INTRODUCTION

Testimonial Voices in Gender Rights Struggles

This book examines the ongoing struggle against gender-based violence in Argentina in recent decades, exploring the intersection of legal, cultural, and artistic scenarios and drawing on feminist, transfeminist, and transgender theories. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the book explores how testimonial voices have played a pivotal role in the ongoing struggle for justice, memory, and gender rights. Argentina has been often regarded as a global leader in human rights, LGBTQI+ rights, and, more recently, feminist movements; yet the analysis of legal and judicial responses to gender-based violence after the last military dictatorship (1976–1983), in contrast to cultural and artistic productions, reveals a slow and at times stagnant process, especially when examined through feminist and transgender perspectives. This book explores these delayed advancements while highlighting the crucial role of testimonial voices—legal, literary, and artistic—in shaping them. Primarily situated in the last decade (2010–2023) of activism and legal reforms, this book surveys the interplay between legal approaches to gender-based violence and testimonial practices in literature, film, and archival and curatorial projects. The testimonial component of the voices I analyze in this book is what most evidently brings together these two paths: the legal testimony that denounces gender-based violence, on one side, and testimonial expressions from literature, photography, and cinema, on the other. Testimonial expressions outside the legal scenario,

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while still testimonial, not only denounce violence but also explore the edges of memory, the difficulty of remembering, as well as the doubts surrounding memory. They expose (and this is very clear in terms of gender-based violence) the difficulties of narrating violent events and their aftermaths and how gender-based violence is entangled with other expressions of violence.

The historical journey proposed by this book begins with an examination of how women were framed and their voices silenced during the first decades of the redemocratization process. Starting with an analysis of landmark moments in the feminist legal struggle against sexual violence related to crimes committed during the last military dictatorship, I analyze these interventions and how they are linked to questions of imprescriptibility and reparation. However, I do not propose a legal examination of these struggles or judicial rulings. Instead, I offer a conceptual analysis, from a feminist and transfeminist theoretical perspective, of how these rulings address concepts of vulnerability, precarity, and helplessness, on one side, and consent, coercion, and agency, on the other.

After examining the legal and cultural battles in Argentina to make gender-based crimes committed in clandestine and detention centers both intelligible and punishable, the book shifts to address femicide and transfemicide—forms of violence that often occur in interpersonal relations in Argentina—and to rethink systemic expressions of cis-patriarchal violence. The criminalization of feminicide, the first court ruling to use the term "travesticide," and the post-2015 street mobilizations against all forms of violence against women show that the history of gender-based violence in Argentina in the last decade has not followed a linear trajectory but rather a bumpy and sinuous path marked by landmark judicial cases and persistent systemic biases.

Literary and cinematic practices capture the many affective components of gender-based violence that are often absent from legal discussions but which have been central to the design of new spaces of feminist and transfeminist struggle. These cultural and artistic practices range from testimonial narratives that closely align with judicial proceedings and legal battles to more poetic explorations of surviving gender-based violence in homes and in the streets. In these cultural–artistic practices, the voice is often anchored in the emotional expression of what it means to experience violence. By narrating and expressing emotions such as pain, fear, terror, excitement, desire, and love, these voices (as witnesses, activists, complainants, scholars, artists, writers, and film directors) have in turn examined questions of embodiment, subjectivity, and agency, to reject victimhood and to weave together communities and assemblages of voices and bodies.

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This book highlights the testimonial dimensions of these struggles while examining their aesthetic components, analyzing the voices that convey these experiences and their narrative and acoustic modulations. Therefore, testimonial voices are understood not only narratively—as denunciations of violence and cis-patriarchal repression—but also aurally, through their acoustic modulations and vibrations. By examining how aurality connects different bodies and generates spaces of listening and by considering testimonial voices and their diffractions, in terms of sound and meaning, this book explores new forms of resonance from within Argentina's feminist and transfeminist movements. Chapters 1, 4, and 5 of this book discuss narrative voices, whether testimonial, interpretive, or poetic, whereas chapters 2, 3, and 6 focus on the sonorous aspects of the voice. The analysis of the voice is rooted in questions of meaning and in the effects its sound produces on bodies that share the same sonic space.

The sound of the voice projects the body into a surrounding space—a space occupied by vibrations and frequencies that will eventually vanish, as sounds are ephemeral, but which also move around and touch bodies as they move. Speaking involves the articulation of words as well as the presence of a body in a specific space—a sonic space—in which the voice vibrates. To rethink the voice in both its narrative and acoustic dimensions, this book emphasizes the battle over the meaning of gender-based violence and the struggle over the design of sound spaces, which determines who is allowed to speak and whose bodily presence is legitimized. Because a sonic space is not merely the sum of sounds or vibrations but an entanglement of vibrations that connects everyone who shares that space, the design of sonic spaces requires a consideration of their sonorous, acoustic, and auditory dimensions. Chilean architect and sound artist Sofía Balbontín (2024), when discussing sonic architectures, emphasizes the *experience of listening* and proposes an aesthetic that fosters awareness of space accessed through sound. For her, aural architecture constitutes a "parallel dimension of reality" in which the boundary between artist and listener is blurred (257). This kind of listening, as Jean-Luc Nancy (2007) suggests, happens "at the edge of meaning": it involves a suspension of meaning; listening, he argues, is both a straining toward possible meaning and an openness to not necessarily understanding it (6).

However, this suspended form of listening does not imply that sonic spaces are detached from social hierarchies and gendered distributions of audibility. Space and place are always produced through social relations and—as feminist geographer Doreen Massey (1994) has argued—through gender relations. While those relationships are dynamic, and, therefore, space must

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also be understood as relational and fluid, this fluidity involves a dispute between spaces and between understandings of who legitimately inhabits them. Because spatial organization is inseparable from social inequality and from the meanings attached to particular voices, an analysis of sonic spaces must foreground the role of gender in what Jacques Rancière (2009) calls the "distribution of the sensible"—in this case, of the audible. However, testimonial voices that occupy spaces not meant for them are often heard as "out of place," as if space itself were fixed and immutable. When previously excluded groups design or claim new sonic arenas—particularly in public—they trigger a struggle for legitimacy. At the same time, they reveal the existence of multiple spaces that, according to Massey, exist simultaneously ("cross-cutting, intersecting, aligning with one another, or existing in relations of paradox or antagonism" [1994, 3]). The design of sonic spaces, or the occupation of existing ones (as in the struggles for memory, truth, and justice explored in this book's discussion of transitional justice processes), always involves a competition, to reconfigure space and redefine the social structures that space supports. Acoustic architectures of voices that were previously ignored or silenced unsettle attempts to distribute fixed allocations by crafting new sonic spaces with vibration patterns that imagine alternative gender relations.

In this book, I examine sonic spaces as well as the social and political dimensions of sound and the meanings it carries across different scenarios and vocal politics. However, because the testimonial voice has traditionally been understood primarily in terms of meaning and the denunciation of violence and injustice, I want to focus very intentionally on the *sound* of the voice itself. I return here to Nancy, who says that listening is reaching for "a resonant meaning—a meaning whose sense is supposed to be found in resonance, and only in resonance" (2007, 7). Meaning is thus narratively constructed and discovered in and through the body as it listens. According to Nancy, to listen is to be inclined not only to the voice but also to oneself, in the sense that the sound resounds in my body and produces an echo there (9). The echo that I feel in my own body is also a part of listening. Meaning arises from how a voice resonates within our body, the feelings and sensations it evokes, and the norms that control these sonic spaces.

This book's title, *Testimonial Diffractions*, refers to those voices that have provided their testimonies in trials, oral archives, documentaries, literary texts, and art exhibits, as well as in the streets, where they have sought to rebuild the fabric of the community by occupying sonic spaces not meant for these expressions of survival and revolt. I propose to understand these testimonial

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voices through the concept of diffraction, a term from physics and biology that describes how waves behave when they encounter obstacles. On one side, by exploring how the testimonial voice disperses across various settings and scenarios, adopting different forms and interacting with—and even fragmenting into—multiple interpretations, I emphasize the act of listening to these voices. On the other, by using the term "diffraction" to conceptualize these testimonial voices, I underscore how voices navigate around obstacles and expand after passing through barriers. Because the book focuses on the persistent attempt to be heard, which is marked by advancements and setbacks, my characterization of these struggles through the language of diffractions also highlights the design of acoustic spaces, as sites of reception and spaces of interference and transformation.

In its metaphorical use in feminist theory, diffraction refers to a methodology that opposes reflection and the act of mirroring. Donna Haraway has used diffraction as a visual metaphor to emphasize difference and to move beyond the search for sameness, where "diffracting rays compose interference patterns, not reflecting images" (1992, 299). Haraway uses the American Vietnamese filmmaker and theorist Trinh Minh-ha's term "inappropriate/d other" to explain difference "in a diffracting rather than reflecting (ratio)nality—as the means of making a potent connection that exceeds domination" (299). In this feminist methodology, diffraction "does not produce 'the same' displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction" (300). In posthumanist feminist thought, diffraction often appears in efforts to reformulate the gender binary and in the exploration of human–nonhuman boundaries and the transformations arising from entanglements, connections, and interferences. In its visual connotation, diffraction, as feminist philosopher Karen Barad uses the term, describes a methodology for analyzing "the entangled effects differences make" (2007, 73). In addition, a central component of Barad's rethinking of diffraction is the possibility of thinking outside binary systems—that is, how it "troubles dichotomies" (164). Barad reads the "wave–particle duality" in quantum physics vis-à-vis Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*: "There is something compelling about being both male and female, about having an entry into both worlds. Contrary to some psychiatric tenets, half and halfs are not suffering from confusion of sexual identity, or even from a confusion of gender. What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other" (quoted in Barad 173). Barad describes how electrons came to disturb the unambiguous differentiation of particles

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