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Auto-retrato de un cuerpo o la vida exterior: Lesbianas en Acción, Hijas de la Luna y otras

*[L]a vida parece ser de fragmentos cuando se es joven,
fragmentos de un mosaico inmenso
cuyo diseño no se puede alcanzar a ver
Ahora la vida es siempre una hoja en blanco
Algo se está dibujando encima
pero debajo del dibujo siempre está la vida
en blanco
Dejo a un lado el dibujo de ella dormida,
tomo otra hoja de papel tersamente, tibiamente,
perfectamente
en blanco
Autoretrato de un cuerpo, apunto en la esquina inferior
derecha, o la vida exterior,
la hoja en blanco me mira me mira me mira*

(Sabina Berma, 1988, p.25)

We are here today to talk about women's human rights and, by implication, about women's bodies. We can discuss violence, and torture - involving as it does the horrible suffering of people and denial of their rights. Yet, such academic discussions gloss over two things. First, "human rights" may not adequately cover the specific rights of women; and second, it may focus on statistics and hard data to the extent that the reality of feelings is not taken into account. Narrations, poems, autobiographies that explicitly explore feelings all too often fall outside discussion of rights, because they cannot be quantified. Showing feelings, moreover, has traditionally been the prerogative of women and children.

Women's movements have begun to change such traditional beliefs, however, and more men now allow themselves to express their feelings, while violations of human rights have now become more visible.

There is now greater awareness of the abuse women experience in everyday life "such as rape and domestic violence" (Amnesty International, 2000: p.4).

But such greater visibility does not always extend to Lesbians, who are still greatly discriminated against, even within women's movements. This discrimination attempts to isolate us, to silence us, and make us invisible in a "normal" heterosexist society.

Prolonged solitary confinement in prison is internationally recognized as a form of torture. Social isolation of lesbians is not. Nor is the enforcement of heterosexuality. (Monika Reinfelder, 1996: p.19)

Lesbians and gay men have not had it easy in modern world history. We have been raped to have "a real man's fuck" (Lynda Birke and Consuelo Rivera-Fuentes, forthcoming), given electroshock treatment to "cure" us, refused access to partners because of immigration/asylum legislation, denied our existence. In international feminist/human rights conferences and contexts, we are silenced or hushed by other wom-

en. We have suffered incarceration in "lunatic" asylums; we have been tortured and killed for being "deviants". Take these figures just as an example: Colombia: 300 lesbians (and gay men) killed by death squads between 1986 and 1990; Brazil: 1,200 gay men and lesbians killed in the 1980s; Chile: many murdered in the years of the military dictatorship; thousands of gay men and lesbians killed alongside Jewish people during the Nazi regime in Germany and so on. (see Reinfelder, 1996, Rivera-Fuentes, 1996).

We are, I repeat, made invisible by that deep homophobia. 'Heterosexism: The belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving and thereby the right to dominance. Homophobia: The fear of feelings of love for members of one's own sex and therefore the hatred of those feelings in others' (Audre Lorde, 1996 p.99) which cuts across cultures, religions and ideologies. When we manage, stubbornly, to speak up; when we narrate our lesbian stories and experiences of torture, too many people doubt our suffering and demand facts, statistics, and physical evidence, just as male-defined concepts of human rights and institutions do. The expression of feelings of pain, of helplessness, of fear, of not understanding why one is tortured for one's right to self-determination makes other people uncomfortable. Facts and statistics enable the listener to distance themselves from the horror; but it is less easy to distance oneself from expressed feelings of pain. Reactions may not always be positive and/or compassionate. Is that what happened, for example, when I participated in one of these international conferences a couple of years ago? Two of my Latin American "sisters" wanted to imprison me in the straight (excuse the pun) jacket of *testimonio* when I was clearly performing a testimonial narrative. For further details of the concept of *testimonio* and testimonial narrative, see Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield (eds.): *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*. Routledge, 2000. But the narrow concept of *testimonio* leaves me silent; it does not allow me to perform my pain in public, it does not allow for the recovery of my feelings and memories of torture. Nor does *testimonio* allow listeners to express their own emotions and fears.

Testimonio stops me recovering my voice, but especially my Lesbian voice. I am an activist of my dreams so I refuse to be silenced by narrow concepts of human rights, of violence, of torture, of sexual identity. As a writer, I also refuse to tell my lesbian stories in a neatly organized way, with a logical beginning, middle and end: yet this doesn't make my story less important or truthful than a *testimonio*. Sometimes I write with clear, crude facts; some other times I do it with feelings, which seep and flow through my skin into the page open in front of me. I write from and for myself first; I write to try to understand myself and my contradictions; but I also write to understand human capacity for violence and profound cruelty, perpetuated against both other human beings but also non-human animals. While much is written about violations of human rights, too little is said about crimes against Lesbians, especially in Latin America. So, here I write to denounce the violation of Lesbians Human Rights. As Marjorie Agosín asserts:

La que escribe recurre a lo único que conoce: ella misma; desde los secretos confines de su caja de Pandora que lentamente comienza a abrir para explicarse a sí

misma. Pero también la literatura escrita por mujeres representa la voz de los oprimidos que escriben para dejar constancia de esa marginalidad

(Marjorie Agosín, 1986, p.7)¹.

So I am going to open my Pandora box once more in front of you, this time in a mixture of Spanish and English reflecting my constant crossing/cruising of linguistic, cultural and language boundaries. My story is not unique, thousands have been in the same warp of events or worse, but have remained silent for reasons I will not analyze here. I respect the privacy of their pain. However, if I am going to contribute to that feminist ideal and utopia of a better and equal world for this and future generations, I cannot remain silent anymore.

Lesbiana sí, maricona in my own terms, yes. *¿Pero no esperes que les haga una mariconada a mis amigos? Maricona* (and *maricón* for a man) is a derogatory term for lesbians in Spanish but it can also be used to say of someone that they are a bad person. *Una mariconada* refers to treason and betrayal. I think, and smile to myself in spite of my swollen lips. I stare at him, defiantly, directly into his green eyes. I am trying desperately not to look at the *compañeros* standing opposite us. It hurts me so much to see those young men with their heads lowered, in submission and defeated. What's happened to our chanting: *el pueblo unido jamás será vencido?* What's happened to our determination to overthrow *los milicos?* Where is our anger?

Our anger is diluting into fear and pain. It is now a red, thick liquid dripping onto the hard cement floor of this cold gymnasium. I want to cry. We are two rows of human bodies facing each other; women and men made to stand for hours on opposite sides, bleeding, sobbing, frightened, shaking and thinking *cómo salir enteros de este lugar*.

Our arrest was public and in broad daylight, so they cannot not make us disappear without some explaining to do, I thought naively. That gave me the strength and determination not to lower my eyes. With a morbid curiosity I observed the arrogant lieutenant: he was a tall young man with a well-trimmed, Errol Flinn-kind of moustache; green camouflage uniform and army boots, as it corresponded to the situation (*estamos en guerra, señores*, the general used to say). When our eyes met, full of hatred, he laughed with a laughter of ice and I realized how stupid I had been to think that a public arrest would be "safer". *De ésta no salimos vivos*, I thought. A young woman, dressed in black, wept silently, with her eyes fixed on her shoes, *con el moco corriendo sin control*: her fingers had been broken one by one when they discovered she was a pianist. Fernando had had the points of his own *espuelas* (Chilean cowboy spurs) driven into his face. He was also looking at the soldiers with a deep and almost suicidal determination and hatred. I suppose he didn't mind anymore what they could do to his body; *después de todo el cuerpo exterior se entumece, se adormece; se convierte en raíz de mar*; it dies and the collective memory of people buries it amongst red flags and militant songs and then go on with the struggle; it is yet another body, another bird fleeing from forgetfulness, but not being able to fly.

¹ ¡Agacha la cabeza, maricona!, howls the green lieutenant.

I bent down to pick up a tissue and tried to clean the bleeding and runny nose of the pianist, but I met the demolishing army boot of one of the soldiers; ...or was it the lieutenant's? I don't know. What I do know is that from that moment on, my body would not be.

Mami, mami, why don't you take me to your warm womb again? I want to feel your heart in my heart, your blood in my blood...Why have you left me? I yelled as the electrodes made my whole body shake.

Shall we play *tengo-ganas-de...*? said Camila, the history teacher. She had long hair, copper-like, as her skin and high cheeks, swollen and bruised now. She started by saying: *Tengo ganas de dormir todo el día abrazada a mi viejito*, as she called her married lover with three children. . I want to go to Concepción Theatre to see *Tres Tristes Tigres* and smoke a Hilton very slowly. Has anybody got a *cigarrito*?

None of us had but a self-portrait in our memory; a female body, blurred by the kicks and the yells, but that we could still recognize as our body.

Yo tengo ganas de estar en la casa de campo de mi abuelo y de robar manzanas verdes de la parcela vecina. My grandfather's orchard is full of apple trees but the neighbor's somehow taste nicer, whispered the pianist and started to weep.

Yo tengo ganas de ver a Cristina, I said quietly. I want to smell her body, I want to hug her in a night full of *cuecas* and *cumbias*. *Tengo ganas de comprarle una empanada de horno en una fonda llena de huija, rendija y borrachitos y luego darle un beso con gusto a helado de pistacho*. I want to make love to her on the beach of Lirquén. If I close my eyes, I can feel her body that smells of the sea, that quiet sea that bathes the coast of our beaten, fragmented country. *Quiero encontrar en su cuerpo el consuelo que no me da mi nombre: mar adentro me deslizo, me adentro en las aguas de su cuerpo, azul como el olvido. Tengo ganas de soltar su trenza morena y de lamer sus volcanes hasta hacerlos estallar en una lava ardiente, salina, que queme mi lengua rebelde*.

Chitas que hablai difícil - Domitila uses the language of the "lower" class in Chile, therefore she says *hablai* instead of *hablas*, *enojís* instead of *enojes*, *toy* instead of *estoy*, *meo* instead of *orino*, and so on., Domitila exclaims. So it is true that you are a dyke! I, on the other hand, *tengo ganas de comerme un pollito asado y un sanguiche de potito, pero no de mujer*, she laughs - *Sanguiche de potito* is a Chilean sandwich made with tripe, onions and chilli. *Potito* is the diminutive of *poto*, which means arse bottom. Hey, but you don't look like a dyke. How come? Ah, I know, you are the passive one, aren't you? How do you do it?

Do what?, I reply in anger. Why do people think that the only thing Lesbians do is to fuck? Lesbian equals sex. There is no space for feelings, brain, sensuality, tenderness...

Ya, puh, no te enojís. We have to talk about something, don't we? *Perdona guachita*, Domitila apologizes.

- If you don't shut up, motherfuckers, we are going to fuck you all! - howls the sergeant in charge of guarding us until they decide what to do with us. We are four women sat on the cold cement floor of a tiny cell of the *comisaría*, in the middle of which runs a narrow, yet deep and stinky, open sewer; entering the depths of our souls

like a swollen, smelly wound rotting away our dignities. Domitila pleads with the soldier to let her go to the toilet, *toy que me meo, teniente*, she says, *no sea malito*.

- I am not a lieutenant, you bloody communist! And you can piss yourself in there...*conque ir al baño quería la perla*,...he mocks her.

Se equivoca, mi cabo, replies Domitila. *Yo andaba vendiendo gomitas de eucaliptus* (jelly eucalyptus gums) *cuando me agarraron; no tengo na' que ver con las protestas...Puchas, no sea malito, déjeme ir al baño...*

I can hear the lieutenant's voice mocking me: *What a smell! Look at her, she has wetted herself. Poor little girl! What will your mami say now? Thirty-two years old and she still dirties her pants*. The smell of my own piss and shit is making me retch. *I need water*, I manage to whisper. I remember the happy moments of solidarity with Cristina and Eric and the teacher who had recruited me for the MIR. I do not want to say their names; names bring other names. I only want my mother's hand caressing me but she can't hear me. The cold, sharp strings of this metallic bed are hurting my back, the leather straps are penetrating my brain and my soul. Here is again, the atrocious pain, the needle driving into my innerself, my entrails, my vagina, my breasts. I have no womb, no names, no will, no light...Mami, where are you!?

I woke up with a soft hand stroking my hair and asking: Flaquita, are you all right? It was Camila, or was it Domitila? - Here, take this mirror, wash your face and comb your hair; they are going to take us to another place, she said, handing me a tiny little mirror and a dirty comb, which I failed to grab. Tenderly, she washed my face and started to comb my hair, as my mami would do when I had plaits. Where was my mother? Had not my father come to free me? How long had I been in *la parrilla*?

We were both sent to the COF (Centro de Orientación Femenina) or The Good Shepherd as they also called the women's jail on the corner of Camilo Henríquez and Lientur in Concepción. Some smiling nuns received us and gave us the most delicious fried eggs I ever tasted. I had thought that my new status of corpse would save me the awful pain of hunger.

We were frightened, hungry and bruised in and out. But, however much the nuns smiled, they were also our jailers. They attempted to put us in with the so called *presas comunes* but three political prisoners who had been there for years, complained and rioted until the smiling nuns gave up, not without punishing these three women afterwards. Ariana, *bruja hermosa y valiente*, *La Flaca Meche*, and *La Chica Silvia* taught me that the revolutionary spirit of women who fight for their rights cannot be crushed by jails and bars of any kind.

"Now is the time to know *la parrilla*", whispers someone in my ear and laughs leaving a trace of saliva on my face. They undress me completely.

"I don't want your dirty hands touching my body", I want to shout, but no sound comes out of my burning throat. My heart is a huge drum in my neck. Is this what precedes death? Mami, don't let them do this to me, please! My mother's sweet image disappears brutally when they throw me onto a mattress with metal strips, my legs and arms extended, my sense of shame defeated, humiliated in my deepest private parts. I feel the first discharge: a pillow suffocates my yelling and breathing. The green lieutenant reminds me that I disobeyed and looked at him and the corporal

who forced me onto the police bus, that I bit his hand. They take revenge and skin my pubis pulling and pulling and pulling. The other soldiers also want their little revenge, for what? It doesn't matter much now. I understand that there are more than enough reasons: *ser mujer*, *ser maricon*, *estar metida en cosas de hombres*, being a communist, a *mirista*, a *política*. Cristina comes to my mind once more and I wonder if she knows where I am? Maybe they caught her too. Where is Eric? I have been alone for so long now...Domitila, Camila, the pianist are not here with me playing *tengo-ganas-de*..

Everything is silence now but I know they will come again and again to demand that I tell them names, that I tell them I like men and not women, that human rights are only for those who obey. How to tell them that our people's poverty is against human rights, how do I tell them that I also have the right to love. I don't say anything...or do I?

Mi cuerpo es una muñeca de trapo mojado, mi propia lengua se adentra en mi garganta y el ahogo es casi de alivio. Still in the *parrilla* I feel someone checking me. My ears want to explode, everything turns round and round, I am very thirsty. When was the last time I ate? I feel sick with nausea. A volcano of lights and sounds erupts in my head. I feel a warm viscosity running down my wrists: who is that woman dressed in black smiling faintly at me? Is it the pianist with broken fingers or is it that sweet death I have been calling in my howls? Is it Domitila asking me silly questions or is it Cristina singing: *nada tienen de especial, dos mujeres que se dan la mano...*, or is it my mother warning me not to get into politics and burning my Ché Guevara poster? I want to say their names but I only repeat mine: Consuelo, Consuelo again and again and again in a silence of disemboweled rats...

They are taking me somewhere else, which smells of petrol. Someone opens a door and says: *tengo ganas de jugar a la gallinita ciega* and they start pushing me this way and that way. I fall several times and each time one of them says laughing: shit, I couldn't catch her. From there they take me to *la parrilla* again. They already know what I can resist or not, but they want to go on testing: in my ears, in my nose, in my mouth: putting the needles between my fingernails...over and over again the electrodes raking my entrails...I want to die, *¡tengo ganas-de morir ahora!; ¿¡por qué yo!?*, where is God? Where is my father? What day is it today, is it still September? What time is it? Does it matter?

The portrait of my body has been painted by others so many times that time loses importance; time is a concept invented by those who have never been on the margins of anything, it has been constrained by those who invent chains and put everything in a tiny box where neither dreamers, nor rebels or lesbians fit. The time that matters is that we allow ourselves to listen to others; time is not gold, as the saying goes. Time is mineral copper, a Mapuche who's had enough of injustices, time is the Grandmothers and the Mothers of la Plaza de Mayo; time is that which we take to fight for human rights so that torture is stamped out of our Pachamama for ever. That is the time I respect, not that time we waste on masturbating with theories that do not consider the bodily experience of our passing through life.

And what was of my body, of my external life when I was let free? After I recovered physically, I tried to understand through writing poetry and some stories. But I

soon realized I knew hardly any other lesbians in Concepción. Though few, we created the first organized Lesbian group (Lesbianas en Acción) in the history of the city and the second in the country. For a more detailed history of this, and other lesbian organizations in Chile, see my article in Reinfelder, 1996 (pp.138-151) and also the encyclopedia of Lesbian Histories and Cultures edited by Bonnie Zimmerman, 2000.. In LEA we learned to look directly into the repressive eyes of those who do not accept our difference and hide behind academic, religious or other archaic arguments to try to impose their truth over ours.

Sadly, LEA folded after I came to live in GB. But the seed was planted and there is now another group, *Hijas de la Luna*, in Santiago. *Hijas de la Luna* rescues the feminine, that which represents the moon. Moreover, people in Chile say that Lesbians are lunatic; therefore they are and feel the moon's daughters. I am grateful to Luisa San Martín (Micky) for introducing me to this group. She tells me that so many women have arrived in search of a space where to feel free in their lesbianism that they have had to stop the membership since they have no funding at all and their meetings are held in a tiny space. .

What unites LEA, *Hijas de la Luna* and *Ayuquélén* (the first Lesbian organization in Chile) is the determination to fight back. For centuries, we've suffered the homophobia of people around us, their criticism, doubts and envy, and sometimes their amnesia. Lesbians are strong from standing so many blows; we have the determination to fight for our right to visibility, we feel and express our solidarity with other minorities who suffer discrimination. That is why we write our lesbianstory and paint our self-portrait with colours very different to the ones used by those who want to keep us in a box of sexual and external stereotypes.

And what of the other women in my story?

Cristina lives with her husband in Germany; we see each other occasionally. Camila now teaches history in a Santiago high school run by Dominic Nuns; she goes to the theatre whenever her low salary allows her to. Ariana was freed after three thousand days (almost nine years) and is still re-learning how to walk in the streets, amongst people and traffic, how to use the telephone again, how to adapt herself to new dimensions of time and space, as she says in her memories which she hopes someone will publish one day. *La Chica Silvia* and *La Flaca Meche* went to Canada looking for a lost dream and did not find it. I have never seen them again. The pianist learnt to use her broken fingers to play a different instrument. She is now a writer who wants to tell the world about the painful experience, which changed her life and views. She was a supporter of the military regime before she was arrested by mistake on the day I was caught and is presently an ardent defender of Human Rights in Chile.

As for Domitila, she continues to sell *gomitas de eucaliptus* at the entrance of Concepción market and lives with her woman lover and the son that dictatorship left her for selling in the street. She has told me that now understands that the external body is not important and dares me to tell her whether she is active or passive.

Active, I say - a lesbian is always active my dear Domitila. All the names in this paper, except mine and Micky, have been changed to protect my friends.

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