CHAPTER VII

Con-juring the Body

Making History and Fiction

Introduction by Ileana Rodríguez

This chapter discusses historical memory as collective memory, using the special case of Modesta B.’s file from La Castañeda General Insane Asylum in Mexico City to illustrate her view of citizenship construction. Memory and citizenship are thus linked in this text to the processes of writing and reading documents that make up historiography. The text focuses on the following questions: How does memory emerge in a text? When you read any document, within or beyond your discipline, do you consider it an object of memory? Do you read a text differently when you consider it interdisciplinary or extradisciplinary?

What seems stimulating to me as a reader in this text is the way it answers the question. The text does not speak directly of memory or citizenship but shows how these two categories are constructed through a notion of history as an academic discipline. Its project is the reevaluation of work in this discipline through a timely and selective discussion of instances of the oral as writing and of the written as orality, in order to move toward an ethnographic history able to listen to historical voices and reconstitute the phenomenological body. Memory, I understand through this writing, consists of the capacity to hear these other voices inscribed in the crypt of archives today; it consists of knowing how to distinguish between the word in written form and word as breath; it consists of being able to respond to the gesture, to the air in the pause placed between two words, to the marker of doubt. And citizenship, in this instance in particular, is that which depends on the readings of a phenomenological body, readings that have been recorded in an archive of contradictory words in which the social dialogue established around a woman, Modesta B., is readily discernible. Rivera
Garza tells us who the speakers in this document are and how the amendments to the text reveal the debates that constructed Modesta B.’s body as a text.

As a reader, I enjoyed the following from the start: the process of selection of quotations from other texts; the scholarly conversation between absent participants through memory of other texts that are linked together and leave their own traces; the metaphor of how, like a flash and a moment of danger that I take also as a moment or place where memory emerges, proper names of the speakers light up and fade away, the precise moment when they shine. I enjoyed the points of organization of disciplinary knowledge and the sense of creation of the dull and commonplace, of writing about writing since it contains nothing new; but above all I loved—a verb that is not used in academia due to its private, feminine connotations—the series of questions that the author asks about Modesta B. herself, that woman of whom the texts speak, because that is a form of reading. This is the kind of reading that illustrates the moment in which one loses the thread of the text and begins to dream; the moment when one recalls a memory by way of that same text, in reading; the moment of constructing worlds because the text dazzles and casts shadows. What I have learned from these readings as memories of other citizenships, in other disciplines and fields of knowledge, is the power of the well-written word, the careful word. And I think: is not this what we call literature?

If memory intervenes in a story, that story is certainly fictional.

—Néstor Braunstein, *El atizador de Wittgenstein y el agalma de Sócrates a Lacan*

I. Acting as If

Another way of expressing what follows would be to ask oneself: is it possible to interview a historical document? At the same time, this question is just another way of expressing the possibility that the contemporary reader has, or does not have, of establishing a dialogical, interactive, face-to-face relationship with written information that comes from the past. In its most general sense, it is the question that gives life to Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*. The question attempts to bring to the specific field of history writing the complex relationship that unites and divides oral language and written language in extremely complex
Conjuring the Body

ways. It questions not only the very field of history writing but also the process of collective memory construction that history writing represents or fosters.\(^1\)

It is a question, then, about reading and writing strategies that motivate historians to act as if they could, in effect, do what they promise: listen to voices from the past, make them speak. This question, which is directly related to the creation and consumption of history texts, is, therefore, eminently political in nature; that is, it touches on certain academic forms of producing the past and proposes the use of a contiguous mode of reading historical documents and writing history texts. That contiguous mode seeks to make visible the crisis of representation that has permeated much of contemporary art and postmodern daily life. I have called it the ethnographic mode because its assumptions are clearly rooted in the textualist criticism of a certain cultural anthropology related to the seminal work of James Clifford but also because it is driven by questions that incite certain contemporary experimental narratives. For these narratives, histories and the ways they are told are not transparent or neutral but rather imply a real relationship—albeit a flexible one—to power, including the power of seduction.\(^2\) The question, which is actually plural, invites critical consideration of the narrative strategies that are accepted and adopted by academic historical discourse, including its most sacred metaphors. Based on a rereading of a file from La Castañeda General Insane Asylum—a file that has already given rise to a fictional text, that is, a file that is making its return journey toward history narrative proper—it proposes reading and writing measures for the creation of dialogical, process texts that would embody, as Gertrude Stein would put it, the velocities and textures of the contemporary world.

It all began, as these things often do, because of a metaphor that was so common and familiar that it had become transparent for me over time but not, for that matter, less mysterious. On that occasion, on the occasion that I am referring to now, anyway, I was reading the introduction to a history book in which I was assured, for the millionth time, that this book would speak, that is, that this book contained voices from the past and that in its role of effective medium or ventriloquist, this book would transmit them from their spatially and temporally remote origin to the space and time that I occupied in that moment. The promise seemed extravagant. Why voices? Why voices if what I was doing at that moment was reading written words, inscriptions without sound or presence on impassive white paper? Like any historian who has used that cliché (and every self-respecting historian has done it), I knew that what is really meant by that metaphor is that the book will recreate the events or processes that are being
studied in such a faithful and human way that it will make the reader believe that he or she is really there, in the space and time where the events occurred or where the processes being studied are still underway. I knew that the promise was a convention. On that occasion, on that particular day, however, neither the promise nor the convention seemed so innocent.

We always wish for the impossible, we know that. While I was doing the research that would in time become my doctoral dissertation, I was reading medical files from La Castañeda General Insane Asylum, intent on knowing the lives of the inmates, their doctors, their authorities, as deeply and thoroughly as possible. Five or more years later, when I finished writing the academic document, I too claimed that the dissertation’s pages held voices, and that if the reader knew how to listen carefully, those voices would transport him or her to another time and place. The echoes of those voices would even bring those times and places to the present. A sort of imbrication, or what Walter Benjamin called the now-time. But then I was just a doctoral candidate, and as such I made these and other excessive promises with an ease that is appalling to me now. Time has passed. And no matter how much I would like, no matter how much I still wish, I cannot hide what cannot be hidden: in my book there are no voices. My book is a series of sentences organized in paragraphs and divided in chapters. My book not only cannot conjure the absent body that the use of written language presupposes, but moreover, it is the irrefutable proof that that body, that presence, in effect, is not there. Mute, rigid, motionless, my book is dead. My book, like all books, was born dead.

And yet, it is not dead. Thanks to the writing that also substantiates its death, my book continues to signify. And it is because of this other inevitable process, because of the resuscitation that every reading presupposes, that I dare to suggest that after all—this should be said with the unabashed spirit of the grad student—it is possible to “interview” writing. Another way of saying the same thing is to claim that not only is it desirable, but it is also possible to approach written language in ways that produce that effect of immediacy and presence that, in social terms, is allotted only to oral interaction. An additional way of writing something similar by writing something radically different is to write that as historians, it would be worth exploring all the richness of effects that written language is capable of and that in fact, according to Derrida, are possible in oral language only because in the first place they exist in différence, in the written dimension. But to do this requires more than a simple enunciation or conviction. It is necessary to construct reading and writing strategies that allow that approach—an approach within the “as-if,” a deceptive approach: in short,
fictional approach. Approaching writing as writing, as an artifice: traces of a hand putting ink to paper.

This is the heart of the matter: in order to think as-if history books could speak, as-if we were interviewing them, as-if I were a cultural anthropologist and they were my informants, in order to conduct an ethnographic reading of historical documents, it is necessary to employ strategies that, in social terms, are associated with fiction. Neither history strategies nor fiction strategies will conjure the absence of the body that both approaches presuppose and reinforce, but fiction’s pretending, vowing (juro) that the body could be there, has more of a chance to persuade—and to persuade, not to demonstrate, is all that a historian can honestly aspire to do. After all, it is always easier to pretend to believe a lie than to pretend to believe a truth. This, of course, is nothing new. Renowned historians such as Natalie Zemon Davis or Robert Darnton, to name just the most famous, have managed to do this exceedingly well. What I am proposing to do here is to outline those strategies, at the level of reading historical documents and at the level of exposition of that reading in the history essay, while I apply them to my approach to the medical files from La Castañeda General Insane Asylum. I do this not only because I think it is possible but also because I assume that the more transparent we make the metaphor of voices contained in history books, the more relevant the books and the “voices” can be. The relevance I am referring to is not, of course, only academic, but above all, political. If society has charged historiography with the responsibility of producing and reproducing collective memory, then questioning and violating the mechanisms by which those memories are formed is the responsibility not only of a few experts but of all of us who participate in the everyday experience of production and perception of that memory. Because, as I have asked in other contexts, what is more powerful, and therefore more threatening, than to touch, to alter the way we perceive the world?

What I aspire to do is to produce a history text that is at the same time—and here I am borrowing a term from contemporary art—a process text, a cultural artifact in which not only the information contained is important, but also, maybe above all, the way that information was produced. If this is at all possible, information will cease to be information and become something else: a bridge, a reverberation, pleasure. Pleasure to the eye. With luck, with skill, with effort, pleasure to the ear as well. The pleasure of presence. Pleasure that is, in other words (always in other words), impossible.
II. Ear over Eye

Historians, who in most cases use written sources to document their work, say with suspicious ease that these works contain “voices” from the past. Although this is common, although it has now become a convention, the choice of the word “voices” rather than “writing” does not seem innocent to me. In fact, I firmly believe that this strategy has serious epistemological and political implications. I certainly doubt that historians who say they hear “voices” are trying to pass for schizophrenia patients in a perpetual fugue state, or for mediums communicating with the unknown, or for ventriloquists of lost souls. At least, I would hope not. But by emphasizing something that historians most emphatically do not do, that is, hearing the voice of a living being, the voice produced by a body-in-interaction, historians participate in the modern and postmodern attack on what Steven Connor in *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* calls vocalic space: implicated and not explicated space in which the voice “can be grasped as the mediation between the phenomenological body and its social and cultural contexts.”

Historians read. Historians see letters written line after line and, when they are lucky, on rectangular pieces of paper we call pages. Historians depend on their eyes. And vision, as Walter Ong suggests in *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Religious and Cultural History*, “situates man in front of things and in sequentiality” while “sound situates man in the middle of actuality and in simultaneity.” Vision, with its ability to shut down at will by blinking, has the active power to take, discriminate, and revise. At once the result and producer of a cinematic model, vision, as Connor insists, “an exercise performed on the world, as opposed to the bearing in of the world upon us that seems to take place in hearing.”

When I state the obvious, that historians do not rely on their ears to do their work, that historians, one might say, do not listen and are not, for example, anthropologists or journalists, I am also affirming that, as important agents in literate and visual cultures, agents of the world-of-the-eye, historians cannot, due to the very rules of their profession and by pure self-definition, capture the diffuse nature of the unceasingly intermittent world of sound, which irradiates and permeates the world in paradoxically and politically significant impermanence. No matter how much they would like to, historians cannot reproduce the oral situation they presume, because that is what they are doing when they insist that their works contain “voices” found within or before the writing of the letters. Readers of these letters are not trained to participate in the space of the sound and in the space of the presence-in-impermanence.
And yet, that is what they want to do. And that is what they should do. But to achieve this objective—to implicate the phenomenological body in its contexts, to promote, in other words, an ethnographic reading of historical documents—historians must question the strict methodological rules of their profession. If what they really want is to “hear voices,” then they will have to formulate an appropriately schizophrenic method; that is, a method of incessant intermittence that would replicate the world of sound and that would therefore privilege the abilities of the ear over those of the eye.

Regarding schizophrenia as a method of research and even of reading, Deleuze and Guattari perhaps said all that can, or needs to be, said: “this intensive way of reading, in contact with what’s outside the book, as a flow meeting other flows, one machine among others, as a series of experiments for each reader in the midst of events that have nothing to do with books, as tearing the book into pieces, getting it to interact with other things, absolutely anything.”

Only a method of this sort, only a liquid or gaseous structure adapted to the various flows of the world and threatening the conventional idea of the book—especially the history book, the academic history book—could account for what mediates between the voice that the historian does not hear but means to convince readers he hears, and the letters he does read and means to convince readers he does not read: the body. The presence of the body. The absence of the body.

III. To Con-jure

The verb “conjure” comes from the roots “con” (with) and “juro” (I vow). To vow can mean many things, but it also means to “promise.” I would like to believe that to “con-jure” also is a way of designating that action through which it is possible to promise-with-another, although it is also a way, perhaps paradoxically, of exorcizing, of avoiding harm, of begging, conspiring. Thus, the phrase “conjuring the body” can be at once a way of exorcizing—or, what is perhaps the same thing, erasing the body or testifying to its absence—and promising, in plural and at the same time, its eventual reappearance. I believe that a similar movement unites what divides oral and written language: a disappearance and a promise of the eventual reappearance of the body. I believe that this threat and this offer are implicit in the quite deceptive presence of voices that historians say they hear when they are reading historical documents. Between one thing and the other, the body. The presence of the body. Its absence.

In *El atizador de Wittgenstein y el agalma de Sócrates a Lacan*, Néstor Braunstein compares stories about two meetings of philosophers: on the one hand, the
gathering that led to *The Symposium*, the famous text that contains a trace of what Diotima said to Socrates and what Socrates said to Aristodemus and what Aristodemus said to Apollodorous and what Apollodorous said to “a friend” and “that friend” to Plato and Plato to his readers; on the other hand, two or three versions that bear witness to the encounter, or lack thereof, between Wittgenstein and Popper. Between one event and the other, Braunstein points to the lacunal role of memory in both retellings, affirming: “If memory intervenes in a story, that story is certainly fictional.”

In addition to including Derrida’s *The Post Card* in the definition (“Each one makes himself into the facteur, the postman, of a narrative that he transmits by maintaining what is ‘essential’ in it: underlined, cut out, translated, commented, edited, taught, reset in a chosen perspective. Truth? It has the structure of fiction! Fiction? It is the facteur of truth”), Braunstein uses an aside to describe the relationship between oral and written language in terms of the also famous gap that is never closed between Achilles and the tortoise. Braunstein states, “the written word chases the spoken word, trying to catch it in the very moment it arises. . . . Any record is an unfaithful shortfall, a semblance of a lost object.”

I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that every contemporary historian, especially every cultural historian, is aware of the complex interconnection of these three interrelated pairs of elements: memory and fiction, memory and (the failure of) written language, memory and the absence of the body. A reader of historical documents, those sarcophagi of oral language (and the presence of the body-in-interaction that it signals), reads the implicit absence of the body in written language. Thus, when the historian means to make his readers believe that he is a listener, that is, when the historian lies, even to himself, when he offers the impossible, what is in play is not a simple schizophrenic metaphor, but that absence of the body that manifests—that embodies, Gertrude Stein would say—the lack of interaction, dialogue, and incessant impermanence that plagues written language.

To be clear: I do not think it is wrong for historians to promise what they cannot give. Moreover, I am always in favor of those who offer or strive for the impossible. Thus, to vow-with-another (who is the reader) that the history text will embody interaction, dialogue, and the incessant impermanence of oral language seems to me not only desirable, but also possible and urgent. It seems to me too, that it corresponds to fiction, which is, as Derrida said, the facteur of truth. Its form.
IV. The Typical Situation

The situation is typically the following:

1. Assisted by an archivist, the historian discovers documents that she had imagined or intuited but whose true or real existence—whatever the philosophical persuasions are in this case—she can only truly know for certain at this moment, the moment she encounters the document.

2. The historian reads in a room that is often cold, and if she is lucky, systematically organized.

3. As she reads, the historian imagines what could have happened. This is the moment when “voices are heard.”

4. The historian takes notes, which is to say that she writes about what was written. She rewrites. She inscribes what was written in new written contexts.

5. Now outside of the cold, systematized room, the historian translates that writing into academic language and structures.

6. The historian graduates.

V. Enigmatic Version of the Typical Situation: Three Proposals

The categories of the past cannot be other than reconstitutions; the categories of the present are betrayals; therefore, the only possible choice is between two falsifications.

—Pierre Boulez, *Writing the gesture*

The first time I saw a medical file from La Castañeda General Insane Asylum, I knew immediately that I would write a book about it. Of course, I did not know then that I would end up writing several very different texts on the subject, nor did I know that the writing of each of these texts would make that first document all the more enigmatic, rather than less.

From the very beginning, it was about Modesta B., the patient who *talked* so much. She was born in Papantla, Veracruz, near the end of the nineteenth century. Also known as Matilda Burgos, she spent much of her adult life—thirty-five years, to be exact—in a public welfare institution that was notorious for its medical negligence and a lack of resources that compromised even its surveillance systems. I want to say that even though Matilda was taken to the
asylum by force—the incident was apparently set off when she scuffled with soldiers on the street—she remained there more or less of her own volition. During that time, like many other inmates participating in work therapy, Modesta B. worked in one of the institution’s workshops, in her case the one devoted to fashioning sarapes. Unlike many other inmates, however, Modesta B. also wrote a sort of diary that she called her “Presidential Dispatches,” in which she critically elaborated upon the state of the nation as well as the internal situation at the asylum. With the large, uneven handwriting of a novice, Modesta B. commented on topics ranging from the situation of the anarchists to the lack of privacy in institution wards, among many others. In addition to the writing of doctors who treated and diagnosed her or the supervisors she worked for, Modesta B.’s file also contains printed traces of her experience: the written words through which the inmate captured her way of seeing this life, what she called “the real life of the world.”

A version of one of my readings of these documents became Nadie me verá llorar (No One Will See Me Cry) which, to make things less clear from the beginning, was originally titled Yo, Matilda Burgos (I, Matilda Burgos). The other versions are still being produced and reproduced in everything I write: texts referring specifically to psychiatric practice and social definitions of madness in early twentieth-century Mexico, and texts referring to all the other subjects that interest me. Although it might seem natural that I turned my dissertation into a novel rather than an academic book, more recently I have been wondering why I made that decision. The question is not of a personal nature, although one might think that it is. I mention it here because I think, in many ways, that the decision I made (behind my own back) is closely related to the argument I am trying to develop in this text: the narrative strategies offered and assumed by fiction facilitate a conjuring of the body that persuades the reader in general (and the reader of historical texts in particular) that “hearing voices” is not only possible but also desirable.

I return to the file for the millionth time. I return to a file that is returning—now in the very moment of my reading—from the world of fiction. It is, then, a file that comes back. This is a file that sets out on its return trajectory because I order it to do so, because my reading-in-historical-mode incites it to return to the starting point (which is not, as one might suppose, the point of origin). I return to it now to interview it, or to interview her, actually. It is, or in any case it should be, a reading in historical-ethnographic mode. It is, I mean to say, a false reading. An imposture. And what happens in this effort to read a historical document in an enigmatic way is the following:
a) Not how it happened, but rather, how it flashes in a moment of danger. This shining phrase belongs to Walter Benjamin, more specifically to his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. I recall it now to point out that this moment, like every moment in which a desire is enunciated, is one of those moments of danger. Another present. Another present-now. In this present-now, as in other present-nows, I am not interested in telling the life of Matilda Burgos as it happened. I mean to say that I recognized from the beginning that the task was either truly impossible or inevitably doomed to fail. In this present-now in which or through which I am looking to outline some questions about the approach—in the most enigmatic sense of the word—of reader and historical text, I go toward that file, which is actually now on its way back from its journey and its residence in fiction. I fly to the file to hear her. And of course, to begin with, it happens that I do not encounter her but others—police officers, doctors, laboratory workers, officials, and the other female inmates with whom the file was produced, and within the file, the diagnostic interview. I do not know if every file is effectively an interview, that is, a point of confluence, an intersection, a negotiation, but I do suspect that every piece of writing is. Clinical files offer the historical eye a collection of texts created from very diverse points of view. To begin with, there are the questions formulated by an interdisciplinary team, financed by public welfare, which constitute the institution’s official questionnaire. Then there are the answers, transcribed—that is, textually quoted—by a doctor, and less often, written by the patients themselves. The answers, too, come from various sources: police officers, previously consulted doctors, the inmate, relatives or friends of the inmate. These diverse answers are then copied over and over, especially when the inmate is a peculiar one, by the institution doctors: from handwriting to type, for example. All of these writings that compose the file, whether “originals” or “copies,” embody changes of perspective that prevent any possibility of formulating beyond the shadow of a doubt “how the facts took place.”

There, where “the typical situation” begs for an explanation, a summary of damages, a singular version among all the possible plural versions of the facts, I again make a choice—now with full and intentional awareness of the various writings that as such instantly become the writings in question, and thus the questioned writings. And this and no other is the starting point for producing the impermanence effect that invites me to feel as-if-interviewing a group of people. As-if-hearing them. I suspect that this effect has as much to do with identifying and accepting all available versions of the case, as with rejecting one, only one: the final version. Slowing, deviating, postponing, circling that
In other words: the moment of danger is not a light, but a flash.

b) Everything together, all at once: the collage as principle of constructing the page. Since writing history, long after I began writing novels, I had the suspicion that the general public does not read history books because, regardless of their topic or the story they attempt to tell, the vast majority are written in the same way. I am referring, of course, to academic history books that tend to explore inherently interesting subjects and extremely pleasant or scandalous stories. Organized according to principles that have been surreptitiously or openly inculcated by methodology manuals or books offering advice on how to write a thesis, many of these texts conform to, and at times confirm, a linear Aristotelian narrative, which includes three specific steps: development of a stable and properly documented context; description, preferably in great detail, of the conflict and/or event that occurs in said context; and production of a final resolution. This narrative, which tends to reproduce a linear, sequential, or visual idea of what is narrated, has the consequence of occluding the sense of impenetrance and simultaneity that is so closely associated with the task of hearing and presence. History writing in the ethnographic mode, then, will require narrative strategies to counteract that phenomenon and open up the dialogical possibilities of the text. And this is where Walter Benjamin’s advice, and his distinctive notes for a philosophy of history, reappear: collage as a strategy for composing a high contrast page whose result is knowledge, not as an explanation of the “object of study,” but as its redemption.16

Like so many other records from La Castañeda General Insane Asylum, Modesta B.’s file is composed according to a similar principle. Although signed by a doctor, the diagnosis is neither linear nor definitive. On the contrary: a detailed reading of this textual material reveals that, like the file itself, the diagnosis is a multi-voice construct, and furthermore, it is contradictory. As a telling example, on the admission slip, the first page of Modesta B.’s file, the question of the reason for her admission is answered with the following two alternatives: “Mental confusion – amorality” and “Hebephrenic dementia precox.” The first of these annotations has been conspicuously and pointedly crossed out. Like a palimpsest or a geological layer, the file gathers this and other revisions without erasing the earlier notes, and even more importantly for the ethnohistoriographic-mode reader, without incorporating the new versions into the previous ones; that is, without normalizing them. In this sense, the text is not just a collection
of traces: it is a collection of traces and inscriptions in constant and perpetual competition. Historiography in the ethnographic mode, history writing thought of first and foremost as writing, would have to pose for itself the challenge of embodying on the page of the book this sense of competitive and tense composition, this dialogical structure that is typical of and internal to the document itself. Collage, then, would not be an arbitrary measure of representation, external to the document, but rather, it is a strategy that in certain cases, in cases like Modesta B.’s, would contribute to bringing to paper her history and the way that history was composed at the beginning of the twentieth century on the grounds of La Castañeda General Insane Asylum. It is not enough, then, to identify “all” the possible versions and reject only one, the final version: it is necessary to show it.

The function of collage is to sustain as many versions as possible and place them so close to one another that it produces contrast, amazement, pleasure: the knowledge produced by an epiphany that is not enunciated but rather is composed or fabricated by the very construction of the text, its architecture.

What this means in terms of the position of the author within the text—especially in an era of experiments with the death of the author—is important. The historian in ethnographic mode who writes according to the principles of collage cannot preserve her hermeneutic position as interpreter of documents or decoder of signs. This is not a historian in search of the hidden meaning of things. This other historian—and here I use a simile from the world of contemporary music—fulfills the functions of a composer, or, even better, of an orchestra conductor much like Boulez. He states:

At all times, the conductor must have the layout instantly available in his head, especially since the events that one wants to provoke are not produced by a fixed sequence, or because said sequence can be improvised and can change at any moment. One must “play” the musicians, as though they were keys on a piano.18

I now paraphrase: one must “play” documents as though they were keys on a piano.

c) Point to emptiness, point to the inexplicable. The crisis of representation that has given life to so much contemporary art—from process art to conceptual art, from minimalism to installation—not only led to a radical criticism of the object through the dematerialization of the work but also consequently changed the emphasis from the object itself to the artistic process of conceiving
the object now as a relationship with the place and the viewer. More than the “object” of reading or interpretation, these contemporary artistic products thus became the object of desire or of appropriation. Something similar happens, or should happen, with history writing in ethnographic mode: properly contemporary history writing.

The more I go back to Modesta B.’s file, for example, the more I am amazed by how my questions about her—her experience and her history—have multiplied. Was she really the one who said that her mother had been murdered? Did she deal with Bolsheviks and anarchists like her writing in her “diplomatic dispatches” implies? Did she use ether? What does ether taste like? How did she get her clothing? How did she wash it? How did she clean her body, her hair, her mouth? What kinds of relationships, if any, did she manage to establish with other female or male asylum inmates? How did she look at the doctors who insisted on making her speak? Did they really insist, those doctors, on making her speak? Did she communicate with anyone else, anyone from outside? What kind of relationship did she have with Consuelo Díaz, the woman to whom her body was delivered in 1953? The questions are infinite, really. Few have answers. Lacking answers does not diminish their value, but only increases it. I am convinced that the amazement I feel when observing that my knowledge of her is decreasing or faltering over time is not a personal or private matter. That amplified not-knowing constitutes the very material for any writing about her person and her place in the world.

In any case, a history book that accepts as its own the crisis of representation that permeates contemporary art and daily life in the early twenty-first century would be forced to stop, with the appropriate care, at that not-knowing that impedes, postpones, diverts, and increases the opacity of the final or definitive version of her experience as a historical subject, that is, of her experience as a citizen of a country in an accelerated process of modernization under the principles of a so-called revolutionary regime. A book of history in ethnographic mode would have to do what US poet and theorist Charles Bernstein recognizes in the writings he terms “anti-absorbent”: “Rather than making the language as transparent as possible... the movement is toward opacity/denseness—visibility of language through the making translucent of the medium.” For the case of reading and writing that now concerns me, this Bernsteinian movement toward opacity is, above all, a movement toward the impediment or diversion that keeps the anecdote from flowing as if it constituted the final version of itself. It is a movement toward writing, toward narrative, artificial, and political strategies, like a curtain
over an open window making it known that there, in effect, air is moving. There, in effect, something is happening, something interesting in and of itself.

As an opaque, densified process text, the history book in ethnographic mode would thus become an apt space to hold the trace of what is not understood or of what is understood less and less, with more and more uncertainty. That book is really an exponential question, and therefore, it is the negative of the book. It is a book that is made, and as it is made, it makes visible the method of its making. It is a book without an explanation, but with enigma. It is a book of shared enigmas. A minefield.

VI. Reading as Mourning and as Writing

US experimental narrative writer Camille Roy states: “In some sense, the writer is always already dead, as far as the reader is concerned.” Hélène Cixous writes: “Each of us, individually and freely, must do the work that consists of rethinking what is your death and my death, which are inseparable. Writing originates in this relationship.” Margaret Atwood says it in her book of essays about the practice of writing, aptly titled *Negotiating with the Dead*. Examples abound, but I believe that for now, these are enough to say that not only is there a close relationship between written language and death, but moreover, this relationship is recognized succinctly, poetically, or practically by the greatest variety of writers—among whom historians are suspiciously few. A relationship that involves death in such a way cannot be experienced or enunciated without a ritual of mourning through which the death in question is recognized and assumed, whether personally or socially. The book is the *sine qua non* of this mourning; it is an artifact of communication with the dead that makes manifest the most impossible longing for connection with worlds beyond earth, unknown and perhaps unknowable worlds. Therefore, a relationship that involves loss in this way—not least of which is the loss of bodily presence—cannot be enunciated or resuscitated without a trace of melancholia. The melancholia of one who knows from the beginning that it is an impossible task (making the dead speak); the melancholia of one who, aware of that impossibility, continues reading anyway; the melancholia, too, of the file itself, perhaps forgotten for years, motionless, covered in dust, lost. But that accumulation of melancholia, whose intrinsic elements include the impoverishment of the self, could play a strategic role in opening a way for that other desire, the desire to live in wonder. If, as Cixous maintains, “the scene of writing [is] a scene of immeasurable separation,” Kathy Acker is also correct when she argues:
Whenever we talk about narration, about narrative structure, we’re talking about political power. There are no ivory towers. The desire to play, to make literary structures that play into and in unknown or unknowable realms, those of chance and death and the lack of language, is the desire to live in a world that is open and dangerous, that is limitless. To play, then, both in structure and in content, is to desire to live in Wonder.24

Perhaps that desire to live in wonder brings us to the political implications of these history texts in ethnographic mode: something should happen in the real and true world (Modesta Burgos’s phrase) when we make manifest the methods of construction of texts through which we socially recreate the plural memory of our present contexts. Something should happen in the real and true world, I insist, in the world of flesh-and-blood citizens, when the texts of our memory take on the syntactical, cultural, political challenge of embodying the narrative strategies of the documents upon which they are based, and when they take on the challenge, a promise that remains to the present day, to act-as-if they were heard at that very moment. This moment.