

Torture in Context and Translation

In her recent essay, “The Torture Device: Debate and Archetype,” Stephanie Athey argues that a better understanding of how torture functions—an understanding crucial to dismantling the ideologies that sustain torture—depends upon critical attention to torture’s social and political contexts. Athey analyzes news reports and legal scholarship that address torture, and finds that both typically feature an archetypal portrayal of torture as a confrontation between torturer and tortured that takes place in what J. M. Coetzee has called “the dark chamber.”¹ Delimiting the representation of torture to this basic structure and space entails a simultaneous refusal to embed it in ideology, political and social institutions, psychosocial dynamics that extend beyond perpetrator and victim, and particular places. Part of the tantalizing spectacle of torture offered by the conventional torture narrative depends upon the perverse drama one imagines between two persons who function at once individually and representationally of power and powerlessness. The cultural imaginary produced through this scenario, in turn, generates the desire to peek into that dark chamber, a desire identified by Coetzee as dangerous on its own terms, but also inasmuch as it offers only the same representational loop for the writer or artist who seeks ethical means of expressing it. Even when torture is real or historical as opposed to fictionalized, adherence to the archetype still enhances its metaphorical resonance. Whether suffering is spectacularized or presented with restraint, the torture narrative hinges

¹J. M. Coetzee, “Into the Dark Chamber: The Novelist and South Africa,” *New York Times*, January 12, 1986: 13.

upon how effectively the victim as witness conveys the ostensible truth of her individual suffering—with effectiveness defined according to the degree of adherence to the conventional narrative. Thus, Athey argues, the archetype of torture “narrows our understanding of the systemic and communal nature of torture” and “closes off from scrutiny all political, social, and economic networks that support the activity.”² We add to Athey’s argument that this archetypal dyad also forecloses understanding of the networks and institutions upon which redress and solidarity depend and, thus, other positions from which witnessing can take place.

This section features four chapters that insist upon complex modes of life writing to convey understandings of torture that are deeply rooted in personal experience and professional training. The authors inhabit multiple perspectives that reflect how personal and professional positionality shape one’s entry into the torture narrative. Those multifaceted perspectives also underscore the need to forge anti-torture alliances that extend beyond the confines of immediate situations of either torture or redress. In short, these essays address the ways in which torture and its aftereffects are never cut off from the larger social matrix, and are instead always embedded psychosocially, ideologically, historically, and materially in the societies in which they occur.

Our first chapter, by Paraguayan survivor and psychiatrist Carlos Alberto Arestivo, analyzes what torture is and how it works from a psychosocial perspective that is at once personal and clinical. His approach emphasizes the ways in which the personality of an individual, whether perpetrator or victim, is constituted through social and societal relationships and, therefore, deeply marked by techniques of personal destruction. Moreover, he understands the centrality of those relationships through his own experience under torture by the Stroessner regime and in treating others who suffered with him, as well as through his professional expertise in the psychological stages of torture. Although he rarely speaks in the first person, using it only in relation to his work with a fellow survivor, Arestivo’s essay is marked by an intimate knowledge of how the psyche attempts to survive torture through interpersonal bonds, even when the only available bond is with the perpetrator.

²Stephanie Athey, “The Torture Device: Debate and Archetype,” in *Torture: Power, Democracy, and the Human Body*, ed. Shampa Biswas and Zahi Zalloua (Seattle and Walla Walla: Whitman College and University of Washington Press, 2011), 131, 145.

Chapters 2 and 3, also by torture survivors, examine religious and political ideologies used to sustain torture in Sudan and the Philippines, respectively. In Mohamed Elgadi's "Torture in an Historical Context: Notes from Sudan," the author describes his brutal treatment by Omar al-Bashir's regime in the context of the long history of torture in Sudan and, especially, under the guise of religious sanction. Elgadi's contribution emphasizes torture as a political strategy that may take similar forms by perpetrators in different parts of the world, but is nevertheless employed in specific situations and toward discrete political ends. His personal story and its wider context remind us that torture is never simply a struggle of one person's mental and physical fortitude against excruciating pain and suffering wielded by another. Rather, it always depends upon personnel, equipment, discursive patterns, evaluations, and performances that root torture in particular ideologies, histories, and institutions. Rather than attest solely to the mental and physical assaults he experienced, Elgadi writes as an educator and activist who resists torture's isolationist effects by re-contextualizing the dark chamber in ideology, history and politics.

Whereas torture narratives typically detail the abuses of the state against its designated opponents, our third chapter, "The Unspeakable Agony of Inflicted Pain: Torture, Betrayal, Redress" by Robert Francis Garcia, addresses the use of torture by an insurgent movement against its own members. This political shift, whereby comrade becomes perpetrator, doubles the experience of betrayal that the pairing of torture and interrogation invariably produces. Elaine Scarry identifies interrogation as a key component of torture, and although we, like Athey, disagree that this pairing must always and necessarily exist in order for an act to constitute torture, interrogation was central to the torture that Garcia recounts here. When coupled with interrogation, torture "systematically prevents the prisoner from being the agent of anything and simultaneously pretends that he is the agent of some things," Scarry notes.³ In the case of interrogation that leads to involuntary confession, "he is to understand his confession as it will be understood by others, as an act of self-betrayal."⁴ Thus, when the Communist Party of Southern Tagalog accused Garcia and other members of disloyalty to the movement and employed torture to force the naming of ostensible collaborators, the tortured not only experi-

³ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 47.

⁴ Ibid.

enced the self-betrayal that Scarry identifies as integral to torture's work, but its magnification through the justifiable betrayal they felt by the Party and the comrades for whom they had risked so much. If, as Scarry argues, torture *unmakes* the prisoner's world by actively deconstructing its social web of meaning, then the betrayal by one's organization exacerbates this condition and makes survivors' attempts to re-weave those webs of meaning and support all the more difficult. They lost the political, social, and material camaraderie that had defined their lives for years, and, because they were members of a guerrilla insurgency, they cannot turn easily to the state for redress. Although recounting that double betrayal does not suture the political ties that were broken, Garcia's account clearly demonstrates his experience as a form of political abuse, as opposed to the individualized exchange embodied in the archetypal torture narrative.

Many survivors emphasize that organizations such as the Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition International (TASSC) are crucial to building new meaning-making webs of self-identification and security, as well as to providing the ground for wider torture abolition campaigns. Such organizations offer a forum in which survivors from different local contexts share, support, and determine the paths of their own healing and politics. This solidarity depends upon the careful translations of survivors' individual experiences to one another and to outside audiences. In our fourth chapter, "Translating Trauma, Witnessing Survival," Laurie Ball Cooper provides a careful and detailed examination of the emotional and ethical challenges of the work of oral translation in these contexts. Although translators in general are tasked with "projecting a voice without assuming it," as Ball Cooper writes, in the case of torture testimonials the task is laden with the weight of suffering that must be witnessed and translated, but not coopted or spectacularized. In this precise meditation upon her own responses to these challenges, Ball Cooper highlights the interpersonal dynamics that shape translation's process and products, as well as found relationships that extend beyond the immediate testimonial situation in question. The translator's job necessarily rejects the conventional wisdom that torture is unimaginable and inexpressible. Thus, her essay provides a nuanced view of how witnessing emerges and takes shape from specific rhetorical situations and their actors.

We note that translation—not simply in the strict sense of interlinguistic communication, but also in the broader terms of intercontextual and interpersonal exchange—is integral to rethinking witnessing as a dynamic process that produces new subjects and knowledge. In *Trauma Culture*:

The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature, E. Ann Kaplan defines translation in cross-cultural contexts as a “network of interexchange, not simply a set of binary relations.”⁵ Here we extend that notion to focus on the dynamic relationship between speaker, translator, and listener that oral translation makes possible. Ball Cooper’s essay not only provides an example of this process, emphasizing less the testimony itself than the relationships it garners, but also points to “translation” as a mode of reading. Ball Cooper’s careful consideration of her own positionality in relation to that of the survivors for whom she translates models the questions that readers, too, must address when entering into a torture narrative in any language.

Together these chapters identify facets of an expanded register of witnessing necessary for an ethico-political future that we discuss more fully in our introduction to this volume. Kaplan outlines one of the fundamental tenets of witnessing that extends beyond recognition or acknowledgment, and that helps to explain the work performed by the essays in this section: “‘Witnessing’ involves not just empathy and motivation to help, but understanding the structure of injustice—that an injustice has taken place—rather than focusing on a specific case.”⁶ Foundational works by Scarry and Darius Rejali (2007) identify the common forms torture takes, its historical evolution, and, in Rejali’s monumental study, its regular use by democratic governments. The essays in this section exemplify the process of placing a singular experience within a larger, systemic, and institutional context, asking readers to attend to understanding how torture operates in a given political situation and against its designated targets.

⁵ E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 104.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.