto-criticism of the revolutionary politics of the 1970s, which twenty years later these men were only beginning to see as masculine-identified, authoritarian, and hierarchical --- as highly mimetized with the terrorist state against which they had fought. It is important to note an explicit rejection by the women of the notion of heroism that they had found seductive in their activism. The women of this group as well as others criticized not only the hierarchized "organizations," but also referred to their own omnipotence critically with wry humor (#7, p. 4; #8, p. 5; M. Peralta Ramos, personal communication). The husband of one of the women revealed that he placed his wife's critical perspective as operative, along with that of other women activists that he personally knew, as early as 1975, just before their imprisonment. His wife, he emphasized, had been the more involved of the two in political activism. Nevertheless, he stressed that she, along with other women, had become alienated from a movement that they saw as having diminishing bases. The women he knew had been organizing unions, but they began to point out that the meetings increasingly involved all organizers and few if any workers. The husband remembered that these women

had very clear priorities: union organizing was dangerous, they had both families and their political commitments to think about. If workers did not find organization useful at this time, then there was no point in risking their lives. At the same time, he went on, the men were seduced by the potential ideological significance of their activism, and by their protagonism and the heroics of the very risks they were taking. He felt that the men had missed the significance of this position on the part of the women. At the time of our conversations in 1994 it was deeply impressed on both of us that there was a time lag in the consciousness of the men (see Diana 1996 and Cerruti 1997).

The transcripts of the women's meetings make clear that one of their most important memories was that of mutual nurturance. This involved food with its complex repercussions for psychological welfare as well as physical health (see De Silva 1996). But equally important was care for their bodies through complex collective strategies designed to replace grooming and cosmetics.

Food is perhaps the most obvious "nurturant" activity, one culturally identified with women. While not the focus of this paper, nurturing activities involving food are often part of the accounts of these women ex-prisoners. It is important to underline for our purposes the symbolic elaboration of food here

and in other cases, including cases of male prisoners (De Silva 1996:xxx). In the Argentine case at hand, the ex-prisoners recall their efforts to produce celebratory foods, cakes (xxxvii), and cider, the sine qua non of Argentine Christmas celebrations which involved a complicated process of fermentation over time (#3, pp. 5-6; # 4, p. 14,15).

"Of course, I remember the first birthday that we celebrated, with the cake that we used to make out of bread, and I said 'Oh no, look, not me, I don't think I could eat that.' 'Ah, but listen to me, that's because you just arrived, but you don't know how you are going to want to eat this.' And true enough, when I tried it, it seemed terrific, and besides we didn't usually make it, only for birthdays. [...] I wanted to make it for my mother when I got out of jail, and I made one. [...] Puajjj! not even I could eat it." (#3, p. 5)

The case of make-up and grooming is particularly interesting here for two main reasons: on the one hand, because of "[t]he moral indignation on all sides regarding questions of clothing and cosmetics" (Kondo 1997:14) which contributes to their being dismissed as trivial; on the other hand, because of a similarity of this case of Argentine women to cases of women prisoners in the Holocaust (see Pollack 1990). Diana Taylor and others have spoken of torture as writing on the body (Taylor

1997:162), and of writing as a means of recomposition (170) of the subject in the wake of inhuman treatment of the body (157). In the prisons of the Argentine dictatorship, the women would remake their bodies, their subjectivities, and their community by writing on their own bodies with cosmetics.

As they remember their life in jail, the women repeatedly mention ways they managed to care for one another, making special efforts to maintain their physical appearance. One reiterated memory has to do with the invention of a method to dry recently shampooed hair in the face of the lack of hair dryers: one prisoner would constantly fluff the hair of another, styling it in the stifling humidity of Buenos Aires until it was dry. Other reminiscences have to do with ways the women managed depilation or facial make-up in the absence of real cosmetics. The prisoners scraped the red paint off the cans of mate tea to obtain a powdered rouge which they saved particularly for those who were to meet family during visiting hours. They also mixed potblack [*tizne*] with toothpaste to produce dark mascara.

This situation, although extreme, would fit Kondo's interpretation of fashion including cosmetics as part of "a repertoire of oppositional strategies" that involve pleasure (Kondo 1997:13). The uses of make-up and clothing amongst the Argentine prisoners underline as well the importance that Elaine Scarry's work on torture gives to "extensions of the body,"

lodging, clothes, and by extension, cosmetics. Scarry emphasizes the significance of the destruction of these extensions of the body due to their centrality to the construction of subjectivity. Here, the idea of the *performance* of gender through the "costumes, props, and theatrical conventions at our disposal" (Kondo 1997:5) is perhaps closer to the intimately transformative consciousness of actual performers rather than to the spectacle and its effect on an audience (Kondo 1997:8). Cosmetics in this case are more than accessories in the performance of gender. They are bodily solace and nurturing caress as well as performance of the conventions of a dignified gendered being. The dictatorship understood this perfectly and wielded this knowledge to make personal grooming difficult if not impossible in its prisons. This was so even on the street, where the military tried to control the use of make-up by young people (Taylor 1997:105).

If the prisoners regularly availed themselves of the implicit performative aspects of cosmetics and grooming, they were also deeply involved in explicit and self-conscious theatrical performances. They recall that during their imprisonment they staged plays written by other authors. After prison, their meetings led them back to an engagement with theatrical scenes of their own invention with the participation of a guest playwright. Just previous to this intervention, the

women had, after much discussion, invited a psychologist whose attempts at interpreting their experience in terms of individual interactions were resoundingly rejected by ex-prisoners. The playwright had been invited to participate in the ex-prisoners' meetings and helped write a scene based on an episode recounted by one of the women. The women agreed that they had, in the final product, their visagra.

DRAMA

The involvement of the authors of the archive with drama while they rejected psychotherapeutic intervention is worth attention here. In the midst of a great deal of debate and feelings that ran high, these women sought a narrative that would integrate their experience. There are many reasons that they may have turned away from the psychotherapist. Importantly, the women were concerned that a male would misinterpret them. Among other reasons, it is interesting to note that the women's archive includes a summary of an unrecorded meeting in which they found questionable interpretations by the therapist that emphasized an individualist aspect of part of their experience that they remembered as collective. In particular, they found objectionable questions concerning "love in jail," involving mutual touching and nurturing, that they saw as love, but as a more solidary emotion shared throughout the group, rather than

as romantic love of individuals. The group clearly and deliberately opts for drama in their search for the genre, visagra, that they have defined, if somewhat less clearly, as appropriate to understanding their past. Although the records of the group's choice and composition of their visagra are all written, they are explicit about the fact that theirs is a dramatic genre and that ultimately performing it would be the way they would choose to communicate their experience.

Possible reasons for this option illuminate strategies, both of representation of torture and repression and its victims, as well as of the remaking of subjectivities and lives destroyed under repression (see Adorno 1977, Scarry 1985, Taylor 1997). Like writing in general, writing drama is a way to constitute a narrative that "provides the victims [...] a way back from atomization and disconnection" and staging a play provides a way to reconstitute lost community (Taylor 1997). In the face of physical trauma when time and verbal discourse both stop (Goodwin and Attias 1999), a verbal story counters these effects. But the acting out of a dramatic episode provides something beyond this: when the verbal discourse is accompanied by bodily messages, the simultaneity of the story in words and the expression of corporal trauma makes new linkages and forges important paths out of disjunction and fragmentation.ⁱⁱ But verbal and bodily messages construct discrepant versions of a

tale that can interact. This capacity of course would be ideal in a search, like that of the women in the group of ex-prisoners, for a medium to express deep contradiction and paradox.

Their search began in prison; the women make many mentions of staged dramas all performed at the extreme risk of being sent to solitary confinement. The archive includes an actual three-page script of a comic space adventure involving the theft of false eyelashes in which a rebellion of all-too-human robots against capricious power triggers a galactic war. The tiny play, apparently written down by a member of the group after the prison years, revolves around Prince "Locor Titono Quitalo Valiente," a vehicle in part for a hilarious rendering of a saying, Courtesy doesn't diminish bravery [*Lo cortés no quita lo valiente*; the name of the Prince is in fact "Short stature doesn't diminish bravery"]. This play on words could be deeply relevant to a group of women, commonly considered more frail than the males noted for their valor, thinking about how to fight state terrorism in a humanly dignified manner. It conveys as well a criticism of the ideal of heroic bravery held by both state and opposition. With the description of the performance of Othello, the women also recall the specific case of having costumed themselves to perform a version of "La Boutique Fantastique," "the dolls in a toyshop that became alive when the

owner closed up," in poignant echo of their own activities when the guards could not see them. Women in the group of ex-prisoners were amongst the actors: "I remember being a little lead soldier[...] We thought about how ridiculous it would be if we were sent to solitary confinement all dressed up in our costumes[...]" A member of the group asks on tape: "I can't remember: did we have a warning system [*teníamos campana*] when we did all those things?" "No, " someone answers, "we tried to make a tight circle, covering up what we were doing, so no one could hear us" (#4, pp. 4-5).

The choice of drama by those affected by trauma may have been made at other moments in the history of Western drama. A constant theme of Stanislavski concerning the potential of Western theater is the idea that from physical truth, in the form of disciplined practice, arises spiritual truth (Stanislavski 1957). An election similar to that of the ex-prisoners has been explored by Goodwin in the case of Sophocles' and Euripedes' choice of "a thoroughly embodied medium, tragic drama" (Goodwin 1998). Given that both classic dramatists would have been familiar with different forms of abuse, indeed that both were war veterans, "it was this combination of cultural experiences that [...] [they] molded to convey for the generations the body's way of telling a story about trauma." "For several hours the body of an actor brings Oedipus to life

[...] An image in the mind's eye would not suffice. This visible, audible, animate [...] body [...] conveys to us --- as well as the words of the play --- subtle gradations of grandiosity, shame, poise and self-fragmentation" (Goodwin 1998: 9, 11). The capacity of drama to portray several simultaneous layers of potentially discrepant messages, many not in the verbal text, has made it a particularly apt vehicle for resistance while avoiding censorship in repressive regimes (Obeyesekere, personal communication; Taylor 1997). But beyond the difficulty that dramatic performance presents to oppressive censors, it also may be a particularly apt medium to address the tragic contradictions lived by massively traumatized populations.

All of these elements may have contributed to the wise determination of the ex-prisoners to seek out a "hinge." In the broadest sense, drama itself serves as the hinge between bodily and verbal discourses. It also connects past and present --- the story itself and its enactment. But beyond this it offers the ex-prisoners ways to convey corporal messages that contradict their words. The stories they want to tell, and eventually to cast into dramatic form, centrally involve this kind of contradiction. The importance of the body here echoes Diana Taylor's remarks concerning the representation of the disappeared in Argentina: "These disappeared bodies are the

linch-pin in different, often ideologically opposed narratives that tie into, or run into, the national fantasy founded on radical differentiation --- between good and evil as well as between national (Argentinean/non-Argentinean) and gender (male/female) identity. Similar fantasies underlie other terror systems. There is such a *déjà vu* quality to the scenario that one wonders how anyone can think of them as Argentine [...]. These bodies are the linch-pin in this narrative, in part because they have no clear meaning beyond their individual, biological facticity [...]" (Taylor 1997:147). Bodies have more recently again interrupted narratives of the Dirty War that had been based on "radical differentiation" in the living beings identified as children who were appropriated from mothers who gave birth in the concentration camps: the "children of the disappeared" emerge as neutral, indisputably innocent victims.

In an account with a bodily *sous-texte*, one of the members of the group uses the term "hinge" in the course of recounting her bewildering journeys from freedom to a camp, from the camp to prison, and finally from the prison towards freedom and exile. When she is taken out of the extermination camp, to be identified as a political prisoner with rights to a trial and to normal imprisonment, while this process of "legalization" is going on, she, eight months pregnant, is thrown down a flight of stairs and beaten mercilessly. She is finally put under house

arrest before being able to leave the country for exile: "I spent three months in Argentina just after getting out, sleeping in my parents' house. Sleeping is a figure of speech because I would go to bed and be unable to sleep with the window beside me that looked out onto the street --- I heard every car that stopped, every door that opened, and I never went anywhere, I had no documents, I had nothing, because they had stolen everything" (#7, p. 1). In the course of the account of her actual flight abroad into exile she relates profoundly contradictory episodes such as suffering in the air the same severe eye irritation she had had when taken prisoner. Flying away from her own imprisonment, she suffers a physical symptom that reproduces the moment of her imprisonment. The simultaneity of her body's re-enactment of imprisonment and her actual liberation are eloquent of the experience, repeatedly mentioned by others, of being in jail when free and free when in jail.

When she arrives in exile, she tells of a double existence:

"All that time I had permanent images of the prison, no? I looked at the clock at the hour of roll call --- I had almost a biological clock. Every minute had another dimension --- with all the differences of time and of climate, but I was on prison time, I lived the rhythm of the prison. It was like coming out of a tunnel, very slowly

--- bit by bit I resigned myself to the idea that I had landed there [...] sort of as though it were a cartoon [...] I remember that in the morning we got up, on a gorgeous day, and this friend says, 'Let's go for a walk.' He was a very sweet guy, not compulsive at all [...] But of course, we end up in the Coliseum, and I looked and crazy things began to happen to me, from realizing what the Coliseum had been in its moment to asking myself why in hell this is still there, why don't they blow it up and pulverize it and make it into a field for horses --- wanting to destroy with my mind the Coliseum and all of its consequences [...] People were telling me, 'Now your children will arrive,' and I thought: 'What state will I be in when they come? What the hell am I going to do with the children?' But this did stimulate me a little. Well, they were a terrible two days" (#7, p. 7).

The transcripts, then, recount the prisoners' experiences mixed with their account of the search for an adequate medium to express them. Crucial to this attempt was their search for a genre that would resolve the intractable contradictions that riddled their memories of jail and their construction of their own agency during the Dirty War and afterward. Their experience, their bodies joined what seemed otherwise to be opposites/ binomials: liberty and prison, "inside" and "out," innocence and

guilt (#2, #8, #18), victims and victimizers, action and passivity, "collaboration" and "resistance," life and death.

"I tried to explain what it means to go directly from an extermination camp to the street, it's as though all of a sudden they open a window to show you all the horror of the universe and then all of a sudden they shut it, and well, with that image in your head, go on back and live. The difference from our other situation, which was more gradual, as we went to the police station, to the prison. What it meant for us to pass on to prison as against a camp. We said to ourselves that prison was full of girls who were in our same situation, we were going to feel better, and that doesn't happen when you go directly from horror to the street. ... You lose all criteria of reality, you can't know which side is which of things." (#7, p. 3)

"When we were prisoners, we were prisoners. ...In spite of everything we had a freedom that people outside didn't have. We had people in whom we could confide. But the people in the street didn't have that. ... Nobody knew who was who. When I met people in France who had come from the real Argentina, I realized that we lived in freedom. In the last analysis, [in our play] we are showing the spectators who believe themselves never to have been in prison, that they were more imprisoned than we [...]. My mother lived

near a cemetery, and when she came to see me in prison, she told me that every day the streets were awash with blood and all the bodies they were taking away, and she said 'It can't be that you girls don't see blood. I see it all the time.' That's what people were living outside while we were inside' " (#9, p. 1).

Finally, the women's experience seemed to them the point of encounter and of incorporation of contradictory lives, a point at which they learned to overcome difference and to reject exclusion. They felt that their political organizations, *las orgas*, with their absolutist formulations of difference, had failed them in this task that the women had come to see as essential for a human existence.

MARIPOSITA: A SCENE

Although many of the transcribed memories exhibit similarly contradictory themes, the one finished example of the newly invented visagra, produced with the help of the playwright after much searching and discussion, is the story of *Mariposita*, "Little Butterfly."

Mariposita was a prisoner who shared ten days of solitary confinement with a political prisoner. No one could know whether she was another political prisoner with whom they had no contact before or after, or --- what was more probable --- whether she

was a regular prisoner "*una común*," jailed for a common crime. The profound contact and communication with another prisoner who could not see her had been recounted as the only way out of a moment that the political prisoner remembered as the darkest of her years in jail.

In the imagined dramatic sequence, the contradiction between total solitude and communication is introduced and framed by another --- the contradiction between a world "inside," in prison, and a world "outside" --- a contradiction that the prisoners felt in many ways was only relative. "Inside" and "outside" were in continual contact with each other in a paradoxical relation between the two such that often those "inside" had the only true freedom and those "outside" were those that were truly imprisoned. For the prisoners, the story of Mariposita was an example of the genre that they were inventing to deal with their experience: their *visagra*, or "hinge."

Why would this particular scene be so central to the ex-prisoners' search for communication and solace? This memory of "the most terrible moment, when I felt truly jailed" was also a moment of profound communion. While representing what the women felt to be the worst of their imprisonment, it alluded to the intensity that they had felt in caring for one another. Amongst a group of women who were highly educated and could refer to

Shakespeare or the latest on the theater scene of Buenos Aires, it is unlikely that they had no association whatsoever with that most famous of women "undone" by men in Western opera, *Madame Butterfly* (1904). Cio Cio San, betrayed by both her culture of origin and her adopted culture, also struggled to take control of her body and her destiny as she watched herself abandoned and her child stolen. For these women also, a butterfly, that has no voice, nevertheless sang. But beyond this, their butterfly, with wings like a hinge, so fragilely feminine, was surviving the blows of powerful torturing men.ⁱⁱⁱ This invisible but present butterfly who sang the songs that were so much a part of Argentine communal life, gave voice as well to the belief that one is never alone --- neither in solitary confinement, nor upon leaving group discussions to take the lonely trip back home, a moment that deeply disturbed the members of the group. The scene of *Mariposita* brought and represented a communion so profound that it was chosen as a quintessence of these women's experiences, and as key to their communication with others.

The scene was read in meeting and accepted.

something came up about solitary confinement. A scene occurred to me: [...] in my mind, spatially, it is a long corridor, and people and the guards walk down the hall. Why did this come to me? Because there is a

necessity to communicate a world outside with a world inside, no? That inside with the outside, to put them together, later we will see what happens. There isn't an idea of a defined space, rather the process of passing through, and of people crossing in and out of these places. Then I had the idea of a scene defined by lights, like a small box. Someone, a woman, who is there, curled up, a space [that is] tall and narrow, and she begins to speak, to sing in a low voice [canturrear], to rave, silence, humming, silence, blows and someone who responds to those blows --- you can't see, everything remains dark. But someone is there and responds. And a dialogue begins between Mariposita and someone without a name, whose politics we don't know, whom no one can see. But this dialogue is with Mariposita. And songs that grow and grow, that begin with tangos and boleros and become gradually freer until they end singing together (#2, p. 20).

The transcripts show a group of women forging new subjectivities in the face of the atomizing violence of a terrorist state and of the political resistance to it. The women, many of them already expert as activists in strategies of political resistance such as strikes and protest, are concerned

to construct an alternative, and in doing so they enhance practices that are relatively de-emphasized, if not deprecated, in the culture that produced both state and resistance. They discard individualism and hierarchy in favor of collective agency. They respect their bodies and put a high value on nurturing them through cosmetics, touching, and food. They seek out a medium that collectively involves their bodies and attends to corporal meaning as well as allowing for contradictions and paradox in simultaneous statement. This form of expression, drama, is constructed not as spectacle with its inherent hierarchies ranking standards of performance, but rather as inclusive and intimately transformative practice.

In this context, the fact that they risked severe sanction in order to perform the Christmas play that they remember in such detail, takes on a new significance: the play was Othello. While none of their accounts remark this choice, nevertheless, on Christmas Eve, a group of innocent women enacted the story of yet another innocent female body unjustly accused, living the precarious edge between life and death with her own murderer whom she must console and who believed himself --- and was indeed --- the victim as well.

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ⁱⁱNumerous works address the importance of dissociation in the sequelae of trauma, beginning with A. Goldfield 1988 "The Physical and Psychological Sequelae of Torture: Symptomatology and Diagnosis" *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 259 :2725-9. Amongst sources central to the study at hand are Herman 1992 and Agger 1994.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Clément 1988. Different power valences of imagery derived from *Madame Butterfly* have been elaborated in David Henry Hwang's powerful play, *M Butterfly* (1988). In this form, they have in turn been the center of further academic comment, most relevantly here by Kondo 1997: 31-54, Shimakawa 1993, and Garber 1992.