

## (Im)possibilities of the testimonial subject: interdisciplinary approaches to the memory of the trauma

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**Abstract:** This article has the general objective of promoting interdisciplinary reflection, considering contributions of psychoanalysis and history about memory transmission, in their individual and collective dimensions, of traumatic events linked to human rights violations in the context of authoritarian regimes, based on witness perspective. The main assumption is that the subject set discourses that articulate both dimensions, representable and irrepresentable by word. Thus, it is important to question the possibility that the testimony presents in its own discursive organization this dimension that resists narrative articulation, an issue that allows considering the form and functioning that takes the irrepresentable in the transmission process of historical memory linked to collective trauma.

**Keywords:** memory transmission, testimonial subject, traumatic memory, interdisciplinary.

### Memory and testimony

This article is concerned with the transmission mechanisms of memory in testimony, a problem that is associated to the processes of subjectivation and its forms of representation in the word, a phenomenon that, because its complexity, requires contributions from various disciplines to be clarified.

Subjectivation<sup>1</sup> is considered to be a dynamic process subordinated to diverse historical transformations that combine individual, social and cultural dimensions. In this sense, by alluding to the forms of testimonial representation in the word, it is necessary to ask about the ways in which these processes of subjectivities can be transmitted (or not), the forms in which they condense historical temporalities and their (im) possibility of becoming memory. These questions are of great relevance in the current context, they are marked by collective catastrophes arising from the aggression of man over man (state-sponsored violence,

terrorism in large scale, genocide etc.). Against this background it is possible to question the possibilities to establish reflexive processes that promote a critical sociality and consciousness in regards to the violence that continually threatens the necessary, problematic, collective organization. The formation of a historical and social memory is one of the mechanisms that can contribute to the constitution of processes of social reflexivity, questioning collective violence and promoting political-legal responses that tend to regulate and restore the rule of law.

The complexity of the proposed problem involves necessarily different perspectives in regards to the subject of memory as an object of study, which requires specifying a dimension of a general phenomenon and also distinguishing the conceptual resources from which is sought to interrogate the slope of the chosen problem. This article refers to a specific phenomenon linked to the historical memory, namely the testimony as a narrative representation of moments characterized by the eruption of forms of violence that actually destabilize social interaction, which is fundamentally an effect of imposing authoritarian political regimes that transgress the essential human rights of a particular community. The issue of testimony is addressed from an interdisciplinary perspective, considering the contributions of two seemingly distant fields of theorizing: psychoanalysis and history. Both will be understood as discourses which articulate various proposals about a central figure in the transmission of the memory: the subject of the testimony of events qualifying collective or historical traumas.

The main assumption that guides this article is that the subject of the testimony sets discourses that can be links between representable and unrepresentable

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<sup>1</sup> In general terms, although Freud does not use the term subjectivation, it can be derived from its approaches psychoanalytical conception of subjectivation. In Freud, subjectivation can be understood as the manifestation of the subject of the unconscious that occurs in relation to any production of the unconscious, such as: lapses, symptoms, jokes etc; i.e., subjectivation refers to the subordination of the subject in an unconscious structure. Lacan, meanwhile, will understand subjectivation as a process that takes place in the relationship between the subject of unconscious desire and the Other, is the latter being the one that has been "appropriate" to the subject's desire and in face that it must respond. The subject of unconscious desire is an effect of language, in as much as it allows it to exist, at the cost of a loss: the castration. The subjectivation, in the field of psychoanalysis, exposes the conflict of a subject who claims to be sovereign, but who is configured and sustained in a permanent relationship with the otherness of desire and with a non-symbolizable enjoyment that disentrance and question their agency.

dimensions<sup>2</sup> of experience in the word, which is based on the understanding that the transmission of memory linked to trauma always contains words that are impossible to find. Thus, it is important to enquire into the possibility that the present testimony, in its own discursive organization, with dimensions that resist to the narrative articulation, are an issue that allows us to consider the form and the function that acquires the unrepresentable things in the processes of transmission of the historical memory of collective traumas.

## The subject of the (im)possibility of the representation

However, due to the well known proliferation of testimony<sup>3</sup>, it is necessary to ask questions about how the processes of testimonial narration may represent traumatic aspects of the human experience, as this question not only implies epistemological problems which concern the representation of the trauma, but also involves an ethical interpellation, insofar as it is a work of historization that addresses the interpretation of events that have severely broken the legal and social coordinates that regulate collective life.<sup>4</sup>

In relation to the aforementioned, the idea of elaboration is particularly productive, since it can be understood as the intersection point between the ethical and epistemological problem of trauma as an object of study. Development involves the possibility of reorganizing the disruptive effects of trauma – which could be considered as its ethical dimension –, while also allowing consideration in regards to the representability of trauma, that is to

say, the possibility that trauma can become an object of processes of symbolic representation.

Regarding the representativeness of trauma, Lyotard in *The differend* (1983/1988)<sup>5</sup> reflects on the impossibility of the account from what he calls “the unreason”, the “damage accompanied by the loss of means to represent the evidence of damage” (Lyotard, 1993/1988, p. 17). What characterizes a victim, according to Lyotard, is the difficulty to be able to prove the immersion in this experience of unreason, because he/she who pretends to testify the suffered violation is not only contested, but is deprived of the possibility of arguing. According to Lyotard, this is interpreted as a problem which must be understood based on the margins of language and beyond communication. The argumentative difficulty of the witness, the presence of unreason, is not a problem that comes from his difficulty to use the language tool, nor from the technical limitations of the tool, but it shows how the speaker is required by their own voice. It is a process of subjectivation which is not restricted to the event nor to an exclusively individual or social dimension, because although it is sustained in all these elements, it surpasses them.

As is highlighted by Lyotard (1983/1988), some traumatic events of collective reach seem impossible to place within the borders of linguistic representativeness, this implies a great difficulty – or even the impossibility – to develop an interpretation of collective trauma argumentatively, especially if this work of historical elucidation is focused on the testimony as an object of analysis. However, where can we find the conceptual arsenal that allows approaching the trauma in order to make it intelligible, but without implying a denaturalization of its non-representational character? The search for an answer to this question has guided researchers, coming mainly from the field of history, towards a seemingly very distant conceptual space, but one that seemed to highlight some fruitful ideas for understanding and interpreting that which they were trying face. It was in the field of psychoanalysis that it was possible to locate a series of

2 We agree with the following proposal by Chemama, Vandermersch, Leeman y Agoff to define representation: “An elementary form of what is inscribed in the different systems of the psychic apparatus and, particularly, of that on which repression falls” (2010, p. 598). The same psychoanalyst’s comment that considering the assumption of the unconscious: “When an event, even a simple perception, has been shown as unassimilable, the affect that was tied to it is displaced or converted into somatic energy, and thus forms the symptom, it is the representation which properly speaking is repressed. This is inscribed in the unconscious in the form of a mnemonic link” (Chemama et al., 2010, p. 598). The mnemonic link is understood in the unconscious as a form of writing, a matter that is explored by Freud in his text *A note upon the mystic writing pad* (1924/2000).

3 The research on historical memory, understood from an epistemology of the archive in its critical dimension (Garcés, 2014), as a resignification of discursive narratives (Vergara & Pinto; 1999-2002), have found in understanding and interpretation of historical trauma a prolific field, resulting essential the role of testimony in this field of study in the constitution of social reports (LaCapra 1998/2009).

4 About this point, for Felman (2002) the judicial processes related to experiences of historical trauma – as the judgments made to the Nazi leaders - correspond to mechanisms by means of which both national and international community try to restore the legal monopoly of violence, in which justice is not a simple form of punishment, but a strategy of symbolic elaboration in which they are located and ordered “victims” and “aggressors”. The link made by Felman between traumas and legal processes highlights a fundamental aspect that is present in the ethical-political debate in regards to the understanding of these historical phenomena: the possibility of a symbolic elaboration of events that have meant a profound disorder of the modes in which a society organizes its links and shapes their processes of reflexivity.

5 The contributions of Lyotard can be considered relevant given his influence in the acknowledged work of Agamben, who also assumed the problem of representability of the limit experiences in his analysis of the paradox of the testimony of the survivors of the Nazi extermination camps, a contradiction referred to in the following terms: “what took place in the camps seems to the survivors the only truth and, as such, absolutely unforgettable; ... this truth is, in the same way, unimaginable, that is to say, irreducible to the real elements that constitute it” (Agamben, 1998/2009, pp. 8-9). According to Agamben, the unimaginable of the truth refers to the impossibility to make a testimony of an experience as extreme as that of the concentration camp, an experience that can be thought of as like the extinction of the witness experience as a subject of it. Agamben remarks that his idea of testimony is a kind of process of alternation between subjectivation and desubjectivation, and should not be understood as a teleology whose orientation would be an evolution of inhumanity to humanity. Instead of supposing an end or a fulfillment of the human from the testimony, Agamben supposes that what can be found between subjectivation and desubjectivation is a rest. That is what is left of Auschwitz, an irreducible separation in the interior of the survival and from which the testimony is possible. The rest of Auschwitz are not the dead or the survivors, but those who, as witnesses, are able to be located in that crack which separates one from the other, to put words to that impossibility to speak.

concepts that made possible an interpretive work which gave answers to the problems of the elaboration and to the representability of trauma<sup>6</sup>.

Before expounding the theoretical background which covers this relationship between psychoanalysis and history, it is difficult to pose questions in regards to the validity of this conceptual translation. One answer from Freud is widely used, affirming the applicability of psychoanalysis in different areas to the treatment of neuroses, as becomes clear in his inquiries for the history of culture (1913/1992), which are ideas sustained again when referring to non-medical applications of the method and the relationships that psychoanalysis maintains with the sciences of the spirit (1922/1992).

Assoun (1993/2003), who considered the contributions of psychoanalysis for the theory of culture, poses that Freudian enlightenment of neurosis it is far from being a knowledge that exclusively concerns psychopathology because, according to the author what Freud ultimately would have reached to establish it is a theory of the subject. According to Assoun, it is in the subject that the structural conflict of the culture is “personified”. In this regard, psychoanalytic knowledge, as a method of inquiry, works as a procedure of “unmasking” of a culture that radically questions the way a society builds beliefs regarding various cultural and historical objects. For Assoun, psychoanalysis does not contribute “a psychological clarification to social fact, but rather poses questions about its essence” (Assoun, 1993/2003, p. 187), an interpretive procedure that makes what culture is hidden in its own functioning intelligible and that, as a result of this concealment, continues being reproduced.

But there is another central aspect in Assoun’s argument regarding the relationship between psychoanalysis and the human sciences that, for this author, consists of raising that point that psychoanalysis provides a “reform of the way of thinking” since its effect is to point out “*a ‘lack’ within the whole of Weltanschauung<sup>7</sup> social and collective*” (Assoun, 1993/2003, p. 187). This last indication is a central argument to understanding the resources for historians interested in studying *Shoa* in regards to the psychoanalytic conceptualization of trauma, since it contributes with elements for the elucidation of phenomena that operate as ruptures of experience, and this is why it

produces a “*lack*” that, although impossible to recompose, can be subjected to procedures of interpretation without filling the experiential vacuum of the trauma, thereby enabling the processes for their elaboration.

### **Psychoanalysis and trauma: between the irrepresentable and the possible elaboration of a memory**

The relationship between memory and trauma can be considered as one of the pillars of the Freudian discovery of the unconscious. It is sufficient to verify the “Preliminary communication” (Breuer & Freud, 1893/1992), with which Freud begins *Studies about hysteria*, to appreciate the link between symptomatic phenomena which seeks to understand – the manifestations of hysteria – and the anchoring between them and the past experience of the subject<sup>8</sup>: “Before, we must to assert that the psychological trauma, or the memory of it, works like a foreign body that even long after of its intrusion has to be considered efficient in its presence” (Breuer & Freud, 1893/1992, p. 32). In this quote it is possible to identify a series of terms that are result in an understanding and interpretation of the links between memory, trauma and testimony, among which we will highlight the following: psychological trauma - memory - present efficacy.

The assertion of Breuer and Freud (1893/1992) which begins by stating that “psychological trauma, or the memory of it”, makes it possible to ask questions about the nature of the trauma, that is to say, this is of the order of a positive fact, and therefore material and chronologically effective, or a memory, with all the deferral dimension that it introduces about the concrete experience are classified as a traumatic event. But the problem of the link between trauma and memory is not limited to the distinction between fact and distance / difference that the remembrance process introduces, since it is, precisely this last aspect that appears deeply interpellated by hysterical subjectivity and neurotic phenomena in general<sup>9</sup>.

6 The purpose of psychoanalysis in the service of the historical interpretation of collective trauma has been fruitful among historians and theorists interested in the Jewish holocaust during the Second World War. In this regard, the contributions of Felman (1991) are considered central, as are those from Laub (1992), Caruth (1996), LaCapra (2001/2005, 2004/2006, 1994/2008, 1998/2009), Friedländer (1992) and Santner (1992), among others. All of them conducted works of historical interpretation of this experience using psychoanalytic categories, especially notions linked to understanding trauma and its impact on the psychological economy, but with the particularity that they displaced these concepts from the space of a theorization and clinical practice focused on an individual level, to the field of cultural experience, with the intention of understanding the mechanisms of structuring a historical and collective memory.

7 Translation to English: Cosmovision

8 It is pertinent to clarify that the notion of trauma proposed by Freud & Breuer in the text “Preliminary communication” (1893/1992) is of the economic type (energetic) and creates a “separate psychological group” which corresponds to what will be the repressed unconsciously. Trauma does not act as an agent of the unrepresentable, but rather as the repressed, which corresponds to a repressed representation, and becomes representable as a symptom, a failed act, joke, dream, among others.

9 The neurotic symptom, of which hysteria is the prototype, is structured as an amalgam in which the traumatic event and the mnemonic representation are fused in a compound which shows its symbolic character only as an effect of an interpretative act. The symptom addresses the difference between trauma and memory since it operates as a conglomerate that makes both elements indistinguishable, which does not imply that both are the same or completely equivalents, a matter that is grammatically manifest in the use of the disjunctive conjunction in the quotation of Breuer & Freud (1992), a grammatical form that unites options which are simultaneously incompatible, which in this case implies that trauma and memory must be considered as different phenomena, but, under certain conditions, this is a condition that for psychoanalysis is named as a symptom, it appears in an apparently inseparable conjunction.

The posttraumatic phenomena shows the collapse of the distinction between the material fact of trauma and memory in the most ostensible way, because in these the temporal distance between what happened and the remembrance is in the present, introducing the paradoxical temporality of repetition, in which the linear chronological development is replaced by the repetition of something equal, that which in its return annuls the experience of progression and the temporal evolution of consciousness is dissolved.

The affirmation of the “present efficacy” of the trauma, included in the previous quotation, makes it possible to maintain that this is not simply a temporarily earlier event that is feasible to be evoked, but rather one that is effective, operating in the present and not from the past. In this sense, trauma differs from memory, since the latter is characterized by a representational organization that refers to an earlier moment from which it arises and to which it refers to the act of remembering. Memory implies a consciousness of the temporal distance between the time of the evocation and the time of the event that is brought to memory. Thus, the “present efficacy” of the trauma requires the repetition<sup>10</sup> an action that erases the distance between the past and the present.

In the context of his work about the technique of psychoanalysis, Freud is led to consider the repetition when addressing the problem of transference phenomena. The transfer is a “reprint” in the literal sense of the term, in other words, the reprint of a fragment of the love and life drive that remains unconscious and that is put into action as working for personal satisfaction. Nonetheless, it is distant from memory not only to the extent that it is unconscious, but because memory is characterized by its condition of deferral between the historical event and the subsequent recovery, which is due to its strictly representational character, which refers to the past re-presenting it, i.e., without being or putting it in action. Instead, the transfer is determined by its actuality, or in other words, the absence of representational distance in respect to the past, what makes it a ‘putting in action’ factor is that it installs repetition as a modality of a relationship with the past, dislodging the possibility that memory operates as a mechanism of historization and elaboration of what happened.

The relationship between repetition and transference is manifested in the way that Freud (1913/1992) characterizes the behavior of the patient at the beginning of a cure; Freud affirms: “we can say that the analyzed person *does not remember*, in general, anything about the forgotten and repressed memories, but *acts it*. He/she does not reproduce as a *remembering*, but as an *action*; he/she repeats it, without knowing, of course, that it does it” (pp. 151-152, italics are ours). The relationship between transference and trauma can be considered based on the

new drive theory (1922), which places the transfer as one of the manifestations of the compulsion of repetition<sup>11</sup>. This conceptual reorganization makes it possible to reflect on the links between memory and testimony, inasmuch that the latter can be understood from the logic of the transference mechanism and, as such, can be understood as a repetitive action of the trauma – acting the past instead of remembering it – or, in the other hand, as a possibility of reprocessing what happened.

The analogy between transference and testimonial narration is held in the logic of repetition, since both refer to a fragment of the past “reprinted” in a current narrative structure, but in this case the relationship with trauma and the death drive, which does not allow a narrative closure of that experience, is that which belongs chronologically to past acts even with present effectiveness.

For Friedländer<sup>12</sup>, this transference-repetitive character of the testimonial works is evident: “in a large number of works published over the years, no trace of redemption or sign of resolution is evident” (1992, p. 43, own translation). This implies that the work of historization, in this case in regards to the holocaust, but possibly extending to other historical events, is faced with the extreme nature of facts to which it refers as to the indeterminacy of the historical significance of these events, which would create a whole field of projections, configurations and unconscious reconfigurations of this material, of an authentic transference situation (Friedländer, 1992).

The notion of Freudian transference, since its early appearance in the framework of studies regarding psychoanalytic techniques until its reformulation in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1922/1992), implies a theory of memory, since it is a particular form of updating the past by means of concretization of the act of a piece of an intersubjective history, which operates as a repetition which could potentially become a memory as a consequence of the effect of mediating an act of reprocessing or interpretation. In this context, transference is potentially “narrativizable”, that is to say, it is a repetition that could be channeled through certain processes of reflexivity towards the narrative ground, in a procedure that enables self-understanding and intersubjective and social recognition of that historical fragment put into action in the transference repetition.

10 In this regard, the repetition of works about psychoanalytic technique (Freud, 1913-1914/1992) are highlighted in the Freudian reflection about logic, and the reformulation of the drive theory proposed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1922/1992), in which the repetition is articulated along with the death instinct.

11 Considering it is relevant to differentiate and clarify that in the context of the opposition between life drive, there is the –death drive, the compulsion to repeat in and out of the transfer is linked to the unrepresentable, the death drive, trauma and compulsion to repetition and not only to the repression of the representable, although both require transference elaboration.

12 Friedländer (1992) related a narrative-testimonial production about Shoa with the transference mechanism. According to the author, it is possible to appreciate an analogy between works of a testimonial nature from several authors (Lanzmann, Zuckerman, Levi, Fink) with a repeating structure and implemented transfer. Friedländer repairs an element, in its structural judgment, in the various testimonial productions about the Jewish holocaust: the absence of a resolution, the lack of a narrative closure which will make it possible to conclude the experience about which the testimonies try to appear.

However, the link of transference with the death drive<sup>13</sup> complicates the possibility of a narrative articulation that could result from the transfer to memory, since Freud, in making the repetition a privileged manifestation of the death drive, seems to relate it to a disorganizing force, able to disconnect the links between the representations with the amount of energy invested and which leads the psychological apparatus to become a primary form of functioning, where the drive is not linked to a representative, nor to associative, links between the representations. If this is true, then the transference as a tributary repetition of the dissolution logic of the death drive would work against the necessary representational operations and produce a memory capable of relating the traumatic experience.

However, his problem can be approached from another angle that is present in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1922/1992). In Freud's analysis of the dreams of people affected by war neurosis, we can find a way to relocate the transference as a mechanism that allows a remembrance of those dialects in the relationship between what is representable and unrepresentable in the trauma. For Freud, it is evident that the dream in the traumatic neuroses is not under the rule of the pleasure principle, even if this link were possible. The dream in traumatic neurosis exposes the primordial psychological need to connect an excessive energetic *Quantum*, which floods the psychological apparatus by means of procedures that allow a link to this excess of representations; the compulsion to repetition (of which the traumatic dream is a manifestation) is then an expression of the primary psychological work which makes the subsequent establishment of secondary thought processes possible. Without this first part, guided by the logic of repetition that characterizes the death drive, it would not be practical to establish a representational elaboration of the trauma.

If the logic of a work prior to the representational ligature is attributable to traumatic dreams, it could also be applied to the transference understood as repetition. As in the case of traumatic dream, the transfer would seek to lay the foundations for establishing memory as a narrative structure. This implies that the testimonial work would operate as a narrative mechanism that is qualifiable as aporist, since it mobilizes a representational productivity from the "stylized" repetition of what by definition can not conform to the contours of representation, i.e., the trauma. Paraphrasing Freud (1915/2006), when he defines the drive as a limiting concept between the somatic and

the psychological, we could qualify his testimonial work as a limiting voice / writing between the unrepresentable and the representable. The transference character that Friedländer (1992) attributes to testimonial work can be understood as an activity in which the repetition is at the service of the establishment of a narrative memory. The absence of a narrative closure, which operates as a resolution in most of the testimonial studies regarding the Holocaust, determines the transference-repetitive character of this genre, that is to say, a form of paradoxical representation of the past is put into play within it, which is updated in the same way that in the transference phenomenon, as described by psychoanalysis. The absence of redemption or resolution that characterizes the testimony of the survivors of the *Shoa* is the hallmark of the operation of repetition that functions as the condition of possibility for a narrative organization of experience, but at the same time demonstrates the unrepresentable character of trauma.

For Caruth (1996), the narrative historicization of trauma would not be relating an excessively close encounter with death, but rather the attempt to solve an enigma related to life: How does one survive after experiencing trauma? For her, the testimonial production on trauma exposes the work of a conscience facing the enigma of survival, the one that seeks to cover a discontinuity that does not cease to be present in the attempts to narrate the experience. This structural impossibility is the paradoxical source which mobilizes the narrative historicization of trauma, since it promotes a work of elaboration in which the unrepresentable works, as the nucleus on which a narrative construction, is organized trying to surround and shape it, but without saturating the experiential and comprehensive gap that this implies. Testimony is a form in which the enigma of survival is expressed through representations that allude to an unrepresentable question and, in this sense, it is a work in which memory is put at the service of a negativity which paradoxically mobilizes a narrative productivity. The memory besieged by the enigma of survival can be constituted testimonially by including that which resists all attempts of representation, becoming the sign of a work of permanent and endless elaboration and so challenges a community without submitting a resolution, but rather presenting a moment of collapse that without becoming fully understood necessarily requires to be faced and recognized.

However, some questions can be raised in relation to Caruth's proposal, since maintaining the trauma requires expressing this in the form of an irresolvable enigma on the own survival that could lead to the blind alley of repetition. If the testimony is constituted as a tributary manifestation of repetition, this would not be efficient as a mechanism for reprocessing the trauma, since it only puts the compulsive return of an unrepresentable excess for consciousness into play, its effect would be retraumatizing. However, the notion of reprocessing, in the Freudian sense of the term, seems to require repeating a precondition that makes it possible. Freud (1913/1992) indicates that any cure begins with a

13 The modification of the drive theory and the introduction of the notion of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1922/1992) involved the radicalization of the relationship between transference, repetition and the death drive. This transference seems to contravene the pleasure principle, meanwhile is repeated in it "painful affective situations" that are reanimated "with great skill" (Freud, 1922/1992, p. 21). This leads Freud to infer that this repetition in the transfer is controlled by an instinctual drive, which puts in check the conception that the psychological apparatus moves by a primary search of satisfaction. Paradoxically, a fragment of the past is compulsively repeated, despite being tied to an unpleasant and excessive experience in its origin.

repetition, within which the framework proposed by the analysis will take the form of the transference. It must be recalled the paradoxical nature that Freud attributes to the transference, which is both the strongest of resistances and the key to success; therapeutic success rests on calling for the repetition, as Freud indicates “It must give the patient time to engage in the resistance, which is not known to him; to rework it {*durcharbeiten*}, to overcome it by continuing the work in defiance of it and obeying the fundamental analytical rule” (Freud, 1913/1992, p. 157). Repetition-transference-resistance are concatenated, they maintain a relationship with a past that returns compulsively and out of the domain of consciousness and of the narrative historicity that can configure; however, for Freud, it is precisely an *engagement in the resistance* that may allow a rework of that fragment of the past that, as a foreign body and unassimilable for the psychological functioning, resists the representation. What needs to be demonstrated in the previous quotation is the reference to the fundamental analytic rule, which implies understanding that this engagement, in resistance to which Freud alludes, can only be productive as an elaboration if it implies a work with words, and more specifically, a work in which the speaking subject is positioned in the place of the production of his/her own discourse, in a position of enunciation. If, as Caruth raises, the consequence of trauma is the enigma of survival and it is this enigma that carries the insignia of the unrepresentable – of the instinctive in its deadly slope –, then it is feasible to sustain a work with words, in that engaging in repetition is oriented towards an elaboration, a narrative organization of the past that is located in the hiatus between the representable and the unrepresentable, thereby allowing a reflexive linguistic relationship with this, disrupting the establishment of a narrative memory.

An essential aspect to emphasize in a psychoanalytic understanding of the relationship between trauma and testimony is that testimony does not represent a definitive closure of the representational gap that the traumatic experience implies. The elaboration of trauma that testimony allows does not cover the sense or suture without discontinuing the absence of memory produced by the trauma. If the testimony allows an approximation of the historical trauma, then this is done by a rhetorical activity that allows a reference to be maintained without a positive referent or, in other terms, a representation of the unrepresentable. It is precisely in the field of rhetoric that we can find a conceptual resource that makes it possible to sustain the relationship between the representable and the unrepresentable in linguistic terms. Laclau (2005/2007) and Copjec (2006) refer to a rhetorical figure that makes it possible to establish a discursive link with those dimensions of the experience that, such as trauma, are reluctant to enter the field of linguistic representation. Both authors refer to the work of Parker, from whom they get the reference to a rhetorical figure called catachresis. This rhetorical figure that fulfills a function of substitution, it is a figurative reference capable of indicating something

that is impossible in literal language. For Laclau, the catachresis “is linked to a constitutive block of language that requires naming something that is essentially unnameable as a condition of its own functioning” (2005/2007, p. 96). This notion allows us to appreciate how, through linguistic operation, it is feasible to refer to something outside the field of what is literally representable which means that the testimonial elaboration alludes to a reality that is impossible to be completely revealed

Butler (2011/2014), when referring to the writing of Primo Levi, argues that every testimonial narrative contains at its core a fallibility regarding the ideal of a total revelation that however is elaborated through those figures who do something different to present a positive content understood as the outline of “what happened” For Butler this fallibility or hesitation of the testimonial narration is the sign that it is trying to be communicated:

the task of communicating such reality . . . involves the use of the rhetorical features of language to present an emotional reality, which is opposed to the positivist demand that, in relation to the facts, language acts only and always with transparency (Butler, 2011/2014, p. 37).

It is possible to conclude that a distinctive feature of testimonial work is the use of the word to build a memory that, more than referring to what happened, is able to show the opacity of the very facts that it tries to transmit. This cloud of facts should not be imputed to the relativism of interpretations that dispute the truth about a certain historical object, but rather to an opacity that must be attributed to the subject of the testimonial language, and more precisely, to the absence at the core of the testimony, which is a lack from which the fallibility that never ceases to be part of the rhetorical structure is derived.

## The testimonial subject

For Agamben (1998/2009), the testimony places the subject in the caesura between the possibility and the impossibility to say something, which makes the testimony a contingent discursive entity that exposes a power that simultaneously expresses a to be and a not to be “Precisely because the testimony is the relationship between a possibility of saying something and taking a place, which can only occur in a relationship with an impossibility to say; only, as a contingency, as a power of not to be” (Agamben, 1998/2009, p. 152). Agamben indicates that the testimony comes from the form of a subjectivity; it is established in relation to a subject that unites in oneself the possibility and the impossibility to say, which must be interpreted as a structural split of the subject of the testimony. In the words of Agamben “the witness, the ethical subject, is the subject that testifies from a de-subjectivation” (Agamben, 1998/2009, p. 158). Thus, the opacity of the testimony must be attributed to a

moment of the subject fainting – the desubjectivation – who takes the form of a narrative construction that by series of rhetorical articulations does not imply the impossibility of the facts, but of the continuity of the subject before the experience of the trauma. The testimony is the way in which the subject speaks about the impossibility to say something and is thus the form in which the structural fragmentation that characterizes the subject of trauma is put into action.

This experience accumulated by Laub<sup>14</sup> (1992), based on listening to many survivors led him to think that in order for survivors to tell their story to survive “people must know the truth buried, in order to be able to live their own life” (Laub, 1992, p. 78, own translation). For Laub, this imperative to tell can become a target capable of consuming the entire life of a survivor, rendering it an endless task, because neither words nor time nor listening are enough, or the correct ways, to allow the articulation of a story that fails to be completely captured by thought, memory and speech. The need to testify in order to survive can become a trap, since the imperative to speak is inhabited by an impossibility to say, an impasse that Laub links to the own interiority and absence of distance of the survivors in relation to their experience. This impossibility to say that is present in testimony is interpreted by Laub as a condition which derives from the traumatic event, that is to say, more than a disability that affects the witness, it is an event that produces an absence of witnesses. Taking the Holocaust as a reference, the author indicates that witnesses could be listed as “internals” or «externals”, in the first case the Jews and other victims of the German genocide, and in the second case all those who witnessed the facts in some way. Each of these witnesses would have failed, for different reasons, to take their place as a witness, so that we would be in the presence of an event without witnesses

is not only the reality of the situation or the absence of response of the spectators, or the world, which explains the fact that history has spaces without witnesses: it is also the very circumstance of being inside the event which makes the notion of the existence of the witness unthinkable. (Laub, 1992, p. 81)

The interiority to a totalitarian and dehumanized frame of reference is for Laub “which cancels the existence of the witness in the occurrence of the event”. This witness “from inside” is someone for whom the Other is impossible to imagine “since there is no Other to which one can say ‘You’ hoping to be heard, or to be recognized as a subject” (Laub, 1992, p. 82, own translation). This lack of recognition on the part of the Other, leads potential

witnesses to accept resignedly the incommunicability of experience, even for oneself. Such an impossibility to testify is, for Laub, what the true sense of annihilation holds to which victims of historical trauma have been exposed, since the abolition of the ability to narrate and believe in own history can be conceived as the destitution of its identity and social existence.

For Laub the elaboration and integration of the testimony in a narration and the memory that is part of the social body, necessarily occurs late and is temporarily displaced regarding the traumatic event. This shows that a community must make itself able to listen to what was unintelligible. In Laub’s proposal it is possible to see the influence of Freud through the notion of retroactivity (*Nachträglichkeit*), since the traumatic experience can only be available to the subject in a deferred way and not in their experiential immediacy. This integration of trauma in the field of the narrative and audible, or the possibility that the traumatic experience finally become testimony, is mediated by the configuration of a social reception framework that functions as the absent Other in the context of a «event without witnesses”. This social alterity is what can provide a reference that makes it possible to retroactively process the testimony. This reception framework implies that the survivor, in narrating his experience, is “asking for” his position as a witness, or in other terms, his position as a witness is not assured by the mere fact of being a survivor able to narrate what happened, since its demand can only be fulfilled by the presence of a receiver capable of accepting and validating the story into a new framework of meaning. Thus, the possibility of testimony requires opening a reception and recognition space where the witness arrives and finds a social reception.

## Conclusions

This article highlights the value of the interdisciplinary approach to the problems of testimony and the construction of a social memory of collective traumas, which is based on the articulation between historical research and the contributions of psychoanalysis. Both disciplines make it possible to critically approach the process of the constitution of a testimonial subject, allowing it to be understood as a point of intersection between the individual and collective experience, a field where one can appreciate the productive tension in which there is a link between subjectivity and culture. The notion of subject involves intertwining the different discursive and material layers, a complex plot in which individual, social and historical dimensions are involved, a reflection that in this article was oriented towards the interrogation of the aporia of the testimonial subject in the collective trauma. We speak about aporia alluding to the paradox regarding the representation that the subject of the testimony represents, a subject dedicated to the task of telling one’s own memory, but who, in this attempt, is confronted with what seems to disrupt any attempt of representation. The testimony

14 Laub (1992), who was also a Holocaust survivor, is one of the founders of the archive Fortunoff at the University of Yale, which compiles videos of interviews with survivors of the Holocaust, recalls that during the development of the work one of the interviewees said that those who survived did it to tell their story.

of the collective trauma manifests the sustained effort of a subject who, as Agamben (1998/2009) points out, tries to testify about a desubjectivation, surrendering to the work of representing the unrepresentable, a seemingly impossible question, but at the same time essential for a society that tries incorporate the memory of moments of political and relational collapse to think about the present. The narrativization of trauma is indispensable for a society that tries to establish a process of historical reflexivity, but it shows itself to be very complex given the opacity of the object that it tries to make intelligible. At this point, psychoanalysis can provide valuable assistance, since the notions forged in the interrogation of this practice work as interpretive mechanisms capable of opening an interval for the advent of the word and the memory in the ineffable space of the trauma. Paraphrasing Felman (1991), the concepts of psychoanalysis can make silence speak; it can promote the development of trauma through a paradoxical work with words.

It is necessary to reconsider that the bet of the subject of the testimony does not only make an impossibility of the mechanisms of narration present, which finally alludes

to the repetition of forgetfulness. But rather, it involves resituating the problem in the field of transference, insofar as it calls the relationship between the subject and the Other. The processes of subjectivation witnessed and that make it possible to build memory can be understood as a way of interrogating the Other for the foundation of survival, namely the narration of trauma in the testimony, although it shows the unspeakable, it allows us to configure and make intelligible for others the other story of the self and the place of it as part of the social body, however, this allowed and allows survival. In this sense, the Other can be understood as a space of reception and social recognition, where the subjectivity of the witnesses can be registered as a possible history of resistance and survival in the face of social catastrophes. In this way, the transmission of memory requires a social space that not only authorizes subjectivity but also allows the production, in the subject-Other relationship, of an elaboration of the trauma. The issue does not just therefore concern the word, to the condition of (im)possibility of the narration of the subject, but also to this transindividual condition which allows the memory transmission to be reconsidered.

### **(Im)posibilidades del sujeto testimonial: aproximaciones interdisciplinarias a la memoria de lo traumático**

**Resumen:** Este artículo tiene como objetivo general promover la reflexión interdisciplinaria, considerando aportes del psicoanálisis y de la historia, acerca de la transmisión de la memoria, en sus dimensiones individuales y colectivas, de acontecimientos traumáticos vinculados a la transgresión de los derechos humanos en el contexto de regímenes autoritarios, desde la perspectiva del sujeto del testimonio. El principal supuesto es que el sujeto testimonial configura discursos que articulan tanto dimensiones representables como irrepresentables de la experiencia mediante la palabra. Así, interesa preguntarse por la posibilidad de que el testimonio presente en su propia organización discursiva esta dimensión que se resiste a la articulación narrativa, cuestión que permite considerar la forma y la función que adquiere lo irrepresentable en los procesos de transmisión de la memoria histórica ligada a los traumas colectivos.

**Palabras clave:** transmisión de memoria, sujeto testimonial, memoria de lo traumático, interdisciplina.

### **(Im)possibilités du sujet témoin: approches interdisciplinaires à la mémoire du traumatisant**

**Résumé:** Cet article a pour objectif général de promouvoir une réflexion interdisciplinaire en rendant compte des contributions de la psychanalyse et de l'histoire sur la transmission de la mémoire et du sujet qui témoigne sur les événements traumatiques dans leurs dimensions individuelles et collectives. Cette transmission est ainsi liée à la transgression de droits de l'homme dans le contexte des régimes autoritaires. L'hypothèse principale concerne le sujet témoin comme ensemble des discours qui articulent les deux dimensions du représentable et de l'irreprésentable par la parole. Ainsi, la question est-elle de savoir, si le témoignage constitue dans sa propre organisation discursive cette dimension qui résiste à l'articulation narrative. Il s'agit ainsi de considérer la forme et la fonction qui prend l'irreprésentable dans le processus de transmission de la mémoire historique liée aux traumatismes.

**Mots-clés:** transmission de mémoire, sujet témoin, mémoire du traumatisant, interdisciplinarité.

### **(Im)posibilidades do sujeito testemunha: abordagens interdisciplinares à memória do traumático**

**Resumo:** Este artigo tem como objetivo geral promover reflexão interdisciplinar, considerando as contribuições da psicanálise e da história sobre a transmissão da memória, em suas dimensões individuais e coletivas, de eventos traumáticos ligados à



transgressão dos direitos humanos em contexto de regimes autoritários, a partir da perspectiva da testemunha. O pressuposto principal é que o sujeito testemunha desenha discursos que articulam as duas dimensões, representável e irrepresentável, da experiência por meio da palavra. Assim, interessa questionar a possibilidade de que o testemunho apresente em sua própria organização discursiva essa dimensão que resiste a articulação narrativa, uma questão que permite considerar a forma e a função que leva o irrepresentável no processo de transmissão da memória histórica ligada a traumas coletivos.

**Palavras-chave:** transmissão de memória, sujeito testemunha, memória do traumático, interdisciplinar.

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