



## Article

# A Critical Analysis of the Testimonial Literature for the Filipino Desaparecidos

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## Abstract

*This study offers a critical analysis of testimonial literature authored by the bereaved family and friends of the Desaparecidos — victims of state-enforced disappearance. The study employs a qualitative research design, incorporating content and textual analysis, investigating the themes, voices, and literary expressions employed by the writers to underscore the power of narrative in conveying their experiences. Through close reading and examining how trauma dictates these narratives and how acts of testimonial writing serve as forms of resistance, this study illustrates the essential role of testimonial literature in preserving the stories of the Desaparecidos. Additionally, the study critically examines stylistic elements, diction, metaphor or tropes, and other literary devices utilized by the writers. In short, this paper explores the interplay of themes, authentic voices, literary expressions, and social and political contexts, thereby highlighting how literary art becomes a tool for resistance against historical erasure.*

**Keywords:** Desaparecidos, Filipino, Grief, Memorial Texts, Trauma

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## Introduction

### *In Remembrance: A Journey Into the Lives of the Philippine Desaparecidos*

The term “desaparecido,” derived from the Spanish verb *desaparecer*, meaning “to disappear,” originally referred to victims of state-sponsored violence in Chile and Argentina during the 1970s and 1980s, where notorious “death flights” led to victims being disposed of in the sea (Lagman, 2015 ). In the context of international law, particularly the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, a *desaparecido* is defined as an individual who is arrested, detained, or abducted by state authorities or with their consent, followed by a refusal to acknowledge this deprivation of liberty, thus removing the individual from legal protection for an extended period (p.5). In the Philippines, the Republic Act 10353, known as the Act Defining and Penalizing Enforced or Involuntary Disappearance, outlines three critical elements: the enforced disappearance involves the deprivation of liberty through arrest, detention, or abduction; the perpetrators are state agents or act with state support; and there is a deliberate effort to conceal the whereabouts of the disappeared individual. Notably, CNN’s description is particularly striking, indicating that a *desaparecido* refers to those who have been unaccounted for since the imposition of martial law, specifically highlighting the widespread disappearances that occurred during Ferdinand Marcos’s regime following Proclamation 1081.

Enforced disappearance is entrenched in a system marked by exploitation and oppression, fostering poverty and violations of fundamental human rights. It serves as a tool for repression wielded by governments against dissenting voices, often justified under the guise of maintaining peace and order or safeguarding national security against those labeled as “enemies of the state” (FIND p.3). Dictatorial regimes have frequently employed enforced disappearance to silence suspected political opponents. The very nature of these disappearances complicates prosecution, as the obliteration of evidence makes it challenging to establish accountability for state actions.

The first documentation of missing persons in the Philippines began in 1974 and was initiated by the Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP), the country’s pioneering human rights organization. TFDP identified involuntary disappearance as a significant human rights violation, noting that victims typically included individuals involved in social justice movements or those defending civil, political, social, economic, and cultural rights. Many of the disappeared were political activists or government critics (FIND, p. 5).

Historically, the highest recorded number of *Desaparecidos* occurred during President Ferdinand Marcos’s administration, spanning from 1965 to 1986. During this

period, 878 cases of enforced disappearances were documented, with only 138 individuals eventually found alive and 127 confirmed dead, leaving 613 still unaccounted for. Notably, 535 of these cases occurred between 1983 and 1985, marking the peak of human rights abuses during the Marcos regime before its fall in 1986 (“Hope and Despair,” 2012). Following the People Power Revolution that brought Corazon Aquino to the presidency in 1986, human rights violations persisted, largely due to the government’s reluctance to prosecute military personnel implicated in abuses. Under Aquino’s rule, 612 documented disappearances occurred, with 407 individuals still missing, 108 found alive, and 97 confirmed dead. Subsequent administrations continued this troubling trend, with Fidel Ramos reporting 87 disappearances (40 still missing), Joseph Estrada 60 (39 resurfaced alive), and Gloria Arroyo’s administration recording 95 cases (47 still missing).

These statistics reveal that despite the end of Marcos’s dictatorship, enforced disappearances have remained a grim reality. Under President Rodrigo Duterte, the situation has deteriorated further, with disappearances linked to controversial anti-drug operations. While FIND has yet to provide comprehensive data on disappearances during Duterte’s term, the numbers continue to rise, compounded by the return of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to the presidency. More than five decades after the Marcos era, the families and friends of the *Desaparecidos* remain in a state of unresolved grief, haunted by the absence of closure and the lack of graves to visit.

The persistence of testimonial narratives, from the Martial Law era to the Duterte administration, proves a grim continuity of political violence in the Philippines. While official history often erased or downplayed the experiences of the *Desaparecidos* and their families and friends, many recent scholarly and journalistic works foreground the role of testimonial literature in challenging the dominant narratives and confronting historical amnesia. Gloria Melencio’s *Stories of the Nameless* (2017) documents the personal testimonies of ten Martial Law victims from Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. Melencio’s work reclaims the narratives of those rendered invisible by official history. Complementing this, Patricia Evangelista’s acclaimed *Some People Need Killing* (2023) offers a contemporary parallel—detailing extrajudicial killings under Duterte’s regime through a literary journalism lens. Though focused on a different period, Evangelista’s work underscores the continuity of state-sanctioned violence and the testimonial form as resistance and remembrance.

Though the disappeared may have found their final resting places, persistent societal sectors continue to search for justice. The written word continues to provide space for resistance, remembrance, and justice. The irony lies in the fact that while the

disappeared may have been lost to history, their absence continues to resonate profoundly in the lives of those left behind.

*From Grief to Artistic Expression: Writing of the Testimonial Literature for the Philippine Desaparecidos*

Pagtatagpo sa Kabilang Dulo: Panitikang Testimonial ng Desaparecidos is a poignant anthology of poems, letters, and testimonials that encapsulate the experiences of families who have lost loved ones to enforced disappearances. Released by the organization Desaparecidos in collaboration with the Amado V. Hernandez Resource Center, this collection aims to raise awareness among Filipinos about the alarming increase in abductions and enforced disappearances in the Philippines. According to the human rights group Karapatan, there have been 205 recorded victims since President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo assumed office in 2001.

Organized by the names of 27 Desaparecidos, the anthology primarily highlights victims who vanished during the Arroyo administration, with a few cases linked to the regimes of Presidents Corazon Aquino and Ferdinand Marcos. Each family member contributes a personal narrative that provides a human face to these victims, portraying them as devoted fathers, caring mothers, loving husbands, and dedicated daughters. This humanization is crucial, as the collection reveals the depth of loss experienced by the families.

While many of the Desaparecidos were actively involved in advocacy for human rights—particularly concerning the welfare of peasants, indigenous peoples, and workers—the collection also includes ordinary citizens ensnared in military counterinsurgency operations. This includes the son of a National Democratic Front consultant, another consultant's niece, and a peasant organizer's brother, whose stories highlight the state's desperation to quell dissent. Particularly gripping are the testimonials of Raymond Manalo and a poem by Melissa Roxas, both survivors of torture and abduction. The vivid accounts from Bonifacio Ilagan about his sister Rizalina, a victim among the Southern Tagalog 12, further illustrate the brutality perpetrated by state agents.

Cultural critic Rolando B. Tolentino, one of the workshop facilitators, noted that writing about the Desaparecidos requires participants to confront their grief. This painful yet necessary process allows them to craft farewells to their loved ones. During the workshops, the focus was not on producing excellent writing but on enabling relatives to articulate their thoughts and fears. While only four contributors were seasoned writers, many others were able to create powerful literary pieces that reflect their experiences.

The sincerity of these contributions gives the collection profound impact and significance, serving as a tribute to those lost while articulating the interplay between cultural trauma and collective memory. The experience of participating in the workshops was both painful and liberating for the families involved, ultimately culminating in a powerful literary expression that memorializes the Desaparecidos while contributing to the broader discourse on human rights and societal change in the Philippines. *Pagtatagpo sa Kabilang Dulo: Panitikang Testimonial ng Desaparecidos* is a vital platform for voices seeking acknowledgment and justice, shedding light on the ongoing struggle against enforced disappearances.

The people behind this anthology of testimonial writings comprised of multi-awarded editors who are renowned in the academe and the field of letters: Rommel B. Rodriguez—Palanca winner in short story writing, and Roland Tolentino—former Dean of and professor at the UP College of Mass Communication. The facilitators of the workshop were writers and academicians too—Mykel Andrada, Vlad Gonzales, and Romulo Baquiran, Jr., who provided with the proper conditioning of the heart and mind, propelling creative juices to flow and who persevered in putting perspective in the overflow of emotions lest these emotional releases become a mere emotional release for pent up grief and sorrow of the bereaved contributors.

And then there were the forty writers of this collection of testimonial literature. They were the family and friends of the Desaparecidos who give shape to thoughts and emotions that need articulation, who endured the suffering that this workshop entails, which means revisiting the ghosts of their past, confronting the harsh truths, and voicing out the screams long silenced because of hopelessness. They were the brave men and women who called and created from their daily dose of anxiety, pain, fear, and desperation in this anthology of testimonial texts. Lastly, the 36 Desaparecidos to whom these texts are dedicated. Their disappearance is an active stimulus that makes the bereaved families and friends forever vigilant. The missing 36, despite their disappearance, are forever etched in their minds and hearts.

#### *The Impromptu Writing of the Testimonial Literature for the Desaparecidos*

Impromptu writing is often created in spontaneous settings, such as workshops or community gatherings, where individuals are encouraged to write without the pressure of expectations. In contrast, other testimonial works may be produced in more formal settings, often involving interviews, psychologist guidance, or structured community advocacy. This contextual difference can influence the overall tone and content of the writing.

The literary compilation emerged from a series of workshops facilitated by members of the Congress of Teachers and Educators for Nationalism and Democracy (CONTEND). The workshops were designed not only to produce literary work but also to serve as a therapeutic process for the participants, who were guided by psychologists from the Community Medicine Development Foundation (Commed) in processing their trauma. Additionally, materials featured in the book were compiled by Ipe Soco, the son of a desaparecido.

The literary journey of the family and friends of the victims of enforced disappearances began with a transformative workshop in May 2008, which eventually led to the publication of *Pagtatagpo sa Kabilang Dulo: Panitikang Testimonial ng Desaparecidos*. The bereaved of the Desaparecidos were the major participants in this endeavor that emerged from the collaborative efforts of Desaparecidos, an organization representing families of the disappeared, along with *Pagbutlak*, the official student publication of the University of the Philippines Visayas College of Arts and Sciences. This collection is the result of a series of workshops led by members of the Congress of Teachers and Educators for Nationalism and Democracy (CONTEND-UP).

The organizers first gathered the participants, who were mostly family and friends of the disappeared. The procedure was prudently handled in such a way that the participants would seem to come from a debriefing session beginning with a structured dialogue where they try to dissect what occurred, relive the experience, process the emotions, and write about them. Rolando B. Tolentino, a prominent Filipino cultural critic, played a key role in this workshop, highlighting the unique struggles faced by families and friends of the disappeared as they sought to articulate their grief and trauma through writing. Tolentino pointed out that writing about the Desaparecidos is not merely an act of creativity but an emotionally charged task that compels participants to confront their deepest fears and frustrations.

In consideration of the fragile emotional states of the bereaved family and friends of the Desaparecidos, the workshop facilitators approached the participants' trauma with care by creating a "safe space" conducive to introspection and expression. This metaphorical space resembled a house with exits, allowing participants to withdraw if their emotions overwhelmed. The collaborative efforts of educators and sociologists were crucial in fostering an environment that encouraged creativity while minimizing distressing stimuli. This thoughtful methodology was instrumental in helping the families of the Desaparecidos to confront and articulate their trauma, ultimately leading to a powerful literary expression of shared experiences.

At the book launch on January 8, 2010, Tolentino recalled that for many contributing writers, the process of writing became a way to bid farewell to their loved ones, who may never return, and thus required a painful but essential confrontation with sadness. Tolentino further argued that writing served as a form of therapy, helping participants work through the trauma linked to the continued absence of their loved ones. Despite the associated pain, many found the act of writing to be liberating. This anthology of testimonials pays tribute to those lost. It includes letters, poems, bio narratives, and various other forms of expression that convey myriad emotions—guilt, hopelessness, anger, yearning, hope, and resilience. The authenticity of their contributions makes this collection a deeply resonant literary work.

The compilation illustrates the intricate relationship between cultural trauma and collective memory. It ties together the objective portrayal of the traumatic experiences of the *Desaparecidos* with the subjective narratives shared by their surviving relatives. Through this process, cultural trauma emerges as collective memories seeking acknowledgment and catharsis through the written word.

Again, another peculiar attribute of this collection is the impromptu writing of the testimonial literature. It is said that in spontaneous writing, the process of expressing feelings can be as important as the final product. Writers may create testimonials as part of a cathartic or healing exercise, prioritizing personal expression and emotional release rather than crafting a polished narrative. This approach can facilitate healing for the writer and readers, who might see their own experiences reflected in writing testimonials.

## **Methodology**

A rigorous and interdisciplinary methodology is essential to conduct a critical analysis of a compilation of testimonial literature on *Desaparecidos* (the forcibly disappeared). This type of literature is politically and emotionally charged. It is both a literary and political artifact, marked by its dual function as a literary text and a historical witness. The appropriate methodology for this research combines literary analysis, historical contextualization, and critical theory—particularly cultural trauma theory.

A rigorous critical analysis must begin with deep historical contextualization. Testimonial literature on *Desaparecidos* is intimately bound to specific state apparatuses of violence, often emerging from periods of dictatorship, civil war, or counterinsurgency. For example, in the Philippines, the narratives of enforced disappearances are entwined with the legacy of Martial Law under Ferdinand Marcos and later human rights violations during the Duterte administration. Understanding

the period's legal frameworks, military strategies, and resistance movements is essential for decoding these texts' urgency and coded language. Without this contextual grounding, critical interpretation risks abstraction or dehistoricization—detaching the literature from the lived reality it seeks to preserve

Yet, in a critical study of testimonial literature, the literary dimension emerges as the most dominant analytical lens. While historical and traumatic contexts are undeniably integral to understanding testimonial narratives—particularly those involving the Philippine Desaparecidos—it is through the formal qualities of the text, such as narrative structure, voice, imagery, and rhetorical strategies, that the testimonies acquire their full expressive and affective power. The testimonial is not merely a repository of factual recollection or psychological catharsis; it is a crafted literary artifact that engages the reader through its aesthetic choices and symbolic resonances. History and trauma provide essential context and thematic substance, yet they function as secondary layers that are mediated, interpreted, and shaped by literary form. This literary construction ultimately transforms private pain into a public act of witness and cultural memory.

Close reading becomes the initial step to apply this literary witnessing and methodology—a detailed and analytical approach that carefully examines the texts' language, structure, and literary devices. The literary craft and expression become the focus of the evaluation. Another approach is thematic analysis, which involves identifying and exploring key themes that emerge from the testimonial writings. Though the contributors' outputs are pretty much the same, it is imperative to give attention to the authenticity of the voice behind the testimonials. Assessing authenticity involves examining how effectively the texts convey the lived experiences of the individuals involved, including their struggles, emotions, and reflections. An authentic voice resonates with the reader, offering a deep sense of the personal and collective trauma associated with the events being recounted.

## Results and Discussion

### *Theorizing the Narrative of Suffering: The Role of Witnessing, Memory, and Trauma in Capturing the Collective Experience*

In *Pagtatagpo sa Kabilang Dulo: Panitikang Testimonial ng Desaparecidos*, trauma takes the appearance of not only the brutal disappearances of individuals but also the lingering agony endured by those left behind. Families of the missing relive the horror—from the moment of abduction to the physical and psychological torture suffered by their loved ones to the endless, futile search for answers. This unresolved grief and uncertainty prolongs the suffering, transforming it into a collective wound



that marks entire communities. The disappearance of the *Desaparecidos* does not end with their physical absence; rather, it continues through the painful waiting, the fragmented memories, and the irrevocable changes in the identities of those left searching. Their lives are permanently reshaped, haunted by a past that refuses closure and an unhealed trauma that extends beyond personal grief into the fabric of cultural and historical consciousness.

The Cultural Trauma Theory provides a framework for analyzing how the trauma of disappearance is not just an individual loss but a deep, collective wound that reshapes group identity, memory, and historical consciousness. Some of the most significant academic contributions to trauma studies have been made by scholars such as Prof. Cathy Caruth (English and Comparative Literature), Prof. Shoshana Felman (Comparative Literature), and Prof. Jeffrey Alexander (Sociology). Caruth extended Freud's concept of "traumatic neurosis" and linked it to post-traumatic stress disorder, defining trauma as an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events, with responses that often manifest belatedly and in uncontrollable, repetitive occurrences (1996, p.11).

Felman (2002) built upon Caruth's work, addressing the notion of delayed or belated trauma. She argued that when trauma is recalled belatedly, it allows victims and survivors to bear witness to their harrowing experiences, giving voice to their suffering and making their pain visible to others. This concept of delayed reliving and the importance of witnessing—both as an act of listening and empathizing—became central to the formulation of Literary Trauma Theory.

While Caruth and Felman primarily focused on individual trauma, Jeffrey Alexander introduced the concept of *cultural trauma*, distinguishing it from personal psychological wounds. Unlike individual trauma, which is an immediate emotional response to a catastrophic event, cultural trauma is not instantly perceived but instead develops over time through collective memory, assimilation, and signification. Cultural trauma, Alexander explains (2004), occurs when members of a group experience a profound and horrifying event that leaves an indelible mark on their collective consciousness, permanently altering their identity and reshaping their future in fundamental and irrevocable ways.

Unlike personal/individual trauma, which manifests as an individual psychological response to a catastrophic event, cultural trauma develops through a shared process of mourning, remembrance, and social recognition. The families of the *Desaparecidos* experience not only the immediate pain of losing a loved one but also prolonged and unresolved suffering due to the uncertainty surrounding the fate of the missing. The absence of closure—whether in the form of bodies, answers, or justice—

keeps the trauma alive, making it an ongoing collective experience rather than a single moment of crisis.

In the case of *Pagtatagpo sa Kabilang Dulo: Panitikang Testimonial ng Desaparecidos*, the Cultural Trauma Theory, as conceptualized by Jeffrey Alexander and other scholars, plays a critical role in understanding the collective grief, pain, and hopelessness experienced by the families of the *Desaparecidos*—individuals who have been forcibly disappeared by oppressive regimes, often in contexts of political violence and state terrorism. This theory provides a framework for analyzing how the trauma of disappearance is not just an individual loss but a deep, collective wound that reshapes group identity, memory, and historical consciousness.

### *Analysis of the Literary Craft of Testimonial Literature for the Desaparecidos*

In examining the testimonial literature concerning the *Desaparecidos* with a primary focus on its literary construction, rather than treating these texts solely as historical documentation or psychological expressions of trauma, the analysis foregrounds the deliberate literary techniques employed by authors to shape testimony into compelling narratives. Close reading gives attention to narrative structure, voice, and tropes. While the political and traumatic contexts inform the content, this study asserts that the literary craft—the shaping of language, form, and symbolism—renders these testimonies powerful cultural artifacts.

### *The Weight of Words: Themes and Authentic Voices in Testimonial Writings for the Desaparecidos*

#### *The theme of Emotional Dislocation*

The most apparent theme in the literary texts compiled in *Pagtatagpo sa Kabilang Dulo: Panitikang Testimonial ng Desaparecidos* is grief and loss. The bereaved would feel a gamut of emotions, but all sum up to grief and loss. In describing the experience of losing her son, Jonas, Editha Burgos describes it as losing the capacity to express or the inability to articulate because the pain, sadness, frustration, and hopelessness put you in a state of numbness that leaves you speechless. In the poem “*Prime of Freedom*”, a mother’s love needs telling (2009, p.133):

*Need to talk but cannot  
Need to cry, tears flow not  
The words are missing  
And the teardrops bottled*

*Numbness has set it  
No, this is not a sin  
For I am ever conscious  
This too is superfluous.*

The heavy weight of emotions is a struggle for Isabelita Batralo who felt the load too much to carry. Losing his brother Cesar put her in prolonged agony of waiting. She claimed in a testimonial poem titled “*Para Sa Iyo, Kapatid Ko*”, there will be no let up to her longing for the chance to see his brother Cesar (2009, 124):

*Hindi matatapos ang paghihirap ng kalooban  
Dalahin na kay bigat, kailan mababawasan  
Mga katanungan na wala man lang kasagutan  
Kailan, paano, at saan kita matatagpuan?*

Nights are unbearable for Coni Empeno who is haunted by the nightmare that befell her daughter Karen. A mother feels more her desolation at night when she remembers her missing daughter. In the poem, “*Para sa Iyo, Anak*” (2009, p.156) she confessed:

*Sa tuwing sasapit ang aking pagtulog  
luha at hinagpis ang siyang bumabalot  
naisin ko mang ibaon sa limot  
subalit di kaya at binabangungot*

*Sa buong magdamag mga mata’y dilat  
Ang dilag na anak sa isipa’y yakap  
nang dahil sa kanya’y pamilya’y namulat  
Sa dusa ng bayan lalo na ang mahirap*

When two members of her family disappeared and were feared dead, the enormity of the loss is beyond acceptance. Liza, daughter of Rogelio Calubad, mourned not for one but two Desaparecidos. In the poem “*Mahal Ka Namin*” (2009, p.166), she claimed that she could hardly pick the broken pieces of herself:

*Ako ay nasa isang madilim na silid  
Walang anumang liwanag na naaaninag ang aking mata  
Hindi ko alam kung saan ang malambot na kama  
Hindi ko rin alam kung makikita ang aking mata.*

In the twelfth year of her father's disappearance, Ghay Portajada seeks solace from the sea, particularly from its waves, hoping to find the answer—her father's whereabouts, Armando Portajada. The poem "Dagat" (2009, p.258) speaks of affective yearning for the physical presence of a long-lost father whose disappearance has run for more than a decade.

*Sa dagundong ng alon  
Kita'y hinahanap  
Ako'y nangungusap na ikaw  
ay aking makita.*

*Patuloy kitang hinihintay at hinahanap  
Tinatanong sa alon kung ikaw ay nasaan  
Ngunit tila maging ang ingay ng alon  
Ay walang balita.*

In June 2006, Gloria Soco left her husband and two children in Manila to visit her ailing father in Samar. She never returned. Apparently, she took a free ride with her uncle and his companions en route to Samar. The vehicle was apprehended and disappeared. On Mother's Day, two years after Gloria's abduction, daughter Lydia wrote a moving letter (2009, p.188):

*Hindi ako magtatanong kung ano ang kalagayan mo, pero sana hindi ka nahihirapan. Minsan, iniisip ko na magising na ako kung ito ay panaginip lang pero hindi. Nangyayari ito nang walang may gusto. Hindi mauubos ang mga luha ko tuwing maiisip at maalala kita. Sana nandito ka ngayon, mabati, makausap at mayakap ka anumang okasyon ang dumating.*

Dee Ayroso composed a letter for her missing husband, Honor. Entitled "Isang Liham sa Isang Asawang Apoy na Nawawala", the letter reveals how the disappearance of Honor has debilitated her from being the guide and life to others who rely on her for strength (2009, p.78):

*Mahal ko, alam kong malaki ang nabawas sa kakayahan kong magbigay-ilaw, at init, at naapektuhan ako ng hagupit ng malalakas na hangin at ulan. Pero nandito pa rin ako at nagsisikap magsilbing liwanag sa munti mang paraan ay nagbibigay tanglaw sa katotohananng pumupunit sa dilim kasama ang iba pang tulad natin, mga sulo ng bayan na di mauubos ang liwanag sa pagsasama-sama.*

Belet Batralo's father was abducted in the afternoon of December 21, 2006, after a meeting with fellow rally organizers from Southern Luzon. Cesar Batralo never appeared since then. Belet found her voice in the poem "Luha ang Kapiling" as she declared that her repressed emotions get released only when alone at night (2009, p. 118):

*Impit na hikbi sa kalaliman nitong gabi  
Parang inakay na walang inahin sa tabi  
Hinimay-himay bawat hibla ng pangyayari  
Kung ano ang pagkukulang at pagkakamali*

*Mga patak ng luha'y kay hirap pigilin  
Mga tanong sa sarili'y kay hirap sagutin  
Katulad ng iba na patuloy na naninimdim  
Umaasang isang araw sila ay darating.*

*The theme of Resistance in Pursuit of Justice and Truth*

Another prominent theme in this anthology of testimonial texts is the powerful voice of resistance in the pursuit of justice and truth. While the testimonies capture deep grief and sorrow, the contributors seize the opportunity to express their yearning for justice, their struggle for accountability, and their quest for the truth to emerge. Many narratives highlight the resilience and resolve of families and communities in the face of adversity, illustrating their relentless fight against impunity. In the poem titled "Desaparecidos" by Adora Faye de Vera (2009, p.23), she does not hold back her emotions and boldly declares:

*Hahanapin kita sa angil ng punglo  
Sa tinik ng gubat silahis ng sulo  
Ipagtatanong ka sa libong kamao  
Sa kaway ng bandera't dagundong ng maso.*

This opening stanza is already powerful, clearly articulating her intentions. The persona is resolutely committed to finding her beloved, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. This is an angry poem, likely written immediately after a session focused on cultural trauma. However, it is also crafted with a sense of purpose, as the personal narrative intertwines with the broader mission of the movement.

Firmly resolved to take action after ascertaining the fate of her father, Belet resolved that people responsible for his forced disappearance would be facing the consequence of the trial with the people in a united front. This armed struggle is bent

on claiming justice and asserting their basic rights. Belet Batralo's poem titled "Laban" resonates with this sentiment (2009, p.123):

*Matukoy ko lang sana kung nasaan ka na  
Nang bangungot sa pagkawala'y matapos na  
Pananagutin sino pa man ang may sala  
Maniningil, kasama ng sanlakang masa*

*Kapit-bisig na haharap sa ambang laban  
Sa pamahalaan na nagbibingi-bingihan  
Pagkat iisa lang, mithiing ipaglaban.  
Katarungan at karapatan, hangad na makamtan.*

For Dee Ayroso, she has long accepted the impossibility of seeing the husband again but she vowed to remain strong and undaunted in fighting for cause of the Desaparecidos. This she vowed to do in a fierce poem titled "Search" (2009, p.79):

*Pero kahit hindi man kita matagpuan  
Alam kong gusto mong makita ko  
Ay hindi lang ikaw at katarungan  
Kundi ang lakas at tapang sa pagsuong sa laban.*

Karen Empeno was activist Oscar's idealistic, progressive, and passionate daughter. Her Sociology course at UP Diliman and her father's radical ideologies propelled her to get involved in the movement even at a young age. Her mother, Coni, took it upon herself to continue the noble undertaking of her daughter—a pledge she swore to Karen through the poem "Para sa Iyo Anak" (2009, p.156).

*Huwag pabayaang ang ganitong lagay  
bayang sinisinta'y dapat ipaglaban  
Sa mga namumuno na lubhang gahaman  
dapat maputol na itong kabuhungan*

*Sa aking sarili ay naipangako  
sinimulan ng anak di dapat mabigo  
Kanyang ipinaglaban huwag isusuko  
ipagpapatuloy gawaing nahinto.*

Through the essay "Lapis", Ipe Soco, who has long been searching for his mother Gloria since her disappearance in June 2006, commits to writing no matter how

painful the words flow from the pen if only to stop the forced disappearances. (2009, p.192):

*Nakalimutan ko na ang pakiramdam kung paano paikutin at paglaruan ng aking mga daliri ang lapis bago magsulat ng mga salitang gusto kong sabihin, o di kaya ay 'ung mga salitang magbibigay ng buhay sa aking nararamdaman.....Magtatasa uli ako ng panibagong lapis, nang matulis na matulis, kasintulis ng dilang naniningil sa estadong kriminal.*

Ghay Portajada views her husband's disappearance as a catalyst for bigger things in the future. In the poem titled "Ikaw na Nawawala", she claimed that Armando may be absent physically but his ideas, his principles perpetuate for the next generation, for the next big revolution (2009, p.257):

*Ikaw na nawawala, kinuha ka sa amin  
kinuha ka masang iyong pinaglilingkuran  
Kinuha ka sa sinapupunan  
Ng iyong ina!*

*Kinuha ka sa puso pero hindi sa diwa;  
dahil ang prinsipyong iyong pinanday;  
tangan ng mga manggagawa, magsasaka  
at sambayanang iyong minahal.*

Belet Batralo captured in the poem "Mulong" how the disappearance of fellow activist Romulo Robinos impact the future of the organization. The accountable will pay, justice will be served, and the forced disappearances will stop (2009, p. 264):

*Kalayaang mithi, mapapagtagumpayan sa pakikibaka  
Hindi magtatagal, katanunga'y masasagot na  
Tanaw sa silangang mapula, katarungang asam ng bawat isa  
Ang mga Desaparecidos ay makikita at di na madadagdagan pa.*

#### *Tracing Authenticity of Voice in Testimonial Works for the Desaparecidos*

In analyzing testimonial works related to the Desaparecidos, the concept of authenticity of voice emerges as a critical factor that shapes the reader's understanding of the profound experience of loss, resistance, and the quest for justice. These elements are intricately woven into the themes of the narratives, revealing not just personal struggles but also collective sentiments and a united front against oppressive authorities. The exploration of the authenticity of voice in the testimonial works

surrounding the Desaparecidos reveals a gamut of emotions and collective struggles experienced by families of the disappeared. These poems, essays, letters, and anecdotes articulate personal grief and serve as powerful declarations of resistance and call for justice.

The theme of emotional dislocation is the most prominent in this collection of testimonials. The writers express a spectrum of emotions that converge on the central feelings of grief and loss. In every occasion that these writers allow their emotions to surface, become vulnerable, and let go of emotions in their raw form, that very instance is authenticity. For instance, Editha Burgos articulates her loss through a haunting sense of numbness that eliminates her ability to express her pain. Her poem “Prime of Freedom” captures the struggle of a mother burdened by the weight of unarticulated sorrow, powerfully reflecting her emotional state and deep longing (2009, p.133):

*I want to pray  
But what do I say?  
What do I ask for  
While prostrate on the floor?*

Similarly, Belet Batralo’s poignant expression of prolonged agony in her poem “Pag-Asa sa Buhay” captures her unyielding longing for her brother, emphasizing that the pain of loss is a relentless, all-consuming presence. Her raw, heartfelt lines convey an authenticity rooted in lived experience (2009, p.122):

*Yakap ang hinanakit  
Pagkawala mong pilit  
Sa didbdib ay may galit  
Ang sa iyo’y mga dumagit.*

Tales of haunting memories, as depicted by Coni Empeno in “Para sa Iyo, Anak,” describes the pervasive nature of grief in the nightly musings of a mother longing for her missing daughter. The authenticity in Empeno’s voice conveys the painful intersection of personal and familiar trauma, showcasing how the night amplifies her grief (2009, p.156):

*Sa tuwing sasapit ang aking pagtulog  
luha at hinagpis ang siyang bumabalot...  
Sa buong magdamag mga mata’y dilat  
ang dilag na anak sa isipa’y yakap.*



The bereaved family members deliver the most authentic expressions that give face to the unbearable suffering they have agonized over since the disappearance of their lost ones. The most excruciating is losing two. When Elizabeth Calubad lost both husband Rogelio and son Gabriel in a forced abduction, she was reeling from hopelessness. In desperation, she wrote in “Mahal Ka Namin” (2009, p.166): “Ako ay nasa isang madilim na silid./Walang anumang liwanag na naaninag ang aking mata.” In the same manner, Nuki Calubid (2009, p.172) wrote a letter the same way his father, Prudencio, would have it worded if he were alive and sending them one. In “Lihim ni Kahon”, the message is simple but poignant. In this touching letter, Nuki compares the disappeared father to a ‘jack in the box’ who would appear when she least expects it. The father would have connected with them if only this was possible. Nevertheless, this connection will only happen if she feels him in her heart. He could be anytime and anywhere because of that unbreakable bond that connects him to them, which has no limiting dimension. (2009, p.172):

“Ako ay si Kahon. Naghihintay mahanap at mabuksan. Ako’y nakabalot sa gusto mo. Buksan mo lang ako para mahanap mo ang mga sagot na hinahanap mo. Ang espasyo ko sa loob ko ay mahahalagang bagay para lang sa iyo.”

Similarly, the same tone of filial piety flows here as a son tenderly expresses his gratitude to his mother. Through the poem “Salamat”, Mother Gloria is fondly remembered with gratitude by son Ipe Soco (2009, p.187):

Hindi ko na halos maalala  
Kung kailan huling nabanggit ang mga salita  
Mga katagang magpapakita  
kung gaano ka sa akin kahalaga

Sa dilim ay aandap-andap  
Tuloy pa rin sa paghahanap  
Walang mahanap, walang mahagilap  
walang ibang masabi kundi salamat

In a narrative titled “Obet”, Shirley Pascual (2009) described her husband’s life as a paradox. His life transformation was ascribed to his involvement in the organization. Or could it be that much of the organization had transformed because of his contribution? In the character sketch she made for her husband, she put:

Ang buhay niya mismo ang patunay na posible ang pagbabago hindi lamang sa lipunan kundi mismo sa mga taong nagsusulong ng pagbabago nito. Nawala man

si Obet at di muling babalik, mananatili sa akin na asawa niya at kasama ang naipunla niyang pagbabago sa sarili, sa aming pamilya at sa sambayanang nakikibaka. (250)

Through the themes of emotional dislocation and resistance, the authenticity of voice in the testimonial works for the *Desaparecidos* emerges as a critical element in understanding the complex dynamics of grief, struggle, and the fight for justice. By authentically sharing their stories, the authors document their personal experiences and contribute to a collective narrative that challenges oppression and calls for accountability. In doing so, they honor the memory of their loved ones while empowering their communities to resist and advocate for truth and justice. In the vibrant tapestry of these narratives, the authenticity of voice serves as both a profound reckoning with loss and a rallying cry for social change, capturing the enduring spirit of those who dare to remember and speak out.

### *Analyzing the Literary Craft and Expression of the Testimonial Narratives for Philippine Desaparecidos*

#### *Selected Tropes Used in Pagtatagpo sa Kabilang Dulo: Panitikang Testimonial ng Desaparecidos*

During the series of workshops, the facilitators require the contributors to think of a safe space in which they feel secure, free, comfortable, and happy. This initial process leads the participants to conceive tropes that best describe their situation. Some have responded by giving in to their personal concerns, while some relate their safe space to their *Desaparecidos*. Romy Ancheta, having his disappeared brother Leopoldo in mind, came up with “home” as his safe space; Belet Batralo, felt the “flag” meaningfully captures her idea of a safe space or place; Editha Burgos thought not for herself but for son Jonas’ fascination for the “full moon” which perhaps may suit to his idea of a safe space; Linda Cadapan felt “hug” represents her safe space for missing daughter Sherlyn; Coni Empeno chose “book” as an all time companion; “Nature” is a safe refuge for Lisa Calubad while Nuki Calubid pick “box” for its association with the missing father; Ipe Soco saw “pencil” as his reliable companion to his search for mother Gloria; Criz Hizarsa looked at the “beach sand” as a place to go for her and husband Abner; Ghay considered the “frying pan” as both her stronghold and quickfix; For Lolit Robinos, the “television” is the harbinger of truth and therefore gives her the needed calm; Aya Santos, the daughter of desaparecido Leo Santos, wished she were a free as a “bird.”

The tropes created by the contributors to the testimonial literature for the Desaparecidos illuminate profound layers of emotional depth and significance. Each selected metaphor not only embodies the personal experiences of loss but also conveys broader thematic elements that resonate within the collective memory and identity framework. The analysis reveals how these metaphors serve as vessels for expressing grief, longing, and resilience while simultaneously creating a sense of shared experience among those affected by enforced disappearances.

#### *Tropes for Emotional Resonance and Personal Connections*

The metaphors reveal the nuanced ways in which individuals process their grief and longing for their loved ones. For instance, Romy Ancheta's metaphor of "home" evokes a fundamental human longing for security and belonging, which is shattered by his brother's absence. It highlights the emotional void created by disappearance and the struggle to reclaim that sense of safety in a reality marred by loss. Similarly, Linda Cadapan's use of "hug" encapsulates the deep yearning for connection and affection, underscoring how such physical gestures are imbued with emotional significance when a loved one is missing.

Moreover, metaphors like Belet Batralo's "flag" and Ipe Soco's "pencil" illustrate how personal mourning intersects with collective activism. The flag serves as a symbol of hope, identity, and a commitment to justice, embodying the struggle against oppression faced by individuals and communities. As a tool for expression, the pencil highlights the transformative power of writing in confronting grief and preserving memory, emphasizing that personal narratives contribute to a larger narrative of resistance.

#### *Symbolism of Nature and Everyday Objects*

The metaphors of nature and everyday objects—such as "nature," "frying pan," and "television"—serve as anchors that help individuals navigate their emotional landscapes. As a symbol of refuge and renewal, nature offers solace amid the chaos of loss, suggesting that healing and beauty coexist with grief. The frying pan, representing domesticity and nourishment, evokes the routines and practices that connect individuals to their loved ones and provide emotional sustenance.

In contrast, Lolit Robinos' "television" symbolizes the quest for truth and the need for awareness concerning the disappeared. It emphasizes the role of media and information in shaping public understanding and fostering a sense of accountability, thus linking personal experiences to broader societal issues. This connection between

the personal and the public underscores the importance of storytelling in creating awareness and driving collective action.

#### *Tropes for the Thematic Elements of Freedom and Resistance*

The metaphors also explore themes of freedom and resistance, particularly in Aya Santos' longing to be a "bird." This imagery captures the desire to transcend the pain of loss and gain liberation from grief. It symbolizes a yearning for reconciliation with the past and the hope for a future free from suffering. Such expressions remind us that the quest for justice and closure is intertwined with the longing for personal freedom.

Overall, the tropes created by these writers become a powerful expression of individual and collective struggles, transforming personal grief into broader themes of identity, resistance, and action. The contributors' selected symbols foster a deeper understanding of the impact of enforced disappearances on families and communities, emphasizing the significance of memory in the ongoing fight for justice. Through their evocative metaphors, these writers honor their missing loved ones and contribute to a larger narrative that seeks to keep their stories alive and visible within the collective consciousness.

#### *Literary Expression: Diction, Tone, Narrative Structure of Testimonial Literature*

In order to make the participants write, they were involved in a workshop that subjected them to a specific set of activities that served as a stimulus to trigger emotional responses. This workshop procedure was applied to all of them, which makes it no surprise that the outputs are almost the same. This is not to exclude the fact that they have the same context, experience, dilemma, and political and social background, so their testimonial works read all the same. So, the similarity in their works is really expected.

In the testimonial texts of *Pagtatagpo sa Kabilang Dulo: Panitikang Testimonial ng Desaparecidos*, emotionally charged words convey feelings in a direct and impactful way. Words like "loss," "grief," "hope," and "love" are straightforward yet heavy with meaning, allowing readers to grasp the depth of the authors' emotions without ambiguity. Even simple words can create vivid mental images that evoke strong emotional responses. For instance, phrases like "cold night" or "empty chair" can elicit feelings of sadness and longing through their evocative power. Dee Ayroso put her longing in a simple but very touching wish (78): Alam kong habang tumitingala ako sa gabi, makikita pa rin kita habang nagbibigay tanglaw ka mula sa

itim na kalangitan, kasama ng iba pang mga sulo na naging mga tala na ang liwanag ay tumatagos sa walang hanggan.

The family of James Balao has never ceased in hoping for his appearance: Still searching, still not knowing. But the silence and the brick walls will never rob us out of our faith and hope (2009, p.108)...Yet in the poem “Laban” by Belet Batralo (p.122), she confesses her vulnerability with the lines: Bakit ba ang pagtangis ay hindi maiwasan?/Tuwing naaalala, kahapong nagdaan/ Paghahanap ay hindi alam kung kailan/ Subalit hindi susuko, hanggang matagpuan. In an open letter for husband Leo, Elizabeth Principe’s fierce words resonate with a message hard to ignore (p.286): Ang magbuhos ng dugo para sa bayan ay kagitingang hindi malilimutan. Ang katawang inialay sa lupang mahal, mayaman sa aral at kadakilaan.

Using simple yet emotionally charged words in testimonial literature enhances the narratives’ clarity, authenticity, and emotional power. This choice of language allows writers to communicate profound experiences and feelings, fostering a deeper understanding and connection with their audiences. By prioritizing accessibility and emotional resonance, testimonial literature becomes a powerful means of sharing personal stories and communal struggles, ultimately contributing to social awareness and change.

Testimonial writings often reflect personal experiences and authentic voices. Since these testimonial works are creative outputs from a workshop, it is not as if simplicity is imposed upon them. The writing has become simple and straightforward because they all possess the voice of authenticity because of the kind of experience they have been through. Their simple language enhances their narrative’s sincerity, allowing them to express raw emotions without being overshadowed by elaborate vocabulary or complicated structures. This authenticity resonates deeply with readers, fostering empathy and connection.

Finally, a testimonial work that uses simple, emotionally charged words can evoke a sense of shared humanity. Readers are more likely to empathize with the author’s experiences when they can easily grasp the emotions being expressed, leading to a stronger emotional bond. In the case of this anthology, *Pagtatagpo sa Kabilang Dulo: Panitikang Testimonial ng Desaparecidos*, the outputs of the writers often deal with complex and multifaceted emotions. Had it been written with superfluous language, the complex emotions would not have made sense because they would have become excessively dramatic or sentimental. Simple language can effectively convey these complexities by distilling intricate feelings into relatable terms, making the emotional burdens of the experiences more tangible for readers.

## **Conclusion**

The exploration of testimonial literature concerning the Desaparecidos offers a profound insight into the lived experiences shaped by enforced disappearances of the Desaparecidos. By delving into these texts, we uncover the poignant language, structure, and literary techniques that give voice to experiences steeped in trauma and loss. A recurring theme prominently featured in these narratives is emotional dislocation, which emphasizes the profound grief that permeates contributors' stories, underscoring the personal toll of such tragedies. This anthology serves as a powerful platform, illuminating the pain of loss and the relentless pursuit of truth and connection by families grappling with these heart-wrenching experiences. Beyond individual sorrow, these works illustrate the collective trauma that arises from enforced disappearances. They weave narratives of resilience, where contributors rise against the backdrop of impunity, advocating fervently for justice and accountability. Each testimonial encapsulates a spirit of hope and determination, enriching the overall narrative of the Desaparecidos and illustrating a collective struggle against systemic oppression.

In the "Pagtatagpo sa Kabilang Dulo" workshops, participants were inspired to reflect on their own safe spaces, which led to the creation of evocative metaphors that convey their profound grief and longing for absent loved ones. These metaphors go beyond personal expression; they connect individual mourning to broader themes of identity and collective action, enhancing our understanding of the significant impact that enforced disappearances have on families and communities. The language in these testimonials is strikingly emotive, characterized by simple yet powerful words such as "loss," "grief," and "hope." This choice of diction constructs a vivid emotional landscape that resonates deeply with readers. The clarity and authenticity of the straightforward language allow for genuine emotional expression, fostering empathy and creating connections between personal experiences and larger societal narratives.

Ultimately, the testimonial literature emerges as a crucial medium for raising social awareness and inspiring change. It honors the memories of those who have disappeared while advocating for justice and truth, ensuring their stories remain alive in the collective consciousness. Through these narratives, we are reminded of the strength found in shared sorrow and the relentless quest for healing and justice amidst adversity.

## **Conflicts of Interests**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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