

2009

## Performing to Survive: A Theater of Memory in Diamela Eltit's *Por la patria*

Daniella Wittern

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/inti>

---

### Citas recomendadas

Wittern, Daniella (Primavera-Otoño 2009) "Performing to Survive: A Theater of Memory in Diamela Eltit's *Por la patria*," *INTI: Revista de literatura hispánica*: No. 69, Article 21.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/inti/vol1/iss69/21>

This Notas is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Providence. It has been accepted for inclusion in INTI: Revista de literatura hispánica by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Providence. For more information, please contact [dps@providence.edu](mailto:dps@providence.edu).

## PERFORMING TO SURVIVE: A THEATER OF MEMORY IN DIAMELA ELTIT'S *POR LA PATRIA*

Daniella Wittern  
Brown University

**E**ver since the *golpe de estado* of September 11th, 1973, the questions of memory and *desmemoria* have been at the heart of Chilean nationhood for author Diamela Eltit. The subject appears again and again in Eltit's essays, as she explains that the dictatorship, "buscó erradicar una parte de la memoria nacional, porque entendió la memoria como un tumor extirpable" (*Emergencias* 30). As such, it isn't surprising that her second novel, *Por la patria*, documents the necessity of memory as a tool for survival. Amid the chaos and violence inflicted by an authoritarian state upon Coya, the novel's mestiza protagonist, I argue that the performance of memory will allow here to emerge from detainment and, though still bearing the marks of trauma, begin a new life.

*Por la patria* begins by relating Coya's conception and the complicated tangle of relations that exist between her and her parents, but then immediately jumps ahead in time to the raids on Coya's neighborhood that result in the death of her father and a psychologically shattering separation from her mother. It proceeds to recount Coya's prolonged internment in a prison camp, and finally concludes with her release. Through all of this, Coya is pursued by Juan, her *contramemoria*: obsessed with Coya, Juan follows her, repeatedly demanding that she forget the acts of brutality committed against her family.

This article intends to unravel the roles played by trauma, memory, and performance in Coya's survival in *Por la patria*. It will have two parts: first, I will offer a close-reading of Juan's attempts to erase Coya's memory, in order to then analyze how performance allows Coya to recover her memories and invert the terms of her captivity. We shall see how performance upsets

the power dynamics within the prison camp, permitting Coya and her friends to survive repeated episodes of torture, eventually emerging from the prison camp to found a new order.

### Juan – or *contramemoria*

Juan makes his first appearance in the narrative in a bar, in the midst of a spectacle of *borrachera* shared by Coya and her mother. Coya is unaware that it is the night of the first of the *redadas*, the raids in the neighborhood, and at the time Juan's presence seems inconsequential: he is a mere messenger-boy, passing on an order from Coya's father. "Era Juan,," Coya tells us, "quien me dijo que mi padre me mandaba estar en la casa" (*Patria* 24). Even in this very first appearance, Juan assumes the voice of (paternal) authority, and in the process he steps into the triangle that is Coya's family in order to separate her from her parents just before the *redada*.

As we shall see, this timing isn't coincidence, nor is Juan's participation in the sequence of events. After Coya's departure, her mother notices a uniformed-man at the back of the bar staring fixedly at her who, upon catching her eye, exchanges a wink with Juan. "'Juan'", she shouts, "'hijo de puta, estái vendido a los perros'" (29), as she realizes Juan has sold them all out for the *redada* that is about to begin. His design required both Coya's absence and her mother's presence for the raid, in an act of betrayal that will mark the beginning of Juan's participation in the repression of the state.

Coya's narration of the events of that night is disordered and confused; bits and pieces come out over the course of several chapters. Her father manages to make his way home, but arrives gravely wounded. Coya, in her grief, tries to care for him until the door is forced open, "... y sin que mediara vacilación alguna, le dieron el golpe de gracia a mi papá" (47). Witness to her father's murder, Coya is then forcibly pulled outside, where a thorough registry of the neighborhood is being conducted. When she is finally allowed to leave, it is only because of Juan: "Sería inútil, resultaría una falsedad no asegurar que Juan me sacó de allí" (48), Coya confesses.

In the shadow of the still ongoing *redada*, Juan resets the bones that had been broken when Coya was dragged out of her house and bandages her wounds. This benevolence belies his true motives, however, as he then stands over her and begins to inform Coya of a different version of the day's events. In Juan's revisionist history, Coya's father hasn't been murdered; instead, her mother is the root of the family's trouble, and has run off with someone else, causing her father to leave town in her pursuit. Coya's wounds are also her own fault: "Fue muy malo lo que hiciste, Coya, muy feo golpearte contra las paredes. [...] No es mucha cosa, una rabieta tuya. Pero inventa lo que quieras, para mí está bien." (49)

Nor does Juan's malice end there: he proceeds to lie down next to Coya, ordering her to talk to him as if he, Juan, were her father. Coya recoils at this insinuation of paternal substitution and threatens to leave, never to come back to the *barrio*. In return, Juan, who has just reset Coya's bones, begins to beat her. When Coya ultimately concedes to enter into a dialogue with him, Juan reassures her: "... yo te voy a ir apuntando las cosas y te van a aparecer ordenadas otra vez" (51). Nonetheless, his need to control Coya's memory is so great that even her willingness to rewrite her parents' disappearance as a result of her mother's infidelity isn't sufficient. Juan incessantly interrupts Coya's rewriting, correcting her: "No, [...] Ocurrió de esta manera, anota" (52).

I want to momentarily suspend this close reading of the night of the *redada* to analyze the strategy Juan employs. Coya has suffered serious trauma at the hands of the (unnamed) State: she witnessed her father's murder, she was abused and interrogated in a raid on her home, she has been separated from her mother (of whose current state she still knows nothing), and she has now been coerced into a rewriting of her own past. Once she has been separated from her family, Juan's objective – both personally, as a man obsessed with Coya, and professionally, as a new representative of the State – is to erase Coya's embodied experience and memories. He intends to replace her memories of trauma with a written document that will, as it is written, become the official version of events, assume into what Diana Taylor terms the state archive.<sup>2</sup>

This displacement of Coya's embodied memory by the official history of the State is significant, because as Taylor reminds us in another essay, "... the courts, an 'archival', document-producing system that in Latin America serves the interests of the powerful, cannot encompass or 'understand' pleas from the poor. [...] Expressions of trauma might just as well be delivered in a foreign tongue" (Yuyachkani 228). Interestingly, in Coya's narration of this first raid on her neighborhood, she tells us that the tragedy causes a mental and *linguistic* split in her psyche, as well as the physical and literal splitting of her family. "Esa noche de la tragedia, alguien acabó en mi nombre y desde entonces respondo dual y bilingüe si me nombran Coa y Coya también" (*Patria* 27). From this point forward, her name will carry two references: as Coya, it refers to her indigenous roots and means Incan empress or princess; as Coa, it refers to the slang spoken in the slums of Chile and is the language she employs in much of her narration.

Coya's trauma, then, is indeed expressed in a foreign tongue, in *coa*<sup>3</sup>, and it is therefore unsurprising that it must be excluded from the official archive of state history. Coya's *coa* memory of events will be repressed by the versions Juan will help Coya to co-author, thereby further splintering her already dual identity. He reassures her that this revision of her memory, however, will bring 'order' back into her life.

Coya's response to Juan's imposed memory on her own family's history is intriguing. After being beaten, she appears to acquiesce to the game, putting up only small resistances. She compliantly invents details of how her mother ran off with a blonde man, but then interjects that her mother never would have gone with what she disdainfully calls *un zarco*. Juan, however, persists in his endeavor, demanding an end to her disobedience and the complete rewrite of Coya's past. Ultimately, she has little recourse but to agree and affirm that her mother had been having relations with another man for days. In spite of Juan's rewrite of her memory, though, Coya's dissidence finds its form here in one final transgression of the State's order and authority: she adds to the story, "'Antes de hacer trato con él [el zarco], [mi madre] trató conmigo'" (53). In other words: Juan, obsessed with Coya, has been able to make her family disappear, and to rewrite the circumstances of their disappearance. He is not able, however, to erase the trace of incest that threatens his control over her, as well as the stability of the order for which he stands.

### ***Parlamentos in Prison***

Alternating between other versions of the *redada*, new raids on the neighborhood, and Coya's visions and hallucinations, the novel leaves the *barriada* behind and relocates its narration in the prison where Coya and her friends have been detained, drugged, interrogated, and tortured. Most of the time, Coya only gently alludes to the torture she experiences during her internment – perhaps as a result of her traumatized and drugged state – but she recounts one severe episode of torture in detail. First, they cut her left arm, then she is raped by each of the soldiers present; she spends hours shuttering from electric shocks, they stick her with hypodermic needles, and finally they bury her, naked, from the waist down (190).

Ironically, the trauma she suffers in this episode sparks the tool that will eventually help her to survive: Coya, upon being released from her interrogation, begins to write a series of what she calls *parlamentos* (193). She writes as something to do in the evenings, when the guards are less vigilant and don't notice her stack of papers growing. Although she begins by writing in silence, Coya does not refer to her papers as her *memorias* or as a journal, but insists on calling these writings *parlamentos*: that is to say, they are speeches, texts that she means to deliver to someone else, orally. Containing "los recuerdos que superponen palabras tapando, cubriendo el odio manifiesto que me encauza" (198); Coya's *Parlamentos* are performances that reveal a determination to recuperate her past, to recover the very memories that Juan has been so intent on revising.

Although Coya specifically cites her *recuerdos* as the content of the

*parlamentos*, she admits that alongside “asuntos verídicos e inexcusables” (199) there are also *mentiras* about everything. This new writing of her past is inextricably tied to the re-write Juan previously tried to impose on her memory. Coya has learned that history is malleable, but she is also determined to be the one who gets to fix her own memories for the record, and will not accept changes from anyone: “Hay cosas que no voy a cambiar” (198) she declares to her friend and fellow-detainee, Berta. Coya’s plan, however, is not limited to the realm of her own personal memory. Instead, she sees her *parlamentos* as “una toma colectiva del habla” (203), which will motivate the other detained women to speak of their experiences out loud so that Coya can record – and they all can perform – what they say. Concerned that memory – both her own and that of her friends – will slowly be worn out and eventually lose the battle to repeated sessions of torture that incessantly attempt to wipe each woman’s past clean, the text that Coya constructs and Berta edits becomes the depository for the collective trauma experienced by the women of the *barriada*.

As the *parlamentos* develop, they turn into full performances in which all of the women detained with Coya have been cast and participate. With time, they become the main occupation in Coya’s cell, such that when a dispute between Coya and Berta brings the composing process to a halt, the other women no longer know what to do without new parts to learn and offer to intervene (223). Yet the *parlamentos* are not simply a prison pastime or distraction, as becomes evident when la Rucia emerges from an acute torture session. Berta, alarmed by la Rucia’s condition, insists “en que hay que darle una indemnización, alguna forma de compensación” (254). Coya immediately concurs: they do have to find a way to counteract la Rucia’s suffering. “Dale rol [...] abre para ella algo especial,” she concludes. The performance, then, has become what allows the women to survive the trauma they experience in their detainment: it compensates for and alleviates their pain. As Diana Taylor explains, “... performance is not about going back, but about keeping alive” (Yuyachkani 230) in that it allows the victims of trauma to repeat, reiterate, and take ownership of those experiences that have possessed them.<sup>4</sup> Taylor continues: “Trauma becomes transmittable, understandable, through performance – through the reexperienced shutter, the retelling, the repeat” (230).

As Taylor suggests, the trauma they have endured only becomes understandable to the women themselves through the performance of Coya’s *parlamentos*. What is more, these performances also transmit each woman’s private history of traumatic experiences to the large group of detained women. That is to say, the *parlamentos* maintain “intacta la memoria colectiva y metalizada” (*Patria* 251) in that, as they are performed, they create new witnesses to each of the individual traumas they contain. In a study of performance and collective trauma in Peru, Diana Taylor indicates

that, “Each attempt at communication is also a repeat, as the person who survived the trauma tries to transmit it to another person outside the experience – the one who bears witness and accepts the burden of performative contagion” (Yuyachkani 231). This is to say that performance has the peculiar ability to make witnesses of others, thereby passing on “the dangers and responsibilities of seeing and of acting on what one has seen” (233). Coya’s *parlamentos*, therefore, distribute the individual burdens of trauma amongst all of the women and unite them as what Taylor denominates a “community of witnesses by and through performance” (233).

Moreover, the performance of these *parlamentos* changes the terms of the women’s captivity. Up until Coya began writing, their detainment was defined by private interrogations and torture meant to pluck information so that their memories could be wiped clean. At the same time, Coya and her friends, as victims of torture, were also the spectacle of the prison camp. They ‘starred’ in a carefully controlled ‘show’ meant to reinforce the authority of the soldiers and the futility of resistance. In one torture session, for instance, the guards blindfold the wounded Coya and place her in a ring with an enraged dog on a leash. While the other women watch, Coya is forced to participate in what appears to be a routine display of humiliation in this concentration camp. She must bark to keep the dog away as a guard lets out the leash, allowing the ferocious animal to get nearer to its ‘prey’. The guards, amused, watch and advise Coya to keep howling: “‘Más fuerte perra’” (*Patria* 172). Ashamed, tired, and mentally broken, Coya falls to the floor and begins to feel like a dog herself. After an hour the demonstration degenerates, as both guards and prisoners lose interest. When she is finally able to remove the blindfold, Coya is surprised to see how inconsequential her wounds really had been. These public performances of torture aim to maintain a constant state of paralyzing fear in the detained women, and it is this fear, even more than the guard’s access to weapons, that upholds the hierarchy of power within the prison camp.

Once Coya begins to write and the women begin to perform the *parlamentos* however, what they say or don’t say is no longer determined by torture techniques but rather by their own hearts and memories, by what they need to say in order to heal. Coya, in her role as the Mother General, uses the performances to openly declare her intention to protect personal memory. Even in front of the audience of Juan – who has pursued Coya to the detainment center and become a guard there – Coya/Madre General improvises a new *parlamento*: “‘Pa, par, para hablar la memoria las convoco a rito adicional en proyecto de reconstitución del barrio’” (252). Speaking to the other women, cast as Mothers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, Madre General then confesses that she has betrayed them all by giving in to the torture: she talked, she concedes. The women immediately exculpate her, responding that she only acted in self-defense; they re-characterize the

betrayal as “Un acto de inapreciable valor” (252). Coya, conscious of Juan’s presence as a guard, at this point pulls him into the performance, forcing him to recognize where his own actions fall in this scene. What are the guards doing out there, Madre General questions the women. In chorus, Mothers 1-6 tell her: “Van correctos, rectos hacia el objetivo multitudinario y sangre” (252). Their answer emphasizes the blindness with which Juan and the other military guards unquestioningly follow their bloody orders, regardless of how many innocent bystanders those orders may affect. Not one woman hesitates to respond to Coya’s question in this improvised performance, in spite of the presence of Juan and the power he has to punish them all for this public display of denunciation.

Though the women continue to be a source of spectacle, their performances now transgress against the order established by their imprisonment, rather than affirm it. This transgressive aspect not only manifests itself in the content of the *parlamentos*, but also goes so far as to usurp authority from the guards, despite their ability to regularly torture and interrogate the women. We see this clearly when, in the midst of yet another rehearsal, Juan enters the women’s cell expecting to immediately command their attention. To his dismay, however, “Ninguna se incomoda. Nadie obedece” (*Patria* 257).

What we see here is a change in the power dynamic within the concentration camp that represents a radical transformation in the mechanisms of control. This power shift should not be underestimated. Upon their detainment, these women spent months in a drugged state of existence, incapable of any kind of resistance, only to later be repeatedly and publicly humiliated, and undergo unimaginable forms of torture that lead them to betray their friends and family members. Suddenly, however, Coya begins to write her *parlamentos*, and as the women become involved in these performances, they no longer cower before their torturers or guards. In other words, Coya’s *parlamentos* effectively invert the roles of dominance and authority within the prison camp by taking previously broken women and allowing them to share and perform the burden of their trauma. In so doing, the women take control of public representation within the prison camp. As such, the fear previously imposed by the guards’ spectacles of torture can no longer hold the same mental sway over Coya and her friends. Through the medium of performance, the detained women refuse to allow their memories to be erased, and at the same time, they reverse the balance of power within the prison camp.

At the end of the novel, we find out to what Coya’s collection of *parlamentos* amounts: it is “una épica,” she tells Juan, “una hazaña que no puedes ni podrás con nada desmentir” (277). Coya’s choice of genres is significant: the epic she writes (and Berta edits) is a document. That is to say, it is not simply a performance to be transmitted through the repertoire, though it has been



memorized and performed by the women in her cell. It is, additionally, a written text and as such, it will form part of the archive. In spite of all of Juan's attempts to erase and rewrite Coya's history, in the end her *épica* will officially testify to and record her memories and experience of trauma.

It is also worth noting that within *Por la patria*, Coya's *épica* is graphically differentiated from the rest of the narration by a separation into two columns of text, resembling the presentation of an epic poem. Why, we must ask, would Coya want to imitate the appearance of epic poetry? Traditionally, epic poems are extended narratives in verse, written in a formal style that employs frequent repetition to aid in oral delivery. They generally relate the deeds of a heroic figure whose actions affect the fate of a nation or people (Abrams 76) – a point that is extremely interesting in the context of *Por la patria*. How could Coya's broken *épica* of trauma be of deep cultural significance to a nation or people?

Significantly, Coya's epic is not written in formal *castellano*, but rather mixes the expected 'high' language we associate with epic poetry, with the slang, delinquent tongue of coa.<sup>5</sup> Eltit has referred to her use of such a mix of discourses in various interviews as a form of 'linguistic incest' or 'mestizaje'.<sup>6</sup> As we shall see, the presence of such 'linguistic incest' in an epic narrative can only be subversive. Through her *épica*, Coya not only recuperates her own past and documents her memories within the national archive, but she also legitimizes the marginal (and oral) language of the slums in which she grew up by making coa pertain to the literary sphere. There is a certain violence to Coya's use of this language, as is revealed in the final pages of the novel when Coya and her friends have been granted amnesty and are able to walk out of the prison camp together. They leave speaking a cacophony of language, as Coya declares: "Se levanta el coa [...] El argot se dispara y yo" (282). A threat to official and dominant discourse clearly appears in the language the women speak and employ in this epic, and in which they are about to begin a new life.

Upon their return to the *barriada*, these sterile survivors of trauma will nonetheless become the founding mothers of a metaphorical new "nation": they are going to re-open and run the bar that had belonged to the previous paternal order – in this case, to Coya's father. Their nascent, coa-speaking nation will take Coya's transgressive epic of destruction, violence, and trauma as its central myth: "El fuego, el fuego, el fuego y la *épica*" (283), the new era begins. The newly created *patria*'s epic allows the societal taboos of Coya's past – extreme intoxication, incest, torture, and rape – to function as 'heroic' deeds. Perhaps more important, performing this epic has allowed Coya to recuperate her memories and begin to *feel* again. "Volví a sentir: volví a sentir sobre el erial, superpuesta a mi niñez" (283) she tells us as she returns, though marked by trauma, with her 'army of mothers,' home.

## NOTES

- 1 Although *Por la patria* was published in 1986, Eltit had already begun composing the novel by 1983, when a series of protests lead to brutal retaliation by the military. Given the violence amidst which she was writing, it is unsurprising that no state could be named nor any regime mentioned in the book. Nonetheless, there is an astute critical reading of Chilean society in *Por la patria*, though it is kept to the allegorical level played out by the relationship between Coya and Juan. For further details on the atmosphere in which Eltit wrote this second novel, see Mary Green, p. 52.
- 2 In *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Taylor defines "archival memory" as existing in documents and other physical objects that resist change (19), and opposes the archive to the "repertoire," which enacts all embodied memory in the forms of performed acts of ephemeral knowledge (20).
- 3 When Coya's father arrives gravely wounded, the only wound Coya specifically mentions is a cut to his lip, and although it is clear that his injuries are far more numerous, she continually focuses on his bleeding mouth (*Patria* 34). Metaphorically, in this scene her "father language" has been cut; with her father's death, she becomes Coa and Coya, her language also cut. As she tells us in broken *castellano*, "... yo nada palabra supe qué decir" (35) ...
- 4 In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth explains how trauma "possesses" its victims: a traumatic event, "is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (4).
- 5 In her book *Marginalities*, Gisela Norat has also studied the linguistic strategies Eltit employs in relation to the epic genre proclaimed by Coya for her *parlamentos*. Norat attributes Coya's need of an editor in the composition process as a sign of her low education and oral background, whereas I read Coya's choice of broken language as an intentional means of subverting what normally constitutes the discourse of a national epic. Norat goes on to compare Coya's epic to graffiti writing in its underground nature of resistance, and to offer a complete analysis of the ways in which this epic parallels ancient Greek tragedies, mythology, and epic forms.
- 6 See, for example, "Acoplamiento incestuoso," interview with Ana María Foxley in 1985, or "Tenemos puesto el espejo para el otro lado," interview with Claudia Donoso in 1987, in both of which Eltit terms her mixing of discourses as 'linguistic incest.' This terminology may at first be confusing, since Eltit's technique is to mix what the reader will see as very distinct discourses, whereas incest implies relations between closely related subjects. Nonetheless, Eltit views the Mapuche tongue, coa, and formal *castellano* as cousins, variants of language that all inhabit the cultural space of Chile. She expresses this idea in an interview with Julio Ortega, in which she describes herself as "una mestiza, en ese sentido, bi o trilingüe de mi propio idioma" (232).

## WORKS CITED

- Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999. Print.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. Print.
- Eltit, Diamela. "Acomplamiento incestuoso." Interview by Ana María Foxley. *Hoy* 12-18 Aug. 1985: 41. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Emergencias: escritos sobre literatura, arte y política*. Santiago: Planeta, 2000. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Por la patria*. Santiago: Planeta, 2007.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Tenemos puesto el espejo para el otro lado." Interview by Claudia Donoso. *APSI* 26 Jan.-8 Feb. 1987: 47-49. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Resistencia y sujeto femenino: entrevista con Diamela Eltit." Interview by Julio Ortega. *La torre: Revista de la Universidad de Puerto Rico*. 4.14 (1990): 229-41. Print.
- Green, Mary. *Diamela Eltit: Reading the Mother*. Woodbridge, Tamesis: 2007. Print.
- Norat, Gisela. *Marginalities: Diamela Eltit and the Subversion of Mainstream Literature in Chile*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002. Print.
- Taylor, Diana. "Staging Social Memory: Yuyachkani." *Psychoanalysis and Performance*. Ed. Patrick Campbell and Adrian Kear. London: Routledge, 2001. 218-235. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. Print.