



Translating Trauma, Witnessing Survival

Laurie Ball Cooper

For many years, Laurie Ball Cooper worked as a translator and interpreter for the Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition International (TASSC), interpreting Spanish testimonials into English in individual sessions and public forums. In this essay, she discusses the emotionally and ethically fraught work of interpreting torture survivors' stories. Survivors who wish to testify to their abuse often must rely on interpreters to circulate those stories to a wider audience. In this way, interpreters function as key figures in translingual and global campaigns against torture, and in solidarity and therapy initiatives among survivors. Less often considered are the ethical and emotional facets of interpretation: how, as Ball Cooper explores, translators are at once entrusted by survivors to convey the depth of individual experience and "trespassing" on the intimacy of suffering. She explores the twin challenge of making torture "imaginable" to listeners without usurping the survivor's voice and experience.

Interpreters not only subvert torture's attempt to silence the victim; also crucial, Ball Cooper explains, is the role of interpreters in shaping the responses that stories of torture may elicit and the effects of those responses on survivors. Translators influence listeners' interpretation of the veracity of testimony as well as their emotional response; and they are conduits for

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questions and responses to survivors that range from sympathetic to hurtful and antagonistic. In mediating the confusion or misunderstanding that (mis)translations may generate, Ball Cooper describes the delicate balance of stepping temporarily outside of the role of interpreter to serve as a facilitator in certain contexts, a role that requires shifting between channeling others' voices and inserting her own. She ultimately argues that just as the work of interpretation requires elements of trust and imagination between the speakers, so does the relationship between speakers and the wider listening public, who might work together to oppose torture.

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She sits in front of the room, reading a testimony of torture, suffering, and survival in Peru. Her voice, usually steady as it relays emotions and experiences, begins to quiver as the suffering she speaks of grows more detailed. The tremble in her voice is subtle; perhaps many in the room manage to ignore it by focusing intently on the content of the testimony. Finally, the testimony ends, the panel concludes, and the woman with the quivering voice quietly disappears into the crowd.

I was the woman with the quivering voice on that panel, but the story that I told in that room was not my own; rather, I was reading the English translation of a Peruvian woman's story. The owner of that story sat next to me, having completed her story in Spanish already. She had broken down in tears during her speech before the audience gathered in observance of the United Nations' Day in Support of Victims and Survivors of Torture (June 26). As her interpreter, I experienced the quiver in my voice as a physical manifestation of the intrusion upon her experiences that my work as an interpreter necessitated, as though through my inability to ward off emotions, I was trespassing on not only experiences but also emotions that were not mine to live or to feel.

As an interpreter for survivors of torture with the Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition International (TASSC) for five summers, I struggled with the notion of emotional and experiential trespassing. Much of the annual week-long observance of June 26 revolves around survivors sharing their stories with each other and with "outsiders"—including State Department policy-makers, congressional members and staffers, lawyers, therapists, and others. Torture, as the diversity of voices in this volume sadly attests, is a global scourge and its effects are felt in stories lived and told in myriad languages. As such, the various testimonies of torture

and its profoundly personal effects often reach any given audience only through the mediation of at least one interpreter. The most deeply private experiences and emotions that so many seek to convey, and indeed many of those conveyed in this very book, often reach the listener or the reader in a voice that does not belong to the story's owner.

As an interpreter for TASSC's Spanish-speaking members, it was my voice that very often told those stories, despite the fact that they were not my stories and I did not craft their narratives. My role was to be the voice for survivors who trusted me to convey their emotions, memories, stories, ideas, opinions, and meanings. It was a daunting task indeed, one that posed countless professional and personal challenges, but one whose reward was also without limit. Chief among the challenges that I faced has been coping with the sense that I was continually trespassing in a space made sacred by the enormous depth of suffering and the awe-inspiring reach of survival.

TRANSFORMING "UNSPEAKABLE" TO SPOKEN

I do not remember much about my first year as an interpreter with TASSC, a role I fell into naturally from my position as an intern with the Guatemala Human Rights Commission USA, then a non-governmental organization (NGO) that stewarded TASSC's development into its own independent organization. The words and stories that I would translate during the week were far beyond the reality I had known up until that time; they exceeded the imagination that I had developed prior to my experiences as a TASSC translator. I have clear memories of the people I met during that first year, many of whom became treasured friends I saw each year, but I cannot remember the specific moments and emotions that contributed to what now exists in my memory as an overwhelmed haze.

I do remember, within that barrage of emotions that contributed to a general sense of disorientation, a deep-seated awkwardness. I tried to keep my distance in many ways that year—always trying to sit outside of the circle and to limit my involvement with survivors over meals and free time throughout the week. I was worried that it would seem that I did not know my place as an interpreter rather than participant in the week's events, and was afraid of trespassing further than my work as an interpreter necessitated.

The idea that I could somehow place clear and logical limits on the nature of my trespassing was shattered during my second year working as an interpreter and the first time that I awoke from someone else's nightmare. I lay staring at the ceiling in my apartment, watching specters of

terror—small fractions of one survivor’s experience—dance hauntingly on the white paint. In that moment, the challenge of making sense of the complex effects of my role as interpreter with survivors of torture stood before me, as it does still today. The lesson I learned, when the cold sweat had dried on my forehead and the nightmare had temporarily faded, was that I could not succeed at keeping an artificial distance between myself and the survivors, whom I was coming to know so well that any such attempt was a well-intentioned, yet ultimately impossible, pretense.

There is a natural distance between myself and those who have survived torture, a distance borne of entirely different experiences and realities, yet my work as an interpreter shortened that natural distance ever so slightly, bringing me next to a trauma so severe that most prefer to maintain whatever natural distance from it they can achieve. Most consider torture’s trauma unimaginable, and through their inability or refusal to imagine torture, they are able to maintain not only the natural distance between themselves and torture, but also an additional, unnatural distance that denies the interconnectedness of human existence and, by extension, human trauma.

As an interpreter, I know that in the most basic sense such horrors are indeed speakable, and often they must be spoken. Many survivors have a need so strong that at moments a sense of desperation comes through their voices and eyes. Many survivors were told by their torturers that no one would believe them. Many have held their memories in fear-inspired silence for years, choosing just the right moment to slowly reach out with their story. The survivors who tell their stories find the courage to speak of the experiences and their aftermath; in turn, I must find the words to adequately relay their stories to the English-speaking audience. Sometimes finding the words is more difficult than others, but the truth that translation reveals is that, ultimately, such horrors are speakable if only we are willing to search for the words to speak of them.

SERVING AS AN AGENT OF HEALING AND HURT

Interpretation goes in the other direction as well—interpreters relay not only survivors’ stories, but also people’s responses to those stories. As an interpreter, I am spared the responsibility of an immediate reaction to the stories that I render in another language. The experiences, emotions, and trauma enter into my thinking as narrated to me by the survivors, and quickly exit my thinking as an English representation of the narrative. The listener(s),

however, usually search for some reaction to the story as relayed—a comment, a phrase, a question—some spoken response to a story that the listener finds him- or herself feeling unnaturally close to, if only for a moment.

In many cases, interpretation seems somehow less central during the listener's response to survivors' testimonies of torture than it does during the survivors' narratives, given that much of the substance of most appropriate responses is relayed through body language, eye contact, and a certain sincerity that manifests itself on the listener's face. Of course, as always, an interpreter's accuracy provides the basis for that sincere look to transform itself into a sincere interaction; however, it is unfortunately in the cases of inappropriate reactions or hostile questions that a translator's role becomes all the more crucial.

On more than one occasion, I was horrified by the reactions of those with whom many TASSC members so earnestly shared their experiences. I found myself wishing that I could take that person aside for a moment, explain how their reaction is about to cause hurt or pain or further distrust, and somehow avert the impending damage. Often the comments that cause pain are well intentioned, sometimes they are even comments made among and between survivors themselves that hold the potential for unforeseen hurt. As the interpreter, I was spared the responsibility and denied the opportunity to intervene to interrupt or soften these comments, even when I saw the hurt just beneath the surface. As I interpreted an insensitive question, a well-intentioned but poorly conceived comment, or a thoughtless response, my voice became the agent of hurt. The survivors know better than to blame me for what was said—in their minds, as in reality, I was clearly a vessel for words rather than the crafter of comments or the origins of hurt. But as the words took shape on my lips, I cringed at the hurt that I realized they were likely to cause.

However, sometimes my role as interpreter placed me in a position to deflect hurt through clarifying misunderstandings. Especially in meetings of survivors from all over the world, there are occasional situations that arise from linguistic confusion—now and then due to interpretation inadequacies, but far more frequently through the linguistic chaos of a room with three or four simultaneous working languages. Sometimes it became clear that while someone's words may have been understood or interpreted, their meaning was clearly lost in translation or in inadequate understanding. In those cases, the interpreter is sometimes the only person in the room capable of understanding the root cause of the confusion or hurt, and of rectifying perceived wrongs or mistaken meanings.

On the few occasions when I have stepped forward in an effort to clarify meanings rather than strictly to interpret, I have felt a heightened sense of awkwardness. In these moments the base-level awkwardness inherent in interpreting delicate matters grew larger because I was stepping out of my role as an interpreter to speak in my own voice, crafting my own words and seeking to convey my own meaning rather than relaying another's voice. In those moments, I felt my place inside the room temporarily shifting. In efforts to clarify, another delicate balancing act that interpretation necessitates is clearly illustrated: there is a constant tension between literally serving as someone's voice by accurately interpreting meanings, and coopting someone's voice by presuming meanings. When a conversation is spiraling away from productivity, it is tempting to jump in with "He meant to say..." Yet even when this seems to be the case, as a translator or interpreter in this situation I am stepping even closer to the line between serving as a projector of voice and overtaking the survivor's voice with my own.

In a group of torture survivors discussing something as important and as personal as their experiences with trauma and healing, it is clear that ethical challenges abound. However, my time with TASSC taught me that, at least in the context of the emotionally charged observance of June 26, when interpreting for or working with a group of survivors discussing anything of importance, the ethical challenges are many and often center upon this concept of projecting voice without assuming it. To return to the earlier example about clarifying meanings, instead of asserting what one survivor meant to say, commenting "I think this may be a matter of linguistic confusion" and following that with carefully conceived questions and a general slowing of the conversation can be the most productive approach. This may be best practice in all cases of group dialogue and confusion, yet in the context of facilitating conversation between survivors of torture and across language barriers, the importance of projecting voice while preserving the rightful ownership of voice is all the more crucial.

BEYOND BEING A TRANSLATOR: BEING A FELLOW HUMAN BEING

In an earlier passage, I wrote about the fact that as an interpreter, I was often spared the responsibility of an immediate response to stories of trauma, because my responsibility was to interpret rather than to process or respond to the experiences set before me. However, in the personal setting of TASSC's June 26 commemoration, I became a known face and a person across the table at lunch, in addition to being a necessary intruder upon

intimate conversations. There are moments in the course of these interactions, in which I was a friend or acquaintance first and an interpreter second, that force a response to the stories I interpreted. More often than not, I found that my non-verbal responses were most important in these interactions. It was the moments in which I shortened the distance between myself and a survivor by taking a hand, extending a smile, or sharing space at a table for lunch as friends, not as survivor and interpreter, when my responses were the most appropriate, even if they never felt or could have been adequate.

It was through seeing survivors as people who have survived torture rather than solely as survivors that I most dramatically shortened the distance between them and myself. The natural distance—the giant gap between our life experiences—would never disappear or lose its importance in limiting my ability to truly understand the experiences and challenges faced by survivors of torture. However, by finding friendship with TASSC's members, I found my greatest reward for my work as interpreter, and perhaps offered the greatest contribution I could to their healing.

This friendship also provided the support I needed to cope with the emotional challenges of interpreting trauma and survival. In the course of my summers interpreting with TASSC, I was approached on numerous occasions by survivors or mental health professionals who work with survivors, concerned about my wellbeing in the face of the emotional intensity of our days together and the stress of translation's responsibilities in this context. Always, I found myself both surprised and slightly uncomfortable with this concern, given the many survivors around me who had lived trauma rather than interpreting it. However, as someone who has awoken from others' nightmares on more than one occasion, there is also a level on which I understand that the effects of interpreting trauma are real, even if they are far indeed from the effects of the primary trauma itself.

One June day, walking along Capitol Hill side by side with a survivor who had become a friend, I was caught off-guard by a conversation about my work's effects on me. She asked me if I felt sad when I left work, and if interpreting the stories of survivors was difficult for me. While there were obvious answers to both of those questions that might have been accurate, I paused for a long moment trying to formulate my answer. I was afraid that this friend would think I saw my relationship with her as a burden, or would feel that I was somehow unaffected by the burden of trauma and survival that she carries every day. As I was thinking carefully about my answer, she took my hand in hers. "You cry when you leave sometimes, don't you?" she asked.

“Yes,” I replied slowly, “some days I do.” I squeezed her hand gently and smiled at her. “But I am very happy to do this work.”

She looked at me with tears in her eyes and offered me the words that have brought comfort and reassurance to me in many trying moments since. “Maybe tonight I will cry a little bit less,” she said to me slowly, “because I know that you are crying a little bit for me.”

In that moment, both our eyes shining with tears, we were two humans confronting the enormity of torture. One of us has and will confront torture in every moment; every fiber of her life has been affected by torture’s reality. As an interpreter rather than a survivor, I was granted the luxury of moments removed from torture’s trauma, but also challenged by the combination of responsibilities born of a knowledge of torture more intimate than many possess and the privilege of being far more distant from torture than many have been forced to be.

As someone who has been exposed to the realities of torture far more than many non-survivors have, through my role as an interpreter and the friendships that have resulted from this work, I often find myself in situations and conversations about human rights, torture, and public policy that call to mind my experiences with TASSC. Time and again, I have found myself to be the only one in a room or in a conversation who has known a survivor of torture. While I will never speak for a survivor of torture, I can always speak with a voice that has been informed by survivors’ voices and by my relationships with people who have survived torture. In this way, I occupy dual roles, facilitating conversation and, in other settings, bearing witness myself. As an interpreter in a room of torture survivors seeking the space for conversation, my role was to ensure that those who wished to find the words to bear witness and describe their trauma were given the opportunity to make themselves clearly understood by others in the room. As a sometimes-interpreter for survivors of torture in a room of public policy or law students exploring the definition of torture and its potential effects, my role was to bear witness myself to the suffering of torture and its widespread effects, which I have seen through voices entrusted to me by survivors.

A FINAL WORD ABOUT BRIDGING DISTANCES

Ultimately, what has shortened the distance between myself and members of TASSC has been that very trust that they have granted me. My somewhat natural entry into the role of interpreter with TASSC as a college

intern resulted in friendships and experiences that have shaped my own understanding of reality and will continue to do so far into the future. However, in part this distance was shortened by a choice I made to accept the trust that the survivors offered to me, to reach out my hand to bridge that distance between our disparate lives for just a moment and to imagine what would be far easier to cast aside as unimaginable.

This book offers each of you as readers that same chance. In the chapters of this volume, survivors have reached out with testimony and analysis, stories of all kinds, in an offering of trust with the hopes that you will do your best to see the world through their eyes. Whether or not reading this book will offer you the chance to see through those eyes, to really hear those voices, largely depends on your own willingness to imagine. If you listen to the voices in this volume and process the stories told to you by human beings in a language that you understand, then you too might find yourself with the discomfoting knowledge of torture's effects seen from a seat of privileged comfort. The survivors who are members of TASSC and those who have written in this volume have offered their stories in the hopes that somehow the world will hear their voices, seek to understand their stories, and, by so doing, begin to see torture for what it is: a global scourge whose effects are felt in stories lived and told in myriad languages that cannot be allowed to persist in our world.

Bridging the distance between survivors and non-survivors can be daunting. There is a deeper level on which those of us looking in from outside will never understand the suffering nor the healing which people who have survived torture have known. Yet there is a level on which each of us, if we accept the trust offered to us in these pages, can rid ourselves of the artificial distance that we so often place between ourselves and the very speakable, imaginable, translatable suffering of torture—if only we are willing to translate, imagine, and speak it.