

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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### “THE HEART’S SWEATSHOP”: WEAVING POETRIES OF WITNESS IN *THE DEVIL’S WORKSHOP*

Much of Demetria Martínez’s writing—especially her fiction and journalism—are well known for their active engagement as *witness*, the act of speaking out in print and in person about atrocities, injustices, and oppression.<sup>1</sup> However, her use of *poetries* of witness has not received comment. Her 2002 collection *The Devil’s Workshop* contains poems in several modes, including love poems and “witness” poems. However, apparent thematic differences among the poems disappear because in all of the varied modes, Martínez makes use of “metaphors of witness.” These “metaphors of witness” identify most of the poems in the collection as “postmodern witness poems,” deeply influenced by the Latin-American traditions of *testimonio* and *curanderismo*. Demetria Martínez’s poems announce the necessity of giving witness to all injustices as a first step toward communal understanding and holistic healing of the world’s dangerous imbalances.

Alicia Ostriker describes the “postmodern witness” poem as one that balances between the reportage of events and the inclusion of a poetic self, a “consciousness that desires, suffers, and chooses” and that acts as the “ethical or political model for the reader” (2001, 35). The poet, according to Ostriker,

is not simply a phantom manipulator of words, but a confused actual person, caught in a world of catastrophe that the poem must somehow both mirror and transcend. (35)

*The Devil’s Workshop* might be interpreted effectively as “postmodern

witness” poetry, where the reader never feels as if Martínez’s poet-persona has abandoned her responsibility to act as a spiritual guide. However, the implied narrative distance of the term “guide” is absent in *The Devil’s Workshop*: there is little or no distance between the poet and the acts she witnesses. This lack of narrative distance is emblematic of the Latin-American genre of personal and political narrative known as the *testimonio*.<sup>2</sup> Unlike postmodern witness poetry, traditional *testimonios* are often “as-told-to” stories that display mediation between narrator and recorder rather than between victim and witness/speaker. *Testimonio* incorporates the voices of both Ostriker’s “confused actual person” and the community and/or culture because the speaker is a member of the community that suffers—whether that community is one of women; of Spanish-speaking persons of the Americas; of human beings; or of the universal community, the planet Earth. Ellen McCracken has shown that in Latina narratives influenced by *testimonio*, authors “move between fictive and autobiographical narrative strategies, they interweave personal and public histories,” and, in doing so, they show the “two (spheres) to be inseparable” (1999, 74). Martínez uses a similar strategy in her poetry, effecting what McCracken has called a “disruption of narrative individualism” (66).<sup>3</sup> In these poems, there is no qualitative difference between an individual suffering a personal tragedy and the planet suffering an environmental tragedy; the difference is only one of scale.

Unlike the postmodern witness poet who usually narrates a scene from outside her own experiences or the traditional *testimonio* narrator, Demetria Martínez is the witness, the narrator, and the mediator, and her life experiences are interpenetrated by memories and metaphors of the communal experiences for which she provides witness. This poetry engages in witness through poems of human experience that range from public to personal. In Martínez’s culturally informed testimonial poetics, the internal, personal “heart” turns toward community-based political work. In “Class Action,” for example, Martínez uses the legal concept of the class action suit and the metaphor of the “sweatshop” to emphasize that witness is unavoidable, unsafe, unappreciated work.<sup>4</sup> In this “personal” love poem, the emotional worker is rumored to be contemplating a “strike” (2002, 61). The speaker in the poem chooses not to spend her heart’s work on a failing personal relationship. The metaphors of environmental disaster and economic strike suggest that the labors of the “heart’s sweatshop” are not in vain, but that an individual can resist personal commodification by choosing to give her passion to greater causes. In an interview, while discussing her development as a poet of love poems to a poet of political poems, Martínez affirms, “A love poem became a vehicle for talking about political suffering” (Dick 2003, 83). Martínez uses several poetic

modes to illustrate the concept that there is no divide between the personal and the political nor between the autobiographical and the communal narrative.

There are at least four poetic modes in *The Devil’s Workshop*, and they can be situated within a public-private continuum:

- The “birthsong” poems such as “Blessing Poem” and “Birth Song” treat events on the edge of the public-private divide in American culture; familial and private, but publicly announced and celebrated
- The “personal” witness poems include the “love” (and “post-love”) poems and a few “philosophical” poems—comprising by far the largest category and outnumbering all others combined.
- The public witness poems, the ones most easily recognizable as witness or protest poems, include “Rules of Engagement,” “News Footage: Kosovo Refugee Woman,” “Upon Waking,” and “After a Reading.”
- “Private” witness poems deal with issues often spoken of in public but rarely shared voluntarily by those involved. “*Remedios*” seems to describe the struggles of an AIDS patient, “Flight,” the actions of a victim of domestic abuse survivor. “Needles” and “Abortion,” among others, also belong in this category.

Certainly, these four categories are fluid. Many poems in *The Devil’s Workshop* are at the boundaries of public and private, and they highlight the Janusian nature of commonly opposed concepts: emotion and philosophy, celebration and sorrow, birth and death. Isabel Dulfano (referencing Elzbieta Sklodowska), describes *testimonio*, as combining “different spheres”:

the public and the private, History and history of the common, quotidian life, theory and praxis, ends and means, narrating and experiencing self combined, fiction and journalism, as well as non-fiction and fiction. (2004, 94)

Martínez’s poems also combine these apparently opposite conceptual categories. The purpose of describing them is to demonstrate precisely their fluidity in this poetry collection; moreover, much of the power of Demetria Martínez’s poetry lies in her practice of postmodern witness through the use of *metaphors of witness* in poems from all these modal categories—including her love poems and, most poignantly, in the “private” witness poems. Reading the metaphors of witness in *The Devil’s Workshop* not only reveals continuity across these four types of poems and modes of expression, even across their seemingly different thematic qualities, but also draws significant associations in Martínez’s poetics with both the Modern-American and Latin-American traditions in a the service of global, holistic healing.

## II.

“Metaphors of witness” invoke images one would usually associate with public events and popular themes. In the title poem, for example, the poet-persona witnesses an environmental disaster played out in an intimate relationship: “you, of all people, / Who drove my pen like a tanker onto the rocks / Of the Galapagos” (2002, 5). Most of the “personal witness” poems contain at least one image drawn from human or environmental carnage. In “Insomnia,” the speaker describes the diegetic narratee’s “day” as “dying like a coral reef” (37); in “Lessons,” love letters “Soak in the sink, / Ink to oil slick” (59). As Martínez explains, “there are many tools for social action, but I had a sense that for me, poetry—love poetry, political poetry—could somehow bring out my own passion for social change” (Manolis 1999, 46). It is as if the practice and metaphor of witness have become a living presence in the poems and the poet’s life, an extrusive, inescapable presence that oozes to the surface like lava from a fissure and solidifies into sharp black monuments to the human condition.

In two of Martínez’s “personal” witness poems, she illustrates the inescapability of witness and catastrophic stories in her life. The first poem of this group, “Birthday,” also belongs to the “birthsong” poems, except that “Birthday”—referring to the poet’s birthday—lies in the past and has none of the optimism, celebration, and sense of hope the other “birthsong” poems contain. Indeed, it is more like a dirge than a birthsong. The poet-persona “I” interplays the year of her birth with “Black lung from the incense / Of burning American flags,” and the “58,000” committed to the war in Viet Nam (2002, 7). As a child of that era, metaphors of witness become inescapable and the practice of witness indispensable. One might respond that a person could overcome the accident of his or her birth and the necessity of witness.

However, the voice in the poem “Loneliness,” a voice emanating from a speaker identifiable as “Martínez the poet,” suggests that her condition is not only congenital, but also familial. The speaker’s mother “survived an earthquake in Assisi;” her grandmother’s “pilgrimage to the Holy Land erupted in war” (2002, 11). It seems the women in the family are destined to be witnesses whether or not they choose. Nor do blessed events, even the birth of a poet, offer a respite from the onslaught. Martínez’s first act of witness, the announcement of her own vitality, is shaped by war. The speaker’s father, stationed in Okinawa, first heard his new daughter’s cry “with the help / of a ham radio and the Red Cross.” The use of the Red Cross and a ham radio to

transmit the speakers’ first attempt at self-expression—especially a speaker we know to be born in the early days of a disastrous military action—foretells a lifetime of speaking of witness. The poet’s intimate relationship with the acts and metaphors of witness began before her birth, surrounded her at her first utterance, and continue to structure her life and her poetry in the present. The poet Demetria Martínez cannot avoid her fate. She must testify, and there is no part of her life upon which the acts and metaphors of witness have not impinged.

### III.

While Martínez’s use of metaphors of witness may be unexpected in her personal poems, in her “private witness” poems they operate compellingly to bring the reader to an understanding that there is no difference other than that of scale between “small” individual tragedies and “large” societal and communal tragedies. The pain and suffering are just as unacceptable in each case. More to the point, spiritual life is diminished when even one person suffers. The poems that scrutinize the small catastrophes, the lonely lives that do not make the evening news, are Martínez’s most masterful pieces. They illustrate the pathology of separating the individual from the communal. They also appear to be the most technically difficult. These poems demand that Martínez place herself inside another’s suffering. She cannot depend upon the power of a raw, honest, intimate disclosure as she does in the personal poems. Instead, she must rely on empathy to identify with another’s situation, but empathy alone is not enough; Martínez must make her own moral and ethical choices as well. While the poet celebrates the sheer act of survival, she cannot give way to platitudinous sympathy nor to simple condemnation. Contrasting the witness poem with propaganda, Ostriker notes that in Adrienne Rich’s *Atlas of a Difficult World*, the poet’s “insistence on a personal wrestling, which can never ultimately stand in righteously complacent judgment of others” (36). Like Rich, Demetria Martínez personally wrestles with others’ struggles in her poetry, especially in hushed, intricate private witness poems, particularly “*Remedios*” and “*Flight*.” In Martínez’s poetry, the “judgment” of “others” includes a “judgment” of self, a judgment of past choices and of future actions. The concept of communal agency is essential in Martínez’s poetry and serves to identify Martínez’s testimonial poetics as a Latin-American form of the witness poem, highly influenced by *testimonio*. There can be no “self” to judge “others”; the speaker is both self and other, both individual voice and

communal chorus.

The poem “Flight” is a “private witness” poem presenting an understated yet powerful investigation of spousal abuse. The first extended metaphor makes an oblique allusion to global warming: “A man changes imperceptibly as the climate. / You find yourself grateful / For 102-degree days” (2002, 41). The human ecology of the relationship is equated with natural ecology. The metaphor suggests what might be called an “eco-logic” apparent in many of Martínez’s poems. She envisions individual, societal, and environmental relationships as holistic, interrelated, and non-hierarchical. Individuals cannot manage ecologies; it takes societal effort. Nor can the woman, the “you” of the poem, manage the environmental change in the relationship; it is out of her (your) control. It takes a societal change to prevent spousal abuse and to give sanctuary to its victims. The second extended metaphor is of forest fires caused by lightening—“dry lightning,” without the cooling, restorative rain the woman wishes for in the second stanza. The wife is scarred by the “dry lightning” striking out from her husband’s mouth, and the reader also gets the impression in this stanza that the metaphor is doubled, that the description of verbal abuse is a synecdoche for physical abuse as well. The wife’s body is the particular incidence of the general metaphor: “love’s body.” In the second and third stanzas, the metaphors and adjectives continue to reinforce the physicality of the abuse. The images “black belt,” “night’s tinted glass,” and “bloodshot sky” evoke a darkly violent mood.

The final metaphor returns to the poem’s title for its center. It describes a plane lifting off from a Managua runway. “Flight” is the hinge word in this metaphor, referring, of course, both to air travel out of Managua and to the escape of women and children from domestic violence. Martínez further draws an analogy between the wife’s escape from her husband’s violence and political refugees’ exilic escape from the violence in their home countries, especially since the poem is set in Nicaragua. Martínez commonly makes such analogies between personal expressions of individual abuse and public demonstrations of state oppression. This image parallels that of Maria’s sexual abuse by a family friend and of José Luis’s physical torture by the state in the novel *Mother Tongue*, emphasizing Martínez’s insistence that domestic violence and state violence mirror one another.

For Martínez, as befits an activist, there is hope. The last few lines of “Flight” make clear that once the wife has escaped from the abusive marriage, the “future” is hers to remake for herself and for her children (2002, 42). Courageously deciding to change the circumstances of her and her children’s lives, the woman in the poem has begun “unbraiding” the future. By using the term “braiding,” an activity usually associated with women, Martínez gestures

toward another community for whom her work often witnesses. Perhaps in part because of the gender identification of poet and character, the narrator’s voice slips in this stanza; the “future” seems to be “unbraiding” for both the poetic speaker and the fugitive woman. The injunction to “Imagine / Wearing it any way you like” is, at the same time, the narrator speaking to the character and to herself; the “it” referring to the “future” to be (un)braided. This slippage of agency and voice is another example of the way that Martínez’s poetic voice is never easily locatable but seems to float freely between the individual and the collective. It is up to her—to the woman in the poem, to the narrator, to all women—to imagine, and then create, a new future. Because the woman’s escape is designed as an analogy for political flight, the poem simultaneously speaks not only to women but also to refugees of all genders. The “eco-logic” present in the first lines of the poem suggests that the social, political, and environmental future of the planet is ours to determine. It takes, to borrow a phrase, a global village to “braid” the future of the planet. In “Flight,” Martínez manages to witness a private human tragedy, to lead her reader toward a judgment about the inhumanity of acts that lead to personal tragedy and environmental catastrophe. Finally, and most importantly, the poem expresses hope for a redeemed future, created by individual and societal acts of imagination, creation, and courage.

#### IV.

The private witness poem “*Remedios*” is the thematic pinnacle of this collection intersecting public-private and spiritual-physical polarities. Its title and contents reflect the concern with healing woven throughout the book. The Spanish word, *remedios*, also highlights the Hispanic cultural healing practice of *curanderismo*, which is the invisible philosophical framework of *The Devil’s Workshop*.<sup>5</sup> Although the relationship between *testimonio* and *curanderismo* may not be readily apparent, both traditions require a narrative of illness—personal and social—as the first stage of healing. Also, both traditions recognize that communities and societies can, like individuals, suffer from *susto* or “soul sickness.” While modern allopathic medicine concentrates on curing only the physical components of illness, *curanderismo* also places great emphasis on the spiritual and communal origins of illness.<sup>6</sup> *Curanderismo* requires the active participation of the patient in her own cure; there is no idleness for the devil to corrupt. It places great emphasis on balance, the individual’s place in the community, and upon spiritual as well as

physical healing—concepts that recur throughout the poems. The poem “*Remedios*” reflects these concerns of physical-spiritual healing as it combines the metaphors of witness with the act of bringing forward a moment of private struggle through public events and popular themes.

“*Remedios*” displays the use of metaphors of witness from the very first two lines. The singularity of one person’s “cough” is amplified to “an underground nuclear explosion” (2002, 25). The physical and spiritual health of the narratee’s body is “unraveling,” which the poet-persona associates with the resolution in an international political sphere, a “hard-won peace accord.” At the “bargaining table” the remedies include “garlic, C, zinc, / Oshá root, a five day course of antibiotics.” The second stanza adds the concern for the mind to that of the body. “You quiet your mind [. . .] / You meditate on your lungs.” Even the label on “Herbs from Uruguay,” presumably intended to help the body heal, engages the mind: “The package reassures: you are saving the rain forest / With each new bout of respiratory illness.” This image, a “nuclear explosion,” is another example of Martínez’s “eco-logic” at work. The patient’s recuperative choices are analogous to humanity’s environmental choices. By purchasing herbs sustainably harvested from the rain forest, this individual’s choices affect another living system. In this example, the individual’s choice is a positive one and leads to both personal and planetary health; the unspoken corollary is that negative choices lead to disease and destruction. These two environmental images in a private witness poem serve, again, to merge planetary catastrophes and private tragedies.

The third stanza continues the use of metaphors of witness; the fevered body is “a controlled burn” like the forest service uses to control wildfires, and the patient fears s/he will “go up like Los Alamos,” the nuclear lab (2002, 25). The final full stanza testifies to the community that surrounds the patient: “So when friends call, you say, ‘No.’ / No. No. No. No. Then you just let it ring.” Here is a person whose body is sick, but who seeks holistic wellness in body and mind, while the community stands ready to assist. The final remedy in this poem is spiritual. The reader gets the sense that the subject of this poem is one of the healthiest, most balanced characters in the book; remedies mend the sick body, balance the mind, allow a strong community of friends, and deliver a Zen-like acceptance. However, the Eastern mysticism is reconfigured in Mayan terms: in the act of discovering a “Zero” understanding of being. The metaphors of witness and catastrophe disappear in the final stanza, as if they could not withstand the spiritual strength of “the Buddha-you.” For a moment, through the spiritual example of this one human being, the poet-witness finds herself at peace. As there is no hierarchy in these poems assigning differing values to monumental catastrophes and to the individual pain of lost love,

there is also no hierarchy of remedy. The spiritual remedy, the one that allows respite from one individual’s physical illness, also treats another’s spiritual illness, and the implication of the disappearance of metaphors of witness from the final stanza is that there are spiritual remedies for the large, communal catastrophes. *Susto* affects communities and individuals; it must be remedied in both for the world to retain its balance.

By situating her poetic praxis at the edge of two contemporary genres of writing,—that of the postmodern witness poem and of *testimonio*—and by calling on the older tradition of *curanderismo*, Demetria Martínez creates a powerful and uplifting poetry that, while it expresses hope it does not turn away from the terrors of human life in the twenty-first century. By insisting that the reader engage in compassion (which connotes action), not sympathy (which connotes paralyzed pity), Martínez stresses the value of contemplative action:

all the (spiritual) traditions fully acknowledge the connection between action and contemplation. [. . .] True mysticism, which involves the contemplative disciplines, is supposed to lead to action, or, as the Jews say, to the repair of the earth. It’s supposed to heal the earth. (Manolis 1999, 47)

Compassion, another term for contemplation of another’s humanity, is the bond between human beings; through it, we acknowledge that “soul sickness” afflicts us all.

To heal communities, we must insure all people have an opportunity to attain mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Recognizing the commonality of suffering in the universe does not excuse those who oppress others. Martínez’s judgment is that those who inflict pain do it through choice and not ignorance—they cannot be ignorant of what it means to hurt, to be imbalanced, since we have all, at one point or another in our lives, experienced pain to our spirits. Therefore, there is a choice made to ignore common humanity with those who are hurt by one’s actions. These poems insist upon the necessity of recognizing commonality. It is a poetic of the borderlands, emphasizing what connects us, rather than what separates us. It partakes of both a contemporary American poetry tradition and older, Latin American traditions. It illuminates the bonds between the personal and the communal, the victim and the perpetrator. It reminds us that damage to the human spirit, regardless of its magnitude and cause, diminishes us all. The poems of *The Devil’s Workshop* remind us that the true translator is the contemplative heart and that the world can be put back into balance in the “heart’s sweatshop,”

where compassion's demand to "take action" leaves no time for idle hands.

## Notes

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1 Martinez was indicted by a federal grand jury for conspiring and aiding a New Mexico Sanctuary group transport two Mexican women into the United States. Martinez maintained that she was covering the story as a journalist and she was subsequently cleared of all charges. Her novel *Mother Tongue* and many of her journalistic writings refer to the sanctuary movement. Critics repeatedly refer to Martinez's activism in their analysis of her writing, primarily in *Mother Tongue*. For analyses of *Mother Tongue*, see Dalia and Castillo. Considerations of Martinez's poetry are rare; see Perez.

2 The definition of *testimonio* is debated (often contentiously) in academia. While John Beverly's definitions and criticisms of *testimonio* are perhaps the most often cited, I prefer not to use Beverly's definitions because of their embeddedness in theoretical matrices that I do not wish to invoke in this essay. In short, *testimonio* is a narrative that bears witness to actual events in a community (in the broadest sense) by reporting evidence and descriptions of events; the teller of the events most often uses a communal "I" which makes it difficult to separate the events which the teller experienced first-hand and those which are known second-hand or through communal knowledge. Also, *testimonios* traditionally have been "as-told-to" narratives where the story is recorded by a mediator, most often a journalist or academic investigator. For an overview of scholarship, comprehensive bibliographies, and innovative recent criticism on *testimonio*, see *Woman as Witness: Essays on Testimonial Literature by Latin American Women*, edited by Linda Maier and Isabel Dulfano. Also see Beverly and Zimmerman; Beverly; and Gugelberger. A survey of Latin American and Chicano/a testimonial poetry would be a fruitful endeavor. For instance, in 1985 Victor Cardona Rojas published a small chapbook of poetry entitled "Testimonio: Poesía Social."

3 I view the "disruption of narrative individualism" as the characteristic which distinguishes "testimonial" poetry from postmodern poetry of witness. I do not mean to insinuate that one form is inherently superior or inferior to the other; my personal opinion is that all types of witness poetry are valid and necessary.

4 All poems quoted are from the collection *The Devil’s Workshop* (2002); references are to page numbers.

5 For information on *curanderismo*, see *Woman Who Glows in the Dark: A Curandera Reveals Traditional Aztec Secrets of Physical and Spiritual Health* by Elena Avila. Avila has an M.S.N., specializing in psychiatric nursing; she is also a traditionally trained, practicing *curandera*. For a socio-historical examination of *curanderismo*, see Trotter and Chavira.

6 In a question and answer session, Demetria Martínez succinctly insisted that “the situation is this: to heal individuals, one must heal the communities” (Martínez 2004).

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