

BOOK REVIEW

GATHERING PARTS: Olga R. Trujillo's *The Sum of My Parts* and the Politics of Telling to Heal

Roberta Hurtado

The Sum of My Parts: A Survivor's Story of Dissociative Identity Disorder. By Olga R. Trujillo. Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger Publications, Inc. 2011. Pp. 256. \$13.95 (paper).

“Sometimes I feel like I’m in a secret club whose members understand each other in a way that no one else can” (ix). So Olga R. Trujillo begins detailing her life and experiences of dissociative identity disorder (DID). Trujillo’s testimonio, starting with her earliest conscious memory of mental, spiritual, verbal, and sexual abuse at the age of three, narrates years of trauma and the complex and creative mental navigations that enabled her survival. Currently a legal advisor, Trujillo uncovers the layers of struggle hidden under the exterior of a successful lawyer: the life of a young Latina of Dominican and Salvadorian parentage who grew up in poverty in the United States. In the vein of the Latina Feminist Group’s *Telling to Live* (2001), Trujillo’s testimonio exposes the insidious reach of sociosexual racialized misogyny and demonstrates the need for survivors of trauma to assert their voices, proclaim the right to their humanity, and honor their sentient expressions of self-protection.

Identified as a memoir, *The Sum of My Parts* is more closely akin to the testimonio/ando genre etched out by Latina feminists in the United States. While testimonio has received critical attention within the last few decades,

its transformation by Latina feminists here deserves a moment of reflection in regards to works such as Trujillo's. As witnessed following the publication of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1983), testimonio has come under attack due to epistemological differences between U.S. hegemonic culture and those of indigenous groups—specifically in regards to issues of individual versus community memory. Documented in such anthologies as *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* (2001), testimonio also receives critique from scholars who seek to identify distinctions between narratives and factual historical accounts. Others in this same anthology argue that there must necessarily be an intermediary scholar involved in the process of providing testimony so as to decipher larger political implications and better contextualize the experiences of the oppressed. Arising from these tensions is the very significant question of who has the right to speak of their experiences, and whether the oppressed will ever be able to speak out against oppression and be heard as legitimate sources without the use of an academic intermediary.

With *Telling to Live*, the Latina Feminist Group intervened in this debate with the concept of *testimoniando*, or the active giving of testimonio, illuminating how these academic exchanges silence the voice of the oppressed. Three significant components arise from the agency implied by *testimoniando*—drawing from theories of testimonio proffered by scholars such as John Beverley—which are critical to understanding Trujillo's text: First, the reality that the eye-witness narrator has suffered, and at times suffered tremendously, and that speaking out about this suffering deserves to be respected; second, that there does not inherently need to be an intermediary between the speaker of the testimonio and the audience in order for their experiences to be intelligible to a larger readership; and, third, that those who have been wronged have the right to not only describe their experiences but also to identify the human cost and to determine what remedies are needed to begin healing.

The issue of “eye-witnessing” and whose voice can be trusted remains, for some, a troubling component within the testimonio genre. In the case of Trujillo’s text, this tension is compounded by how the violence she experienced resulted in her psyche creating self-specific coping mechanisms—DID. For Trujillo, testifying to the mental defense mechanisms she developed to survive the violence she suffered is as important as detailing the abuse. Following a description of her earliest memory of sexual assault at the hands of her father, she explains to her readers that “[i]t was like my mind was a house with different rooms to hold different aspects of what I saw and experienced that night. It was a sophisticated way of keeping the knowledge of the attack away from my consciousness—the central part of me that was always there—so that the next day I could get up and function” (13). The coping mechanisms, developed through the experience of unspeakable violence, draw attention to the politics of the telling, the power of voice, and the importance of healing transformation in our communities and academic settings.

Interestingly, it is not until later in the book that Trujillo recalls that some of her “parts” hold specific memories of abuse in Spanish—Spanish itself occasionally functioned as a dual symbol of violation and security. In one particularly brutal scene, Trujillo recalls her father’s resistance to the Anglicization of her brother’s name as an affront to his authority. She recalled her father screamed, “His name is *Alejandro!*” To which Trujillo recalls, “I pulled out Doña Graciela’s rosary and started praying, ‘Dios te salve María, llena eres de gracia...’ I had seen my father’s beatings before and knew that the sounds I could hear were my father’s belt buckle hitting Alex’s bare bottom” (37). For her Spanish represents both the language causing pain and the language of salvation. Her cultural identity, reinforced through aggression and expressed as a source of comfort, comprises yet another layer of struggle she seeks to voice.

Unfortunately, the construction of these specific memory defense mechanisms also represent a method for abusers to deny attacks and thereby negate memory: Whose truth is easier to deny than the person's whose mind created a preservation mechanism to obfuscate what has happened? Trujillo describes a brutal experience of rape in which her father trained her two young but older brothers to rape her; and how later in life, these very brothers denied having committed the assaults (56–57). In doing so, Trujillo speaks to how systems of power and oppression function to silence victims and deny accusations. During the 1990s, debates surrounding memory, have at times discounted the memories of survivors—especially women, and even more so, women of color. A particularly apt example of these debates is false memory syndrome (FMS), in which women who claimed to have uncovered memories of sexual abuse at the hands (usually) of male family members were accused of developing false memories that had been inserted by overzealous therapists.

In *The Sum of My Parts*, Trujillo argues that memory itself, and the ability to remember, is critical for protection and survival. She asserts, “Although forgetting was merciful, it left me without any real protection” (88). For Trujillo, “forgetting” functions as an amnesia that does not challenge the status quo and silences, allowing abuse and the abuse of power to continue in private and public spheres.

Trujillo's work does not end with “telling” readers about the abuse she suffered. Indeed, although much of her book documents the many violations that caused her mind to develop unique coping methods in order to survive, another theme remains present throughout: love, the power of love to heal, and the desire to heal that love enables. In the text, it is small acts of kindness that allow for her survival. For example, Trujillo recalls

instances when her neighbor, Doña Graciela, reached out to help her. She provided her with a small rosary and taught her prayers, she hugged her and told her she loved her. These were not large acts of resistance to patriarchal tyranny, but everyday gestures that allowed one young girl to survive. In her concluding pages, Trujillo states, “This is what I have always wanted: to be loved and love well in return. I have looked for this all my life, and I have finally found it. I am home” (234). Home, then, becomes a place of safety and comfort, of healing, where violence is not allowed to flourish. Not bitterness or cruelty, not anger or humiliation—just simple gestures that together weave what theorist Chela Sandoval describes as the hermeneutics of love.

Trujillo’s *The Sum of My Parts* is a harrowing tale that demonstrates the importance of testimonio as a tool to challenge personal and structural violence. Situated in a long tradition of strong Latina autobiography, biomythography, and testimonios, by authors such as Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Aurora Levins Morales, Trujillo’s testimoniando lends itself to use in literature, women’s studies, and cultural studies. It is a carefully crafted text that enters directly into current conversations regarding the role of testimonios and testimoniando in understanding the past and in working for social change. The simplicity of Trujillo’s words belies the courage it takes to break through silences. Indeed, her book insists that we all take the sum of our parts and bring them to light.

Works Cited

- Arias, Arturo. 2001. *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Beverly, John. 2004. *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Latina Feminist Group. 2001. *Telling To Live*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Menchú, Rigoberta. 1983. *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Edited by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. Translated by Ann Wright. New York: Verso.

Sandoval, Chela. *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Trujillo, Olga R. 2011. *The Sum of My Parts*. Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.