



## Impossible Autobiography: For Phillippe Lejeune

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In the autobiographically titled poem, “Self Portrait,” Claribel Alegria, poet and activist for non-violent resistance in the Sandinista Liberation Movement in Nicaragua, comments on a mirror’s inability to reflect her entire personhood, faulting it for reflecting only fragments:

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reflecting an eye  
a lip  
an ear  
as though I had no countenance,  
as if something synthetic  
inconstant  
oscillated in the four dimensions  
sometimes escaping in the others  
still unknown. (*Suma y Sigue* 39)

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In a meta-commentary on the autobiographical project itself, Alegria acknowledges the confines of self-portraiture and, yet, simultaneously employs that flawed mirror of autobiographical writing as an instrument of self-discovery and a critique of the limitations of that same instrument.

The intertext of this poem evokes the impossibility of self-portraiture that Phillippe Lejeune theorizes in *On Autobiography*, “Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as complete subject—it is a fantasy. In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing” (132–33). This observation lays plain the simultaneous rigidity and elasticity of autobiography that have been the subject of nearly fifty years of foundational life writing theory that comprise Lejeune’s work. But it is more than debates about the dynamic nature of the relationship between the selfhood and genre that Lejeune inspires with this declaration. For those men and women who have

sought to engage in impossible executions of self-representation across the Americas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the question of impossible self-representation is one of life and death—of acknowledging not just the narratological limits of autobiography, but the practical circumstances of authoritarian regimes that make it impossible to come to autobiographical voice. Under dictatorial rule in the Americas, life writing has had to subvert the impossible circumstances of censorship, surveillance, captivity, and curfews of totalitarianism. For scholars who study the autobiographical devices used to tell lives under the oppressive circumstances of dictatorship, these words of Lejeune's are indispensable. For those individuals living in police states, autobiography could cost them the very lives they document. Their writing is a necessary risk, as, to document a life is to possibly save that life by risking it. For scholars who honor the rarity and urgency of their research subject, those who must acknowledge how close those acts of witness come to never being shared and read, there is the ever-emergent realization with every manuscript that the environment in which it was produced has made it something doubly impossible by "the impossibility of not writing" (Beard 16). Lejeune's words underscore the vital necessity of reclaiming the power of self-representation under dictatorship precisely because it is the least possible kind of life writing—particularly for women of the Americas.

Dictatorships in the Americas have been particularly misogynist in their paternalistic authoritarianism. When women risk representing their insurgent womanhood in the impossible circumstances of coming to autobiographical voice under absolute power, they remake their gendered identities despite systematic subjugation. The unmasking power of autobiography is vital to the gendered repositioning of womanhood as a self-aware, resisting subjectivity in hostile environments. Because, as Sidonie Smith points out, "Autobiography is itself one of the forms of selfhood constituting the idea of man," the woman who writes autobiographically under dictatorship has greater stakes in her self-representation than the man who writes his life experience (*Poetics*, 50). Her language of resistance is autobiography as it not only unmasks a transgressive desire for cultural and literary authority over the national imaginary of identity in the Americas, but does so under duress, under gendered circumstances that have silenced and suppressed her individual self-representation.

In a most impossible form of autobiography, writing under the threat of disappearance is a powerful counter-discourse to this systematic practice of silencing nonconformist and dissident women. Chilean author and performance activist, Diamela Eltit, allows the protagonist of her

autobiographical novel, *E. Luminata*, to survive by being dismissed as insane when she critiques the guards who interrogate her, an act which would, otherwise, be thought impossible for an ordinary person. The narrator declares that the woman under arrest is named E. Luminata, or the illuminated one, and denies that she is the author: “Her soul is being E. Luminata and offering herself as another/Her soul is not being called diamelaeltit” (Eltit 90). Unmistakably a test of what Lejeune problematizes in “Autobiography in the Third Person,” Eltit evades censors by drawing ambiguous attention to her name in an all lower-case spelling that further calls into question the guarantees made by the enunciating figure (Lejeune 35–36; 32). In its fulfillment of the autobiographical pact, the contract in which readers come to expect the confluence of author, protagonist, and narrator, such autobiography of human rights in the Americas exploits the double-voiced terms of its doubly repressed, gendered signature (Lejeune 14). It persists in calling readers to witness a life in spite of the literal and figurative risk that it either cannot, due to linguistic conundrums, or dare not, due to iron-handed regimes, be expressed.

Lejeune’s work has also been instrumental in the consideration of work by women who have engaged in another impossibility of autobiography, that of denying dictatorship. Angelita Trujillo, favoured daughter of misogynist Dominican tyrant Rafael Trujillo, launched a memoir challenging her father’s notorious reputation as a serial rapist and murderer in 2010, almost fifty years after his assassination. Her memoir is an uncivil defense of her father’s memory as a loving father and doting grandfather with no regard for his victims, or for the well-documented history of his cruelty and misogyny. Disseminated at a time when the public discourse about Trujillo is swelling with stories of his victims, the tasks of denying his dictatorship and redirecting the public’s attention to her own victimization as someone who has been denied her “inalienable human right” to tell her father’s story are problematic, if not patently impossible (Trujillo xiii). Even for the far more notable Eva Perón, former First Lady of Argentina and wife of General Juan Domingo Perón, the genre of autobiography has served as a method of hiding a dictator. In the case of this iconic woman of international historical fame, by manufacturing propaganda in support of her dictator husband, she successfully hid him in plain sight. In her autobiography *La Razon de mi Vida, My Mission in Life*, she declares “anyone who searches in these pages for my portrait should not be surprised to find the figure of Perón,” and goes on to break any assumed autobiographical pact with her readers by speaking exclusively about her husband and the paternalistic doctrine for which he stands (Perón 41). Conforming to Lejeune’s claim that one cannot

write autobiography without “elaborating and communicating a point of view on the self,” Eva Perón’s disappearing act in her own autobiography is, indeed, an elaboration of her identity (Lejeune 45). In her performance as the beloved, and more informal Evita, Eva Perón remains the loyal, self-effacing sweetheart of the general and as unintelligible as she is nonthreatening.

Even among the many socialist revolutions of Latin American history, the autobiographical act is all but impossible. Women living through, or born into, various revolutions are disallowed autobiographical representation. If, after all, the ideals of the revolution are met, individualism is dissolved and remade into a collective in which the singular life story is superfluous. While writing in exile, novelist Zoé Valdés unleashes a tirade of insults against Fidel Castro, the most polarizing autocrat of Latin American history. Although her *La Ficción Fidel* (*The Fidel Fiction*) is largely read as an exposé of the revolution, it is also a deeply self-reflexive account of coming to terms with the fact that she, like many Cubans born into the revolution, has no individual life to speak of, particularly if it does not conform to the masculinized collectivity of the “New Man” of Cuba. Valdés represents herself as part of a generation of women systematically programmed into a post-revolutionary Cuba in which their personal lives and the desire to write them were “negated” as vain and superfluous to the greater good: “To leave a personal imprint in every act of life is proof of luxury” (Valdés 102; xvii). Fictions of self-representation and fictions of Castro’s promises to the Cuban people are both challenged through the use of mutually illuminating acts of autobiography in which Valdés constructs the possibility of articulating the broken, depraved, disillusioned, special generation into which she was born. Had Valdés not been exiled from Cuba, her personal narrative, possible or not, would not likely have been published. However, just because the utterance of life writing itself is considered an act of luxury, this does not preclude its enunciation, does not prevent its existence as a product of the imperative to give an account of a woman’s lived experience in the post-revolutionary government. Ideology may declare such an endeavour impossible, yet it is no more impossible than the life itself.

In contrast, the women poets of the Sandinista movement write themselves on the verge of an immense world of possibility as they document their social and political activism through self-reflexive literature. Nicaraguan women’s autopoetry is not only committed to documenting the Sandinista movement. It also presses down on what Lejeune terms the “soft pedal” of implicit autobiographical reference (34). For example, in the poems of Rosario Murillo, like much Sandinista poetry, the poet

can be found exhorting the reader to join the struggle. But in certain experimental poems like “For What it Matters” (“*En Todo Esto Que Muda*”), Murillo is performing self-referential acts that draw attention to, if not identify, herself directly, and function discursively to portray herself, the poet at work, in conspicuous autobiographical acts of gendered self-invention and political resistance:

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These are faceless poems  
 poems, for the most part, are faceless  
 only music  
 and magic.  
 This is the naked soul of a woman  
 who wrote poems  
 in blood.  
 These are the poems of a woman  
 who embellished them  
 while the world and its flaws  
 closed an eye to her. (139)

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While the figure of the poet is not a direct ontological reference to herself, Murillo shows readers powerful figures of womanhood in that time and place, women whose self-representation should not exist in the public sphere, women who appear the “faceless” subjects of their own art, yet know the significance of their presence in the movement despite how its “eye” is closed to them. The poem ultimately stages acts of self-representation before what Lejeune calls a “three-way mirror” in which the author’s identity is identifiable even as that identity disappears under scrutiny (Lejeune 44). Within this mirror, such “faceless” poems about revolutionary womanhood are precisely what enable the poet’s visibility.

The fact that women’s anti-authoritarian life writing is impossible in no way prevents it from existing. Produced in impossible circumstances, it must subvert the varied methods and discourses of repression in order to come to print. While the autobiographical pact favours attention to theoretical frameworks, it supports attention to the fundamental purposes and messages of resistance genres, such as testimonio, autoethnography, and other innovative genres that enable the critique of despotic governments through autobiography. I’ve used it to open a door onto the study of those victims of dictatorship in the Americas who engage in impossible acts of self-representation and achieve forms of autobiography and record the traumas of dictatorship amid surveillance, propaganda, and human rights violations—forms which are not as impossible as they are systematically meant to be. Indeed, this writing would be impossible if it were not so inevitable.

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