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Usurping the Apocryphal: Antonio Muñoz Molina's Cosmopolitan Memory of Max Aub's Rhetoric of Testimony

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I. Introduction: Sepharad and Testimony

Present-day Spain is the result of an irreparable “cataclismo,” “[i]gual que lo que sucedió con la cultura centroeuropea después de la II Guerra Mundial” (Muñoz Molina, “Muchos”).¹ In this statement, Antonio Muñoz Molina likens the cultural consequences of the Spanish Civil War and Franco’s dictatorship to those brought about by “irrationality” and “fascism” in continental Europe (“Caso”). Relations of equivalence predominate in Muñoz Molina’s writings on authors of testimonies. The title of his 2001 partially fictionalized compilation of testimonial narratives, *Sefarad*, further invokes this play of metaphorical equivalences, inasmuch as it constitutes “a metaphor of destruction, expulsion, or loss, . . . the place one wants to come back to” (“Company”). Muñoz Molina’s *Sefarad* (the Sephardic name for the Iberian Peninsula) equates the exile of Jews from Spain in the fifteenth century and the exile of Spanish Republicans fleeing Franco’s repression in the twentieth century.

Consequently, Sepharad stretches beyond the imagined community of Spanish exiles persecuted since early modernity to encompass “secular and progressive” European Jewish authors who suffered the consequences of the “cataclismo único en la historia del mundo” that shook twentieth-century Europe (“Max” 120). Among these authors are Primo Levi and Jean Améry—two prominent Jewish survivors of Auschwitz whose writings shape current understandings of Holocaust testimony—along with “the great writers of the Civil War era,” “the new Sephardim,” “democrats” such as Max Aub, a Spanish Republican exile born in France (“Company”). Muñoz Molina’s book stretches the metaphor even further to include “people who are sick and are exiled by their illness” (“Dreaming”). From this now transhistorical perspective, Muñoz Molina draws what I consider to be a questionable global equivalence: “todo el mundo es judío o puede ser judío en cualquier momento. . . . Cualquiera puede tener su Sefarad. Todos somos posibles condenados” (“Todos”). Sepharad, Muñoz Molina’s

¹ This essay owes valuable insights to Antonio Gómez López-Quñones’s analyses of Holocaust representations in Spanish culture, as well as to James Iffland, Christopher Maurer, and Christina L. Svendsen.

master metaphor of destruction, expulsion, or loss, is therefore a trope that universalizes experiences of victimhood.²

Read against the backdrop of Max Aub's testimonial writings, Muñoz Molina's texts on Europe's deadly twentieth century underscore the problems of creating or promoting a cosmopolitan memory inflected by testimonies of the Holocaust. His discussions of the memory of victimhood are deeply shaped by his reading of Aub's testimonies of exile and loss. He treats Aub as a key witness to both the Spanish Republican exile and "una especie de guerra civil europea" lasting more than thirty years ("Max" 121). Although Aub's life and works do belong to these two general contexts, Muñoz Molina tends to universalize (politically and rhetorically) Aub's specific historical position in both, to the extent that Aub comes to embody Sepharad. Thus remembered, Aub's complex experiences and testimonies lose their singularity.

Muñoz Molina's reading downplays Aub's main tropes of testimony—what I will call the alias and the apocryphal, characterized by a rhetoric of alterity, plurivocality, and obscurity. Muñoz Molina instead favors equivalence, univocality and self-evidence, and thereby turns Aub into a precursor whose place he tries to usurp symbolically. Along with other Jewish authors, Aub is made to occupy a transhistorical *topos* which Muñoz Molina "wants to come back to" ("Company"). In this essay, I contrast Muñoz Molina's testimonial rhetoric with that of Max Aub. As we shall see, these different rhetorics do not constitute a binary opposition but, rather, different textual strategies highlighting in varying degrees the uncanniness of testimony.³ In contrasting these two rhetorics, I will address three relevant questions in contemporary memory studies: how the globalization of Holocaust memory can decontextualize and relativize testimony; how so-called cosmopolitan memory can be used to foster one's imagined national culture; and what kind of testimonial literature may best memorialize, in a transnational context, specific experiences of repression.

II. Antonio Muñoz Molina's Rhetoric of Equivalence, Univocality, and Self-Evidence

Muñoz Molina's gesture of multicultural assimilation intervenes in a Spanish cultural field marked by questions about a common European memory insofar as the invocation of the Holocaust inescapably shapes current debates about the

² Antonio Muñoz Molina is arguably one of the most prominent public intellectuals in Spain today. He publishes regularly in *El País*, one of the most widely read newspapers in the Spanish-speaking world. He is a member of the Real Academia Española and he has served as the director of the Cervantes Institute in New York, and now teaches at New York University. He has received countless awards. In 2013, he won the prestigious Jerusalem Literary Prize—previously awarded to Milan Kundera, Octavio Paz, Jorge Semprún, and Susan Sontag, among others.

³ There is an ample bibliography on Antonio Muñoz Molina's and Max Aub's respective literary projects. For the specific connection between identity, memory, and modes of representation—and its possible relevance in discussions about the testimonial rhetoric in Muñoz Molina's work—see Ferrán, Herzberger, Labanyi, Navajas, and Pérez-Simón. For Aub, see Caudet, Fernández, Mainer, Pérez Bowie, and Sánchez Zapatero.

historical memory of the Spanish Civil War (Muñoz Molina, “Destierro” 92). The existence of a Spanish literary tradition about the Holocaust was still largely ignored at the turn of the twenty-first century due to Spain’s peripheral position with respect to the Final Solution (Gómez López-Quñones 59). As Dan Diner has argued, the Spanish Civil War forms part of a “historical constellation of European crises,” but the Civil War and the Holocaust belong to “different spaces” of historical reference (8). Yet, the rhetoric of the Holocaust has recently offered a significant set of criteria for representing and understanding repression during the Spanish war and the Franco dictatorship (Moradiellos 379). The term *genocide* was loosely used during the so-called “guerra por la memoria” that took place in Spain during the first decade of the twenty-first century (Marco 27). The issues debated ranged from the commemoration of victims of political repression buried in Spanish mass graves to the arrest of former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet on the principle of universal jurisdiction. In this context, Paul Preston’s 2011 *The Spanish Holocaust*, an investigation of the atrocities committed by Franco, has stirred a heated debate about how to characterize and name Francoist repression.⁴

The term “Spanish Holocaust” relates to two concepts recently developed in sociological memory studies: cosmopolitan memory and multidirectional memory. These two perspectives take Holocaust memory as their “paradigmatic object of concern” (Rothberg 6). As Daniel Levy argues, the notion “cosmopolitan memory” uses the Holocaust as a template for the “creation of a European cultural history” and, thus, helps to develop transnational memories which could serve as a basis “for global human rights politics” (Levy and Sznaider 87). Multidirectional memory shows how identity can be “a borrowing or adaptation from a history that initially might seem foreign and distant” (Rothberg 5). According to Michael Rothberg, remembering the Holocaust can contribute to the “articulation of other histories” of victimhood (6). In this sense, both Preston and Muñoz Molina would be loosely borrowing or adapting from the history of the Holocaust in order to rearticulate the memory of Franco’s repression. However, Rothberg also insists that such borrowings be clearly drawn and that they recognize the uniqueness of historical circumstances and lived experiences. Thus, parallels between historical spaces of reference such as the Spanish Civil War and the Holocaust should be distinctly defined (Gómez López-Quñones 65).

Andreas Huyssen has warned that global memory “will always be prismatic and heterogeneous rather than holistic or universal” (35). The use of the Holocaust

⁴ The title of Preston’s book has been faulted because the repression to which it refers “differed qualitatively as well as quantitatively from the cold-blooded planning and industrial-scale implementation of the Nazi Holocaust” (Treglown). By contrast, Helen Graham, who in 2002 claimed that for the Francoist project of “national reordering” the Spanish working classes became what the Jews were to the Nazi people’s community (*Spanish Republic* 123), has praised the title of Preston’s book for the “category shift” it may effect, suggesting “parallels and resonances” between the Spanish case and the Holocaust, as well as “a deeper understanding of Europe’s dark mid-twentieth century as a whole” (*Spanish Holocaust*). This “category shift” has been taken to reframe the Spanish Civil War “as in part an ethnic conflict” because, as Sebastiaan Faber has argued, “Franco’s reign of terror, like that of Hitler and Goebbels, was carefully planned and systematically executed” (“Spanish Holocaust”). For a good summary of the controversy, see Graham, Labanyi, Marco, Preston, and Richards.

as a paradigm in cosmopolitan memory faces criticism precisely because the Nazi extermination of the European Jews is taken to be “a particular event” and its mourning is grounded in “a specific place and cultural tradition.” Holocaust memory, therefore, “cannot be easily appropriated everywhere” (Assmann and Conrad 8–9), even when the Holocaust is used as a paradigm to lay the foundation for a universal understanding of human rights, based on generic notions such as a “commonly remembered barbarism” (Assmann 14). A key figure in this polemic is Holocaust survivor Jean Améry, considered by Muñoz Molina as a “hero” against “irrationality” and “fascism” (“Caso”). Yet, Améry not only decried the equating of Bolshevism and Nazism and the indiscriminate use of broad terms such as totalitarianism to refer to Hitler’s Reich, but he also predicted how the term Holocaust would be immersed within a larger frame of reference such as “a general ‘Century of Barbarism,’” and thus would become progressively indistinguishable from the term genocide (79–80). As he knew, claims of universality can lead to fetishizing or trivializing trauma. Also, the indiscriminate use of master metaphors or broad terms such as “barbarism” to link specific traumatic events can misrepresent not only the particular circumstances of the Holocaust but also the idiosyncratic testimony and experiences of a writer like Max Aub. With a touch of black humor, José Naharro Calderón, for instance, alludes to the inadequacy of such indiscriminate use of cosmopolitan memory by remembering Aub’s internment at a concentration camp as “una especie de ‘solución final’ ma non troppo” (116). Thus, if Aub’s rhetoric of testimony is to be understood in the light of cosmopolitan memory, it would be necessary to posit a cosmopolitanism able to address, as Kwame Anthony Appiah argues, the challenge of reconciling “a kind of universalism with the legitimacy of some forms of partiality” (223).

Max Aub holds an eccentric, even exceptional position in twentieth-century Spanish political and cultural history. He was born in Paris in 1903 to a German sales agent, Friedrich Aub, and the French-born Susanne Mohrenwitz. His father’s family can be traced back to an eighteenth-century Jewish community in German Franconia (Zepp 170). At the outbreak of the First World War, Aub’s family moved to Valencia, Spain, where he, aged eleven and a speaker of French and German, learned Spanish. In the early twenties, he became a Spanish citizen and in 1939, when Franco’s troops occupied Barcelona, he returned to Paris. About a year later, on the eve of the Nazi occupation, he was anonymously and falsely denounced as “súbdito alemán (judío) . . . notorio comunista y revolucionario” (Malgat 90). Aub spent more than two years in jails and concentration camps. He was first taken to Le Vernet, one of the camps set up in southern France for refugees from the Spanish war. In 1941, he was sent to the Djelfa concentration camp in Algeria. When he was finally released in 1942, he escaped to Mexico, where he died thirty years later, after publishing his five-volume cycle of testimonial novels about the Civil War, *El laberinto mágico*.

Aub’s book of testimonial poetry, *Diario de Djelfa*, was published in 1944. In 1945, only a few years after fleeing the concentration camp, he wrote an agonized description of his fate:

¡Qué daño no me ha hecho, en nuestro mundo cerrado, el no ser de ninguna parte! El llamarme como me llamo, con nombre y apellido

que lo mismo pueden ser de un país que de otro. . . . En estas horas de nacionalismo cerrado el haber nacido en París, y ser español, tener padre español nacido en Alemania, madre parisina, pero de origen también alemán, pero de apellido eslavo, y hablar con ese acento francés que desgarrá mi castellano, ¡qué daño no me ha hecho! (*Diario* 128–29).

Aub wondered constantly about the reasons for his alienation: “¿Por qué ando lejos de todos los convites? ¿Por qué soy el ‘raro’? . . . ¿Qué soy? ¿Alemán, francés, español, mexicano? ¿Qué soy? Nada” (*Diarios* 108, 273). These questions point to Aub’s undecidable identity and therefore to his exceptional position in the twentieth-century Spanish cultural field. Aub felt the effects of alienation and uprootedness on his life, work, and political activism. It could be argued that he was always an exile. The combination of his ethnic, geographic, and linguistic conditions contributed to his estrangement. Extrapolating Paul Gilroy’s idea that some identities can be more appropriately approached in terms not only of roots but, primarily, of routes, Aub’s experience could be said to be one of other-rootedness and other-routedness (19).

Aub—like Holocaust survivor Jean Améry—is one of Muñoz Molina’s “héroes civiles e íntimos de la palabra escrita” (“Destierro” 99). Muñoz Molina has published several texts about his formative connection to Aub. The most significant is his 1996 speech accepting his induction into the Real Academia Española. In this institutional context, Muñoz Molina presents himself as an “involuntario usurpador” of Aub’s place in the academy: “Usurpamos el lugar . . . de quienes podrían haber obtenido con más mérito lo que el azar reservó para nosotros” (“Destierro” 93). The “usurpation” is justified insofar as Muñoz Molina’s real speech revolves around the speech Aub wrote in exile accepting an imaginary induction into the Academy. According to Muñoz Molina, Aub was a political and a literary exile “sin patria y sin lectores” who has to be rehabilitated because he legitimately belonged in the Spanish Academy (“Destierro” 93). Muñoz Molina concludes his speech by granting Aub’s work a key role in the reemergence of Spain from the “cataclismo” that the Civil War brought on: “yo no creo que la cultura española pueda lograr su verdadera plenitud si no recobra la tradición abolida en 1939” (117). Muñoz Molina thus becomes the reader that Aub supposedly needed in order to return to his cultural fatherland. By supplementing Aub’s absence with his own presence and testimony, Muñoz Molina—self-declared symbolic usurper of Aub’s place—can, presumably, claim and represent the theoretical “plenitud” of Spanish culture.

Here, however, national cultural “plenitud” depends on the paradoxical assimilation of a writer who, as Muñoz Molina himself acknowledges, was “[j]udío, alemán, francés, valenciano, apátrida, mexicano, peregrino en su patria, regresado al destierro y muerto en él” (114). Although the combination of these circumstances is quite rare, perhaps unique, in the twentieth-century Spanish cultural field, Muñoz Molina depicts Aub as a literary and political archetype, a “leyenda . . . del escritor republicano exiliado” (100). More importantly, Muñoz Molina claims that Aub seemed to be able to rebel against the fate of a “porvenir obligatorio” and to overcome his exceptionality: “decidió ser español, un español

demócrata y de izquierdas, sin más raíces que las elegidas por él mismo" (107, 114). However, Aub's experience of exile was very different from that of Antonio Machado or Manuel Azaña, other Spanish Republican exile writers whom Muñoz Molina admires. Aub did have other roots that he could not choose to own or disown in the special historical circumstances in which he lived. I would contend that Aub's literature testifies to this singular experience of alienation. More precisely, it testifies to the tension between the concrete reality of being, as Aub claimed, "de ninguna parte" (*Diario* 128) and what Muñoz Molina calls his desire to be Spanish ("Destierro" 114).

Muñoz Molina's attempt at restoring Aub's standing in the Spanish cultural field brings out Aub's exceptionality and, thus, the tensions involved in promoting a national cultural memory from a cosmopolitan perspective. Muñoz Molina's symbolic usurpation of Aub's place constitutes a paradox because, by turning Aub into a central paradigm and a legend of the Spanish Republican exile, he disregards Aub's experience of other-rootedness—the very experience that Aub could not possibly choose to disregard. Thus, both writers can be rooted or re-rooted in Muñoz Molina's imagined community of an ideal full-fledged progressive Spanish culture. By the same token, Muñoz Molina can claim the distinguished intellectual legacy of an alienated victim, while being safely ensconced in today's Spanish cultural field. As we shall see, this gesture anticipates a key rhetorical move of the narrator in Muñoz Molina's book *Sefarad*: that of identifying himself with a prestigious literary community of victims such as Primo Levi or Jean Améry. The narrator can belong to this community only if the victims' particular experiences of repression are universalized by means of a unifying narrative voice (Gómez López-Quñones 64–65).

In Muñoz Molina's reading, exile from space and time is somehow suspended, so that, to him, Aub's imaginary speech feels real and his own real speech feels "maxaubianamente imaginario" ("Destierro" 117–18). In this and other depictions of Aub, Muñoz Molina tends to abstract the historical context of the Spanish Civil War so as to illustrate a certain transhistorical Spanishness: Aub is "un ejemplo de . . . esa clase de ciudadanía y de inteligencia españolas . . . que para nuestra desgracia acabó demasiadas veces en el infortunio y el exilio" (114). Muñoz Molina has tied the experience of reading Aub's novels during the last years of Franco's dictatorship to a "nostalgia doble del porvenir y del pasado, del mañana en el que podríamos respirar y vivir en libertad y del lejano ayer en el que la libertad existió brevemente" ("Notas"). The destroyed Spanish Second Republic thus becomes part of Sepharad, the textual commonplace to which Muñoz Molina can only desire to "go back" because it is unattainable: "I am a grandchild of the generation of García Lorca, of the great writers of the Civil War era. These artists are like the new Sephardim in the sense that they have been expelled from their country. And they have preserved the best of Spanish culture" ("Company").

If Sepharad is Muñoz Molina's master metaphor for destruction, expulsion, and loss, Aub is, for him, the epitome of the Sephardic exile—one who witnessed and gave testimony to the loss of the various communities from which Muñoz Molina feels exiled and to which he desires to return. As the exemplary Sephardic witness, Aub is behind Muñoz Molina's perception of what he calls

the “apocalypse” of twentieth-century Europe (“Destierro” 100). By invoking Aub’s name, Muñoz Molina wishes to connect his imagined Spanish culture with the European culture of progressive intellectuals represented in *Sefarad*, such as Walter Benjamin, Eugenia Ginzburg, Arthur Koestler, Victor Klemperer, Nadezhda Mandelstam, or Willi Münzenberg. In a 1997 lecture titled “Max Aub: una mirada española y judía sobre las ruinas de Europa,” Muñoz Molina tentatively claims that, as a Jew, Aub was able to look into the past and into the future, since he “casi heredaba la tradición de lealtad y destierro de los sefardíes” (127). Furthermore, his Jewishness helped Aub “a ser consciente, con clarividencia precoz, de la forma particular y definitiva del cataclismo europeo que iba culminar en los campos de exterminio” (127). Thus, Aub is depicted as moving beyond the concrete historical circumstances in which he lived and wrote so as to become a sort of Virgilian guide in Muñoz Molina’s transhistorical journey to Sepharad.

Muñoz Molina claims that the Spanish Civil War is part of a European disaster which he describes as “un cataclismo único en la historia del mundo, tanto en la escala de su destrucción como en la cualidad planificada y sistemática de la saña con que ésta se llevó a cabo” (“Max” 120). By defining “cataclismo único” in general terms, without further historical qualification, Muñoz Molina suggests there is an equivalence between violence during the Spanish Civil War and the destruction of national, racial, religious, or political groups during the Second World War. His frame of reference is arguably the definition of *genocide* as intentional coordinated destruction used at the Nuremberg trials.⁵ The war in Spain is thus metonymically equated with the Holocaust. This sense of equivalence is strengthened by Muñoz Molina’s use of generic expressions borrowed from Aub’s writings: “el totalitarismo aspira a anegar la vida individual en una masa unánime. . . . Nadie está a salvo” (“Max” 135). “Nadie está a salvo” is a key leitmotif in Muñoz Molina’s reading of Aub’s work. “Noche de Europa” is taken from Aub’s play *El rapto de Europa*: “Entre la riada de fugitivos de la noche de Europa . . . están casi todas las inteligencias mayores del siglo XX” (126). Channeled through the narrator’s voice, these generic leitmotifs find their way into *Sefarad*, linking some of the disparate testimonial stories that make up the text and allowing Muñoz Molina to offer a panoramic view of “un cataclismo único, [donde] la gran noche de Europa está cruzada de largos trenes siniestros” and “nadie . . . está a salvo” (49, 285). Some of these stories are about the Holocaust, while others seem less historically specific. Thus, Holocaust survivors Levi and Améry are not safe, but neither are safe “people who are sick” (“Dreaming”). Not even the reader seems to be safe: “puedes entrar al café de todos los días creyendo que nada se ha modificado ni en ti ni en el mundo exterior y comprobar en el periódico que ya no eres quien creías que eras y no estás a salvo de la persecución y la infamia” (*Sefarad* 457). Addressed by the second person singular pronoun, the reader is also drawn into a potentially disastrous situation.

Muñoz Molina’s perspective explains the relations of equivalence prevalent in his testimonial literature. His anti-fictional rhetoric draws on an idea of testimony as a self-evident account of an event, as if experience could be seamlessly

⁵ See Julius Ruiz for the problems involved in calling Francoist repression genocidal (175).

narrated and there were no gaps between bearing witness and giving testimony: “Apenas hay detalles, y da pereza inventarlos, falsificarlos, profanar con la usurpación de un relato lo que fue parte dolorosa y real de la experiencia de alguien” (179). As Dominick LaCapra has shown, gaps between bearing witness and giving testimony do exist (“Traumatopisms” 61).⁶ In *Sefarad* there is a tension between the obvious artifice of the text and the earnest statements by the narrator and the author about their anti-fictional textual strategies. According to the narrator, “[l]os hechos de la realidad dibujan tramas inesperadas a las que no puede atravesarse la ficción” (*Sefarad* 214). Later, in an author’s note, Muñoz Molina writes: “He inventado muy poco en las historias y las voces que se cruzan en este libro” (597). In his account of the lives of witnesses like Primo Levi, Muñoz Molina also claims that he didn’t “really have to invent anything,” since he felt as though *Sefarad* were “writing itself” (“Company”). I argue, however, that a symbolic usurpation occurs in *Sefarad* precisely because of its lack of “invention”—as Muñoz Molina would say—that is, its lack of a defamiliarizing distance between the narrator’s account and the witness’s testimony. This distance might have made it easier to acknowledge the singularity of the witness’s experience. If defamiliarization is the literary technique whereby the reader is made to see common things in an uncommon way, in testimonies of an extreme experience defamiliarization can show uncommon things in their singularity, strangeness, and even obscurity. Or rather, following LaCapra’s distinction between bearing witness and giving testimony, testimony can be understood as the textual gap between experience and expression.

Symbolic usurpation of the witness’s testimony is most evident in Muñoz Molina’s account of the experience of Jean Améry, of all people: “Eres Jean Améry viendo un paisaje de prados y árboles por la ventanilla del coche en el que lo llevan preso al cuartel de la Gestapo” (*Sefarad* 462). Here the narrator states straightforwardly that the reader is seeing what Améry saw, as if Améry’s experience could be conveyed transparently. However, this is precisely the moment chosen by Améry as an illustration of the discrepancy between witnessing and testimony. Améry claimed that even in “normal life” “reality is nothing but codified abstraction” and only exceptionally “do we truly stand face to face with the event” (26). In the case of “an event that places the most extreme demands on us, [there is] never an imaginative power that could even approach its reality. That someone is carried away shackled in a car by the Gestapo is ‘self-evident’ only when you read about it in the newspaper” (25–26). It should be remembered that Améry is the very witness who feared that the term *Holocaust* would be blurred into larger categories.

Améry wrote, “everything is self-evident, and nothing is self-evident as soon as we are thrust into a reality whose light blinds us and burns us to the bone” (26). The narrator of *Sefarad*, however, imagines himself unproblematically seeing what Améry saw, sharing it transparently—infallibly—with the reader, and even

⁶ As LaCapra explains, “[g]iving testimony involves the attempt to address or give an account of the experience one has had oneself and through which one has lived. In a sense, one might understand giving testimony as the fallible attempt to verbalize or otherwise articulate bearing witness” (“Traumatopisms” 61).

becoming Améry himself. He makes the experience of a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust seem familiar, turning it into an abstraction so that Améry's individual place can be symbolically usurped. As the narrator explains elsewhere in the text, "[e]stoy muy dotado para intuir esa clase de angustia" (*Sefarad* 225). Using the second person singular pronoun, he also invites the reader to imagine him or herself in Améry's situation. The addressed reader could reply with Susan Sontag's words from *Regarding the Pain of Others*: "'We'—this 'we' is everyone who has never experienced anything like what they went through—don't understand. We don't get it. We truly can't imagine what it was like" (125).⁷ Sepharad, understood as a metaphor of destruction, expulsion, or loss, allows Muñoz Molina to "naturally identify with those who are left out": "When I was a child, the history of Spain that was taught was the official Catholic history: We were Catholics, we expelled the Jews. I naturally rebelled against all that. If traditional Spain expelled the Jews, I had to identify with the Jews" ("Dreaming"). This identification allows for a narrowing of the gap between experience and expression.

III. Max Aub's Rhetoric of Alterity, Plurivocality, and Obscurity

Max Aub's rhetoric of testimony draws on a different premise—the necessity of a rhetoric of fiction and invention, and, thus, the opening of the gap between experience and expression: "Testimonié. . . . [C]reo que la ficción es el único medio posible (útil) de hollar, de dejar rastro, de testimoniar" (*Nuevos* 209). In this sense, Muñoz Molina's defense of an anti-fictional rhetoric is at odds with Aub's decided defense of a rhetoric of fiction as a means for writing about his experience of alienation. Always already exiled, Aub's dominant testimonial tropes are, as I said, the alias and the apocryphal. In Spanish, *alias* can mean both "nickname" and "otherwise." Etymologically, *alias* is a marker of difference. It also means "at another time," "in another place." *Apocryphal* can mean false, fictitious, of doubtful authenticity; it implies something secret and obscure. These tropes resonate with Claudio Guillén's definition of exile as an experience of linguistic, temporal and spatial displacement (83). Aub's use of apocryphal voices and documents shapes his literature in various ways. A prime example of this apocryphal bent is *Josep Torres Campalans*, Aub's biography of a fictitious

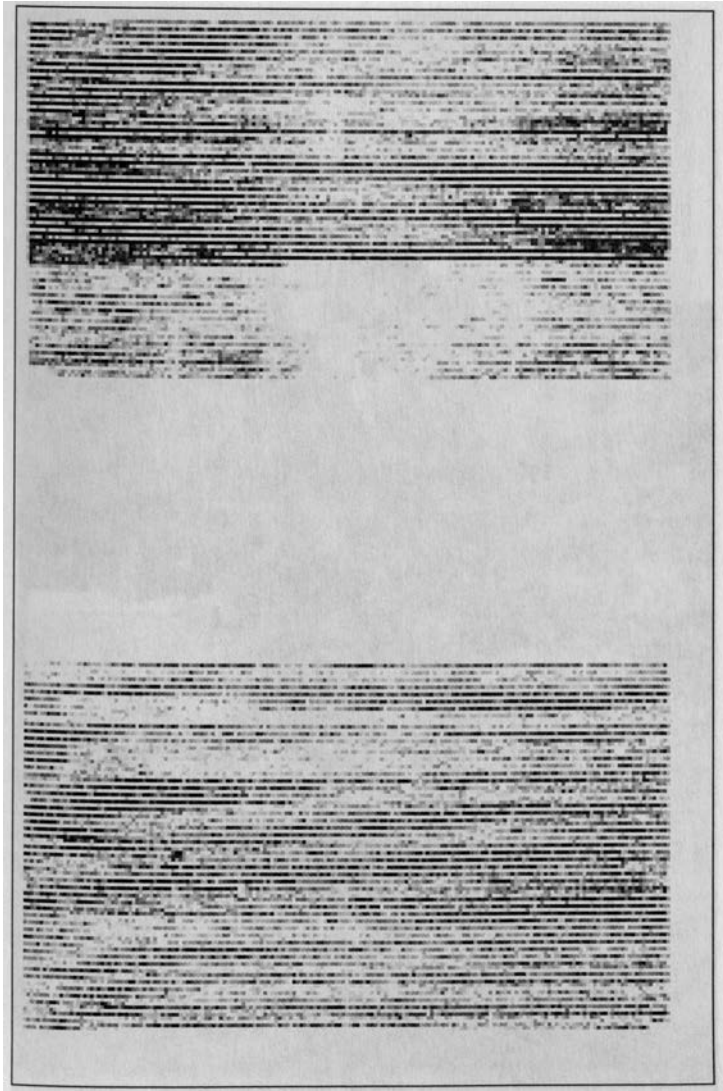
⁷ "[L]os libros los escriben los escritores, y ponen en ellos lo único que tienen, que es la experiencia de su propia vida, la aleación única de temperamento y cultura de la que está hecho cada uno de nosotros" (Muñoz Molina, "Max" 124). The author of *Sefarad* made this assertion despite "lo que digan esos pervertidos universitarios del lacanismo, la desconstrucción, el posestructuralismo y demás basura franconorteamericana." To this one could answer with Susan Suleiman's words: "even the notion that testimony, whether literary or not, inevitably comprises elements of fiction is by now a commonplace—we are all postmodernists in that regard; we know that every narrative is constructed, no matter how 'simple' or 'artless' it may appear" (139). LaCapra has warned that "any attentive secondary witness to, or acceptable account of, traumatic experiences must in some significant way be marked by trauma or allow trauma to register in its own procedures" ("Lanzmann" 244). In this sense, the "transparent" account of Améry's experience given by the narrator in *Sefarad* can be argued to fall into a certain "positivism" to the extent that it follows "the idea that an objectifying notational system can ideally represent, transparently render, or capture the essence of an object" (239).

Catalan painter, described as one of the co-founders of Cubism. The 1958 edition of this apocryphal biography included illustrations and photos created by Aub. *Josep Torres Campalans* has sometimes been listed as a biography of a real painter.

In *Diario de Djelfa*, Aub's 1944 testimonial book of poems about his experiences in an Algerian concentration camp, he claims that all that is narrated in the book is "real sucedido" (7). Yet, the testimony is far from self-evident. As he explains, "sólo mis compañeros muertos y enterrados en Djelfa, el millar de sobrevivientes, podrán, quizá, captar lo que aquí se apunta" (8). Indeed, Aub deems the poems to be "inimaginados o inimaginables" (7). This first defamiliarizing gesture, underscoring a certain fallibility of testimony, is compounded by a poem titled "Alias" (80). This poem makes no direct reference to the camp or any other historical events. It is a baroque meditation on the conflicts and tensions between language and identity. The first stanza reads: "En este mundo todo son apodos, / alias, dichos y modos, / por mal nombre o por bueno / no valgo lo que soy, sí lo que sueño" (80). The poem ends on a skeptical note about the ambivalent power of language: "[las palabras] llenan pliego tras pliego / dando en decir lo que no pueden" (80).

As if to supplement the incapacity of words to name the witness and give an account of his experiences, *Diario de Djelfa* incorporates several photographs. Tellingly, one of these photographs supposedly reproduces the sheets—or "pliegos"—of which the manuscript of the diary was made. However, as critic Bernard Sicot has shown, this image is that of an apocryphal manuscript: it is sheer artifice (420–21). Aub went as far as to counterfeit the physical evidence of his own diary of the concentration camp, as though he were trying to impress upon the reader the obscure nature of the words used in his testimony. Indeed, the text reproduced in the photograph is illegible. Some of the lines are so blotted that they look censored. Aub seems to warn the reader about this illegibility or fallibility in the foreword to the diary: "Esta poesía atada al recuerdo, se desdibuja, palidece y cobra virtud fantasmal según los fantasmas de cada lector, que si de lo vivo a lo pintado piérdese una dimensión, ¡qué no perderá en lo escrito!" (*Diario* 8). The poem's lines are, therefore, "unimaginable" in another sense: we cannot picture them as such. Susan Sontag's words take here an added poignancy: "we truly can't imagine what it was like" at Djelfa because Aub's verses are uncannily obscure.

Obscurity is also key to the short story that Aub inserted on the back cover of *Diario de Djelfa*, "Ver y creer," as a deceptive blurb of his text. This fictional narrative is signed by the very real Guatemalan author Augusto Monterroso. According to this story, Aub is employing a ghostwriter, a Jew who fled Germany but is now hidden in the basement of his house in Mexico City, where he "escribe y escribe, a oscuras casi" (*Diario*). "Ignorante de la realidad," this ghostwriter comforts himself producing texts about the past. Aub publishes "esas producciones con su propio nombre, pero su prisionero no se entera" (*Diario*). Yet, the story is supposed to date back to 1929, thirteen years before Aub arrived in Mexico. By means of this fiction, Aub's authorship is destabilized and his writings take on an apocryphal tinge. The title of this short story, "Ver y creer," plays on



Photograph of the “apocryphal manuscript” inserted, according to Bernard Sicot, by Max Aub in *Diario de Djelfa* (courtesy of Editorial Joaquín Mortiz S. A.).

a paradigmatic figure of witnessing in Christianity, the Doubting Thomas, throwing further into question the evidence shown by Aub’s testimonial poetry.

Aub presents multiple versions of the apocryphal. “El cementerio de Djelfa” (1965) is a short story consisting of the transcription of a letter from Algeria that an anonymous narrator receives in Mexico in a soiled and torn envelope. The sender, a survivor of the Djelfa concentration camp, casts doubt on the evidentiary value of words by underlining the artificiality of his account: “Las palabras son tan pobres frente a los sentimientos que hay que recurrir a mil trucos para dar con el reflejo de la realidad” (79). In other texts, Aub relies on

the Cervantean ruse of the found manuscript. His 1952 “Manuscrito Cuervo” is a Swiftian chronicle of the human experience in the concentration camp. With a nod to the series of fictional authors referred to in Cervantes’s *Don Quijote*, the manuscript is presented as “traducido fielmente del idioma cuervo por Aben Máximo Albarrón” and edited by a certain J. R. Bululú (“Manuscrito” 151). The sheer artifice of these textual mediations is underscored by the fact that the purportedly “true” author of the manuscript is a conspicuously fictional crow named Jacobo, while the translator’s name, Aben Máximo Albarrón, alludes to the name of the story’s author, Max Aub. The crow’s claim that “[t]odo cuanto describa o cuente ha sido visto y observado por mis ojos” underscores the artificiality of both the witness and the testimony, and also, by contrast, the blindness of human beings (156). Authorship and authenticity are thus already subverted in the *mise en abîme* of Aub’s favored literary device, the found manuscript. Aub is well aware that, as LaCapra explains, “any account—representation, narrative, understanding, explanation, form of knowledge—is constitutively limited, notably when it addresses certain phenomena” (“Lanzmann” 242). Among the “phenomena” addressed by Aub’s accounts may be his own singular experiences of alienation and other-rootedness, including “the traumatic effects of limit-experiences” on a survivor of the Djelfa camp—but not of the Final Solution (“Lanzmann” 234).

The idea that a rhetoric of fiction is the only useful means of bearing witness becomes distinctively salient in Aub’s 1963 *Antología traducida*, a collection of apocryphal poems prefaced by highly particularized biographies of both real and fictional poets. As in *Diario de Djelfa*, the apocryphal qualities of the text are strengthened by the uncanny inclusion of the author’s own name. Aub is presented as an enigmatic poet in the third person: “no se sabe dónde está. . . . Nadie le conoce. Sus fotografías son evidentes trucos” (“Antología” 244). The evidence of Aub’s “true” identity is obscured. This self-effacing presentation, this alias showing Aub otherwise, half-apocryphally, explains why his poems included in the anthology represent him as “cerrado en mí, cegato, mudo” (245). Thus, extrapolating Jean Améry’s words, Aub’s dubious witnesses could also claim that “nothing is self-evident as soon as we are thrust into a reality whose light blinds us” (26). In *Campo francés*, a 1964 film script based on his experiences at the Roland Garros prison in Paris and the concentration camp at Le Vernet d’Ariège, Aub memorably stated: “fui ojo, . . . no me represento” (7). Thus, for Aub, the act of seeing which defines witnessing implies a disappearing act, the elusive presence of a half-blind individual giving obscure testimonies of linguistic, spatial, and temporal displacements. Aub’s tropes of testimony, the alias and the apocryphal, entail a rhetoric of fiction and obscurity, and thus preclude usurpation. In 1968, a few years before his death, Aub wrote: “El exiliado murió: lo que ha cambiado es España” (*Diarios* 413). After almost thirty years in exile, the writer reiterated his sense of displacement, while pointing out the potential complications of the attempts at rehabilitating him for what Muñoz Molina calls “Spanish culture.”

IV. Conclusions: The Uncanniness of Testimony and National Culture

Although Aub might embody the metaphor of Sepharad, his name is significantly absent from Muñoz Molina’s book of the same title. Responding to a

deep anxiety of testimonial influence, Muñoz Molina's narrator has symbolically usurped Aub's place. Following Muñoz Molina's Bloomian idea that writers learn their trade by following a dialectical movement between treason and tradition, the narrator in *Sefarad* could be said to ventriloquize real victims, assuming their voices and subsuming them under his univocal persona ("Discurso" 99). In this sense, universality of experience equals univocality of expression. Muñoz Molina's misreading of Aub's diversity of fictional voices as a universal narrative voice may help to answer a key question in memory studies regarding the dynamics of testimonial memory. When witnesses to a specific historical event die, how can future legatees of testimonies best memorialize the singularity of experience?

As Susan Suleiman suggests, although sentiment can be shared even by "authors and readers who were not there," it is as personal, subjective expression that the experiences of survivors can "most memorably be communicated. The meaning of their experience remains, despite the collective nature of the historical event and of its official commemorations, individual rather than collective" (213, 183). Muñoz Molina's model downplays the defamiliarizing effect that would indicate to his readers that someone's experience may have happened "at another time," "in another place," in a different ethnic, geographic, and linguistic context. If W. G. Sebald's testimonial novel *Austerlitz*—to which *Sefarad* has been compared—can be considered an example of "the power of imagination to construct the inner world of a child survivor" (Suleiman 212), then Muñoz Molina's "novel of novels" could be said to be an example of the power of imagination to construct the inner world of a reader of testimonial literature who was not there.⁸ In this light, Aub and Muñoz Molina suggest two different models of literary testimony. Aub's plurivocal model posits the obscure specificity of individual experience, whereas Muñoz Molina's univocal model posits the transparent universality of shared sentiment. These different textual strategies highlight in varying degrees the uncanniness of testimony, thus problematizing oppositions such as individual/collective, fiction/fact, literature/history (Felman and Laub 7). As we have seen, Aub's resort to artifice does not undermine his efforts to narrate what he calls "real sucedido" (*Diario* 7). *Sefarad*, by contrast, reveals a tension between the artifice of the text and the anti-fictional rhetoric that the narrator and the author proclaim.

For Muñoz Molina, the recuperation of the literary memory of Europe's deadly twentieth century is linked to the denunciation of Spanish "provincianismo intelectual e histórico" in the 1980s ("Obra"). In his view, even a few years after Franco's death, Spain continued to be politically isolated, and Spaniards still believed that "cuestiones relativas al Gulag y al Holocausto" did not have much to do with them. Thus, Muñoz Molina can commemorate not only European survivors whose works have been overlooked or disregarded in Spain but also posthumously forgotten Spanish exile writers such as Manuel Chaves Nogales or Arturo Barea, who in the late thirties opposed "dictaduras comunistas o fascistas" and only belatedly "vuelven a ser leídos y . . . reciben una consideración literaria y política de la que no disfrutaron en España mientras vivían" ("Dos exilios"). If remembering the Holocaust can contribute to the "articulation of

⁸ For possible links between *Austerlitz* and *Sefarad*, see Martín-Estudillo.

other histories” of victimhood, then Muñoz Molina rearticulates a Spanish history of isolation multi-directionally, in terms of a European cosmopolitan memory (Rothberg 6). From this angle, the cultural importance of *Sefarad* cannot be underestimated. The book was canonized last year by its inclusion in Cátedra Letras Hispánicas, a widely distributed series of annotated classics in Spanish. *Sefarad* has, to date, been translated into eleven languages.

Muñoz Molina’s efforts to break away from Franco’s provincial Spain are nothing short of commendable. Yet, paradoxically enough, his championing of a supposedly “verdadera plenitud” of Spanish culture seems impervious to the “unsettling force” of exile understood as “nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal,” to use Edward Said’s words (186). As Aub’s friend and fellow exile Tomás Segovia skeptically pointed out at a 2003 conference significantly titled “Max Aub: testigo del siglo XX,” institutional efforts to rehabilitate Aub could neutralize the subversive potential of his writings and diminish Aub’s own “ambigua y paradójica” figure (254). When read against the transhistorical backdrop of Muñoz Molina’s universalizing metaphor, Aub’s testimonies of other-rootedness and other-routedness invite the reader not only to always historicize but also to always spatialize. Indeed, as Paul Jay has shown, current literary and cultural studies are partly defined by a spatial expansion away from national paradigms towards new transnational fields of research (16). Aub’s particular experience as an exile is eccentric because, at least in the framework of cosmopolitan memory, it goes beyond the Spanish Republic to point to an experience of the Holocaust to which it nevertheless cannot be fully assimilated. It thus points to a decentered position toward the Spanish nation. It is in this sense that Aub’s testimonial rhetoric posits the challenge of reconciling “a kind of universalism with the legitimacy of some forms of partiality” (Appiah 223).

Mari Paz Balibrea has pointed out that the politics of recuperation of the testimonies written by Spanish Republican exiles should preserve “as a critical position the marginality . . . of exile” (13). Aub’s desire to return to Spain is well known. As he wrote in 1969: “Te deshaces en deseos: te consume la furia del amor hacia un pasado que no fue, por un futuro imposible” (*La gallina ciega* 311). Much to his dismay, returning to Spain left much to be desired. True plenitude seemed unattainable. It is this seemingly irresolvable tension inscribed in Aub’s self-reflexive form of desire that would align his writings with those of other exiled Spanish writers such as Antonio Machado and Luis Cernuda: “their poetry oscillates between a critical rhetoric of fragmentation and a lyrical rhetoric of attachment, between exclamations of political dissidence and avowals or irrepressible belonging” (Epps and Fernández Cifuentes 38). And yet, Aub’s experience of exile was also different from that of Machado or Cernuda to the extent that, as we have seen, he had other roots that he could not choose to own or disown. In this sense, his writings testify to a contrapuntal, uncanny tension between the concrete reality of being “de ninguna parte” and an unattainable desire to return to a certain idea of Spain (*Diario* 128). In this light, Aub’s position toward the nation was eccentric twice over. Perhaps his testimonial rhetoric of alterity, plurivocality, and obscurity should also be remembered as eccentric. The goal of this article has been to encourage such remembrance and, thus, to

suggest critical perspectives on the attempts to attain national cultural “plenitude.”

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