The Diasporic Subject in Ariel Dorfman’s
Heading South, Looking North

Sophia A. McClennen
The Pennsylvania State University

Esta es la historia de una pesadilla.
Y de su comprensión y superación por medio del arte.
Todos hemos vivido, hemos visto vivir, hemos soñado esta pesadilla.
No todos hemos sabido superarla.

This is the story of a nightmare.
And of its understanding and overcoming through art.
We have all lived, have seen live, have dreamed this nightmare.
Not all of us have known how to overcome it.

―Ariel Dorfman in El absurdo entre cuatro paredes

Dorfman wrote this epigraph to his first book in Chile in 1968
during a time when hopes for revolutionary change were sweeping
the globe. Little did he know that his musing on the ways that art
can overcome nightmares would undergo an extreme test after
September 11, 1973 when Salvador Allende’s presidency was brut-
ally overthrown by Augusto Pinochet and all those who had
worked with Allende, including Dorfman, became victims of a
violent military dictatorship. In an act of foreshadowing that has
consistently haunted Dorfman’s literary career, these first words
could also be used to open his memoir.¹ Heading South, Looking
North is surrounded by pain and guided by hope. To read Ariel
Dorfman’s memoir is to engage with some of the most pressing
questions concerning the ties between literary representation and

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historical event; art and activism; and writing memoir and recording history. *Heading South, Looking North* asks the reader to play an active role in the recovery and recollection of Dorfman’s life, and his memoir highlights the multiple ways that his life story intertwines personal memory and the history of the Americas.²

Paralleling Amitav Ghosh’s notion of the “shadow line” as the blurry, shifting boundary between the self and the nation that is both “absurd illusion and a source of terrifying violence” (n.p.), Dorfman’s memoir points to the conflicts that distinguish identity from identity markers. These conflicts between the self and the terms used to define the self are alternately imposed and desired, external and internal, national and transnational, material and imaginary, fixed and fluid. Identity is not only shaped by the tensions between agency and cultural politics; it is also governed by competing forces of time and space, history and nation. A carefully constructed text that tests the form of memoir and the boundaries of bicultural identity, Dorfman’s *Heading South, Looking North* requires a reading that moves beyond many of the traditional critical categories used to understand ethnic, diasporic life writing.

Academic studies of US ethnic literature, exemplified by the early work of Werner Sollors, were originally organized around a dominant critical paradigm that understood the ethnic self as bicultural: divided across two cultures, two languages, two identities, struggling between assimilation to and dissimilation from mainstream culture, caught between dominant and minority culture.³ This focus on the bifurcated subject receded when ethnic studies increasingly considered the self as hybrid, multiple, and plentiful. With the work of such scholars and creative writers as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, axes of identity registered a number of markers that exceeded traditional ethnic categories and included gender, sexuality, and class. Recent globalization theory has expanded further on this sense of self by considering the subject in relation to local and transnational spaces (Mendieta; de la Campa). In addition, the concepts of postcolonial, subaltern, and postnational chart interpretations of ethnic writing as seen, for example, in the work of Azade Seyhan.

In a parallel vein, the theoretical bases for autobiography studies have shifted recently. Sidonic Smith and Julia Watson
provide a periodization of critical approaches to life writing; they highlight three key phases: 1) studies that focused on the way that autobiographies record the life of a great man; 2) studies that problematized the representation of the subject; and 3) contemporary studies that focus on the "referentiality and relationality of life narrative" (139). The first phase stressed the agency and autonomy of the autobiographer, while the second performed a complete critical reversal. The third strikes a balance between the extremes of these two positions, while also highlighting the craft of life writing. Most current scholarship on life writing engages at some level with the dualist representation of the self as agentic or socially determined.

In what follows I would like to propose a reading of Ariel Dorfman's memoir, *Heading South, Looking North*, that argues that his text can be used to test the limits of many of the critical trends in studies of ethnic, diasporic life writing. Careful attention to Dorfman's literary construction of his identity reveals that many of the major theoretical approaches employed to understand this type of writing miss the complex interaction of competing ontologies. Dorfman's text has two intersecting and overlapping critical frameworks that shape the way that he narrates his life. The first is a strategy of duality, where the self is described as interacting with two oppositional social forces, and the second is a strategy of polyvalence, where the self is described as a hybrid that cannot be represented through dualisms. These gestures combine to form what I want to call the "diasporic subject" found in the life writing of exiles and the displaced. The notion of the diasporic obviously engages with Dorfman's experience of triple dispersal—thrice exiled, his attachment to space is constantly in question—and also reflects his Jewish heritage, since, well before his birth, his parents' families had experienced a number of forced migrations. My understanding of the diasporic, however, resonates beyond these historical particularities, and its etymology suggests the intricate ways that Dorfman's text layers subjectivity. "Diaspora" comes from the Greek "diaspeirein," "to spread about," where "dia" means "apart" and "speirein" means "to sow or scatter." On the one hand, scattering suggests the polyvalent self and, on the other hand, sowing suggests the binary tension between the attributes found in the seed and those found in the land. These two notions
inseparably traverse Dorfman’s memoir.

To trace this theory in terms of ethnic studies, Dorfman’s memoir, at first reading, seems to present us with a bicultural self that straddles the borders of a North American, individualistic, materialist subjectivity and one that is Latin American, collective, telluric, and political. From a US source of identity, Dorfman’s text stresses a sense of autonomy, of agency, and of responsibility; and the confessional mode he uses reflects an ontology that emanates from an Anglo-European tradition. Alternatively the text has a nonlinear, circular structure typical of Latin American personal storytelling that functions as a counterpoint. This division of the self between the north and the south, especially between English and Spanish, locates his text within Latino life writing, and we might comparatively read *Heading South, Looking North* against texts that also perform similar divisions like Richard Rodríguez’s *Days of Obligation*, Cherrie Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years*, or Reinaldo Arenas’s *Antes que anochezca* (Before Night Falls).

Yet, on closer reading, these two competing visions of identity are shown to be porous and are accompanied by further *mestizajes*: Dorfman represents himself as caught not only between the north and the south; he also reveals that his identity is also a product of his European, Jewish heritage: “part Yankee, part Chilean, a pinch of Jew, a mestizo in search of a center” (220). The child of Jewish grandparents who had fled anti-Semitic persecution in Russia and Eastern Europe, Dorfman’s identity is marked by a long legacy of diaspora and, as mentioned, his exile from Chile after Pinochet’s coup is his third. This third exile is extraordinarily violent and causes Dorfman substantial trauma, which further troubles his ability to narrate his life.

In addition to this being the story of a man raised in an atmosphere of border crossings, Dorfman’s memoir is the story of a global writer: it is the story of a man who loves to write, whose writing caused his exile and saved his life. As a writer whose thesis focused on the pastoral plays of Shakespeare and whose first published book analyzed the theater of Harold Pinter, Dorfman is also a global reader and world literature constitutes one of the major sources of his cultural identity. Knowing Dorfman’s love of renaissance literature, for instance, is essential to understanding
how his memoir’s chapter titles intertext with Spanish Golden Age literature, in particular *Don Quijote*. The memoir titles all begin with the phrase “A Chapter Dealing With. . .” in English and “En el que. . .” in Spanish which parallel the chapter titles from *Don Quijote* many of which begin with the phrase “which deals with. . .” or “que trata de. . .” and “de lo que. . .”. Of course, similar to Cervantes’s text, Dorfman’s chapter titles are a ruse and what they signal is not always what the reader encounters. If *Don Quijote* is the story of a frustrated, but stubborn, reader who refuses to have the forces of history thwart his worldview, then Dorfman’s memoir is the story of an equally tenacious, if quirky, writer, an identity which also links his memoir to another Golden Age genre he admires, the picaresque. In many respects his memoir, in the tradition of Jean Paul Sartre’s autobiography *Les mots* (*The Words*), recounts the formation of a writer.

So, while it may seem that *Heading South, Looking North* suggests a bicultural identity, a binary between north and south, culturally Dorfman is far more hybrid: he is North and South American, Jewish, thrice exiled, a survivor of trauma, and a writer well-versed in world literature. What is most vexing for the scholar of his work, though, is that he draws on these multiple cultural influences throughout his text, while also, still, reinforcing the notion that dualities, especially that of north versus south, English versus Spanish, hold particular identitarian purchase.

In considering how *Heading South, Looking North* relates to scholarship on life writing, it is revealing that Dorfman’s life narrative is consistently referred to as a memoir and not as an autobiography. While the two terms are often used interchangeably, there are key differences. “Autobiography” resonates more closely with the narration of a singular life and it suggests an autonomy and agency inappropriate for describing Dorfman’s text and difficult to sustain in terms of recent critical reflection on the construction of subjectivity. Situated between the collective narrative of *testimonio* and the personal presentation of autobiography, memoir, in Spanish *memoria*, with its allusion to memory and its etymological links to the creation of official records, situates the text between historical document and personal reflection, between recalling and recording, between musing and witnessing, between the self and the collective. Dorfman functions as
history’s scribe and as historical actor as he narrates his life and his life’s inextricable ties to his social context. Nancy K. Miller states that memoir “hesitates to define the binaries between public and private, subject and object” (43). And yet, what happens in Dorfman’s text as he creates a diasporic subject is not so much a hesitation to define these binaries, but rather a revelation of these binaries and a departure from them. For ostensibly Dorfman consciously creates the tension between the agency of autobiography and the collective subjectivity of testimonio.

A telling example of this conflict comes during an early trauma in Dorfman’s life when he is hospitalized and quarantined for three weeks for pneumonia in a New York hospital shortly after his arrival in the United States. This event leads him to English since his sickness forces him to use English to communicate with the hospital staff and denies him the ability to talk with his parents who he sees soundlessly mouthing words from the other side of a dividing window, and it abruptly forces a split in his identity between Spanish and English unusual in most cases of exile and immigration. In describing the duality that emerges from this harrowing incident, Dorfman wavers between emphasizing agency and choice in his use of language versus admitting his submission and passivity to the circumstances of his cultural displacement.

The reader must make an effort to recall that, at the time of his illness, Dorfman had not yet turned three years of age; from the confident tone of the narrative one would imagine a much older child. Despite his young age and budding linguistic skills, Dorfman maintains that he “instinctively chose” English and that he “refused” hybridity. Adding further confusion, he admits that the event led to his “quick and complete surrender to English” (42, 41).

This antagonism between understanding his identity as composed of choices exercised by freewill and as determined by social and historical forces persists throughout the text. Dorfman’s description of this moment further reveals his layered, multiple, and yet also binary, diasporic sense of self: “I instinctively chose to refuse the multiple, complex, in-between person I would someday become, this man who is shared by two equal languages and who has come to believe that to tolerate differences and indeed embody them personally and collectively might be our only
salvation as a species” (42). The description of himself at the moment of writing as “multiple, complex, in-between” suggests the self as pastiche, as product of mestizaje, and his reference to simultaneously being shared equally by two languages portrays the self as dual and double.

Added to the dialectic between autobiographical agency and the subjectivity of testimonio, Dorfman constructs a text that oscillates among the modalities of the confession, the apology, and the memoir. Francis R. Hart points out that each of these forms has its own “principles of memory selection and narrative perspective” and that each author discovers their own “fluctuating mixture” (508). These autobiographical registers intertwine in Dorfman’s text in response to the excruciating difficulty he has narrating the trauma of Pinochet’s coup. Trauma, which derives from the Greek for wound, characteristically results in a lack of language, an inability on the part of the traumatized to name their experience, and Heading South, Looking North can be productively categorized as trauma narrative. Leigh Gilmore explains that “the subject of trauma refers to both a person struggling to make sense of an overwhelming experience in a particular context and the unspeakability of trauma itself, its resistance to representation” (47). Here it is useful to appropriate Paul de Man’s notion of autobiography as prosopopeia—the act of linguistically constructing a life that is imaginary or absent—within the concrete context of a writer who is attempting to bear witness to the lives lost during Pinochet’s dictatorship. The text balances the weight of Dorfman’s presence against all of those who are absent, disappeared, and unable to tell their side of the story. Consequently, Dorfman’s text is autobiographical in that it endeavors to highlight the active way in which he has constructed his life, it is testimonial in that it is the story of a collective, it is memoir as it wavers between recalling and recording, and its evidence of apology and confession designate it as trauma narrative.

To unpack these multiple modalities it might be useful to focus on the opening lines of the text:

I should not be here to tell this story.

It’s that simple: there is a day in my past, a day many years ago in Santiago de Chile, when I should have died and did not.
That’s where I always thought this story would start, at that moment when history turned me, against my will, into the man who could someday sit down and write these words, who now writes them. I always thought this story was meant to start on that morning when the Armed Forces of my country rise against our President, Salvador Allende, on the 11th of September of 1973, to be exact, and the death I have been fearing since I was a child enters my life and, instead of taking it, leaves me to survive: I am left here on this side of reality to remember what ends forever that day in me and in the world, still wondering why I was spared.

And yet I cannot bring myself to begin there, that day I should have died. (3-4)

The passage has a confessional, apologetic tone that is counterbalanced with the vision of the writer, of the storyteller, who exercises a certain degree of control over his text. Dorfman suggests that he was the victim of history but that he answered that victimization with the agency of writing. He is certain that he cheated death: this is not egotistical hubris but grounded in the fact that he was meant to be with Salvador Allende on that fateful morning but had arranged with a friend to switch shifts—a fact made even more obvious in the Spanish version’s phrase “alguien. . . murió en mi lugar” that closes the first sentence (9; “someone. . . died in my place”). This twist of fate, over which he feels no control, leads him to respond with writing, and, over the course of the memoir, it becomes clear that Dorfman’s identity as a writer is what saves him from despair and what structures his life. Freight with guilt over his survival, Dorfman’s mission, his calling, is to act as a medium for those who died in his place. He later tells us that he writes: “Haunted by the certainty that I have been keeping a promise to the dead” (40).

To underscore this tension between artistic agency and lack of free will, Dorfman artfully refuses to use contractions after the subject pronoun “I,” a technique made all the more noteworthy by the two contractions “It’s” and “That’s” that begin the second and third paragraphs. This refusal to blend the words, to shorten the phrases, describing the subject and its actions highlights the separation between his coincidental survival and the tragic loss of so many of his friends and of so many Chileans. The “I” stands alone, isolating him, while the verbs are separated, stilted, an effect
that also calls attention to the performance of writing. In the Spanish version, which Dorfman translated from the English, this practice necessarily changes since Spanish does not allow flexibility in the use of contractions: there are two required forms that are prepositional phrases. Consequently, Dorfman employs a parallel strategy in Spanish where he repeats phrases in the first person that underscore his solitary identity. In the first and last lines that correspond to the English passage I've highlighted, the lack of contractions is replaced by a repetition of phrases in the first person that similarly suggest a search for the proper link between subject and action: “Si estoy contando esta historia, si la puedo contar” and “no puedo, no quiero, comenzar ahí” (9; “If I am telling this story, if I can tell it;” “I cannot, I will not, begin there”). The last phrases in Spanish also draw attention to the distinction between subjective reality (no puedo) and desire (no quiero).

These lines illustrate how the text departs from trauma and from the unspeakability of trauma, and they call attention to the writer’s craft, to Dorfman’s dialogue between what he wants to write and what he feels that history has compelled him to write. The phrase “the man who could someday sit down and write these words, who now writes them” emphasizes the traumatic warping of history where the past occupies the present. Dorfman opens his memoir by stating that he will not begin at what he thought was the beginning, but instead will rewrite himself: by altering his own version of events and his own privileging of the coup as a marker for his identity, he recreates himself. This gesture, which emphasizes the fragile and subjective ways that history is recorded, immediately makes the reader suspicious of Dorfman’s historical memory and of his self-presentation.

The memoir repeatedly suggests that the reader should not trust Dorfman’s account of events. In relaying his time in the hospital he reveals that his memory may not even be his own: “My parents have told me the story so often that sometimes I have the illusion that I am the one remembering” (28). These asides to the reader reinforce the notion that Dorfman’s memory is a construct. Indeed, Dorfman’s goal is to challenge the reader to take an active role in attending to history and his consistent references to faulty memories are meant to distance the reader while simultaneously building
a sense of fraternity, for by admitting his inaccuracies he lets the reader in on a shared secret and makes the reader his accomplice. Dorfman’s authorial strategy is clear: the memories of the dead will not be honored by a passive reading; they require collaboration between the reader and the writer.

In addition, these opening lines establish Dorfman’s writing as a form of resistance. This memoir is his, not Pinochet’s, and he cannot allow his life story to begin on a day that marks an end rather than a beginning. In the Spanish this reversal of opinion over the importance of September 11, 1973 is made even more obvious when he admits that he had always thought of that date as the moment that “me hace nacer, que me daba comienzo” (9; “gives birth to me, that gave me a beginning”). To start with the coup would be to start in the historical moment that destroyed the collective of which Dorfman was an active member. As opposed to beginning with the coup, the disappeared, and exile, Dorfman narrates his way in; he recollects all that brought him to Santiago on September 11, 1973, and he does it in order to make sense of his own life, autobiographically, and also to honor his memory of the dead.9

This memoir is personal and it is collective, made all the more noticeable by the shifting possessive in the same sentence from “my country” to “our President.”10 To stress this exchange between self and collective, the rest of the first chapter reveals Dorfman’s early obsession with death and what he envisioned as the unbearable solitude of death. He imagines that in death “you’ll be so alone that not even you will be able to accompany yourself” (5). This preoccupation is answered for him by a vision of “a brotherhood of the dead,” which functions also as a metaphor for all of the lives lost under Pinochet who may not speak, but are not alone, and are kept company by Dorfman and those like him who are committed to keeping their stories alive (5). Stressing his role as a storyteller, Dorfman ends the first chapter, haunted as he is by his impending exile and loss, by reading his son, Rodrigo, a fairy tale the night before the coup.

This text’s complex structure provides another key to how Dorfman represents a diasporic subject. The memoir is structured according to two key dualities—that of north and south and that of life and language versus death (and silence), while simultaneously
pointing to the interpenetrations of these oppositions as well as to their supplements. Since the English version of the book provides the reader with no table of contents, no easy reference to this structure, it is necessary to delve into the book, flipping the pages and scanning the titles to discover the memoir’s pattern, an act that reinforces the complicity and collaboration between Dorfman and his readers. The following table maps the text’s structure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part One: North and South</th>
<th>Part Two: South and North</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Chapter Dealing with the Discovery of Death at an Early Age</td>
<td>A Chapter Dealing with the Discovery of Death, Sometime in September 1973, in Santiago de Chile</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Chapter Dealing with the Discovery of Life and Language at an Early Age</td>
<td>A Chapter Dealing with the Discovery of Life and Language During the Years 1960 to 1964 in Santiago de Chile</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Chapter Dealing with the Discovery of Death in the Early Morning of September 11, 1973, in Santiago de Chile</td>
<td>A Chapter Dealing with the Discovery of Death Outside an Embassy in Santiago de Chile in the Year 1973</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Chapter Dealing with the Discovery of Life and Language in the Year 1945 in the United States of America</td>
<td>A Chapter Dealing with the Discovery of Life and Language During the Years 1965 to 1968 in Santiago de Chile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Chapter Dealing with the Discovery of Life and Language During the Years 1945 to 1954 in the United States of America</td>
<td>A Chapter Dealing with the Discovery of Life and Language During the Years 1968 to 1970, in Berkeley, California</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Chapter Dealing with the Discovery of Death on September 13 and 14, 1973, in Santiago de Chile</td>
<td>A Chapter Dealing with the Discovery of Death Inside and Outside an Embassy in Santiago de Chile in Early November of 1973</td>
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In the two parts, "North and South" and "South and North," Dorfman points to a flawed binary, an opposition that is inclusive rather than epiphenomenal, since what we have is not north versus south, but rather north and south, which, in keeping with the title of the book, suggests Dorfman as a Janus face, a being who straddles the north and the south, always tied to both to some degree. This structure gives the reader an early clue into what will be one of the central dilemmas for Dorfman because his early exile from Argentina to the United States, timed as it was during an intense moment of US nation-building from 1945-1954, left him desiring complete assimilation to US culture: “I wanted to melt and dissolve... into the gigantic melting pot of America” (78). Then, during his second exile, when his father was threatened by McCarthyism and the family relocated to Chile in 1954, Dorfman rejected all things Chilean by engaging in a defiant act of dissimulation that he later reversed when he sought complete assimilation into Chilean culture in the 1960s. He comes to learn over the course of the memoir and in the process of writing the text that he is American in the hemispheric sense of the term, that he is of both the south and the north and that complete assimilation to either is not possible. Dorfman’s hemispheric American identity is signaled by the transition in his notion of “America” from his statement after his stay in the hospital for pneumonia that he “became an American” (50) to his assertion as a refugee on the verge of exile in the Argentine embassy in Chile: “I am American. Latin American. Soy chileno” (267).

Returning to the dualist structure, each of the two sections has eight chapters with titles that alternate between the “Discovery of Death” and the “Discovery of Life and Language.” Apart from the first two chapters which ostensibly take place “at an Early Age,” all of the chapters on the “Discovery of Death” take place in 1973
beginning on September 11 and end as Dorfman is about to go into exile. Alternatively, all of the chapters on the “Discovery of Life and Language” cover Dorfman’s life chronologically up until the coup. Once again Dorfman’s chapter titles appear to set up a binary between “life and language” versus “death” only to then expose its limits and explode its boundaries, for the epilogue merges “life and language and death,” suggesting that after the coup it would no longer be possible for him to conceive of life and language apart from death since with every breath of life he takes he remembers those who no longer share the air with him. In addition to the combination of these opposing forces in the epilogue, the chapters, while ostensibly setting up a division, do not actually narrate a clear antagonism between life and language versus death. The chapters on the discovery of life and language include discoveries about death: for example, Dorfman is deeply moved when Ethel and Julius Rosenberg are executed and his family holds a candlelight vigil outside the New York prison, but these deaths and the fear they cause are narrated in a chapter on “life and language” (73). Moreover, the opposition of life and language versus death is constantly revealed as false since language is also essential to death, for it is only through language that Dorfman can narrate the dead, and such narration influences life and reveals the interpenetrations of life and death.

Similarly, the chapters reveal specifics of time and place that are not entirely accurate and the limits of chronology and geography are constantly tested by the text. The first chapter ostensibly tells us about Dorfman at “an early age,” but, in fact, it wavers temporally between narrating his obsessions as a child, marking the key moment of September 11, 1973, describing his actions the night before the coup, and describing the author in the present moment of writing. The text’s play with time hints at the tension between European and Native American *kronos* but it also points to the incommensurability of the subjective time of memory and historical time. Spatially the chapter moves from Santiago, Chile to New York City, and in the Spanish, Dorfman makes a point of highlighting that he works on the translation in North Carolina (9). In the last chapter of the first section supposedly recounting Dorfman’s “Discovery of Life and Language During the Years 1954-1959 in Santiago de Chile,” Dorfman opens by describing
the moment when he decided that he would only write creatively in Spanish in Berkeley in 1968. He uses this event to introduce a corollary moment of isolationism in his life: his arrival in Chile in 1954 as an exile who could only think of return to his beloved United States and who hated speaking in Spanish. So structurally Dorfman decides in this chapter to emphasize the theme of the “discovery of life and language” and neglects the markers of time and space that ostensibly code the chapter title. Such a move tests the structure he has established and demonstrates the way that he narrates his identity in terms which are both binary and polyvalent.

The text’s structure, like other trauma narratives, circles around the event that is unspeakable in a way similar to Toni Morrison’s Beloved, rocking the reader back and forth between Chile in 1973 and the trajectory of Dorfman’s life. These signposts of date and space document historical record and parse key moments in Dorfman’s life. Their fluidity, however, reveals the murkiness and messiness of memory, as well as the exile’s acute awareness of, on the one hand, how dates and places can change one’s life forever and, on the other hand, how these watershed moments leak beyond traditional conceptual strategies of containment. Perhaps this is why Dorfman uses the word “journey” in the memoir’s subtitle (“A Bilingual Journey”); because, as revealed more overtly in the Spanish jornada, a journey signals both the events of one day as well as a trip that knows no limits. On one level, the subtitle indicates how it is only at the end of this journey that Dorfman finally comes to accept himself as bilingual, to reconcile himself to the two forces of his two languages, and to more comfortably inhabit a world where both English and Spanish function compatibly. At another level, though, “journey” suggests that his travels in bilingualism and cross-culturalism persist, that they began well before his exile from Pinochet, and that they have not ended.

Both of these examples, the opening lines and the complex structure, that I have highlighted as indices of Dorfman’s construction of a diasporic subject indicate that this is the memoir of a writer. In fact, Dorfman’s confidence in his ability to write may be one of the few elements of his life that he does not endlessly question. When he tells readers that he may have been spared by the coup in order to be its storyteller, he admits to his doubts: “If it is not true that this was why I was saved, I have tried to make it
true. In every story I tell” (40). But these doubts do not persist in the same way that he worries over other aspects of his identity. He tells his readers that he discovered that he wanted to become a writer while on a cruise to Europe at the age of nine when he met Thomas Mann (85-86). The meeting sparked Dorfman’s interest in the power of literature (“I wanted the power to reach all of humanity”), in the role of language in literature (“In what language does he write?”), and in the ways that exiles use literature to recreate their ties to their home (86). This encounter also leads Dorfman to wonder how literature can be used to overcome and interrogate solitude and how it can shape life: “I think I began, from that moment, to live in order to record life” (84). It is telling that the phrase reads “to record life” and not “to record my life” because such phrasing begs the question of whether what we are reading is his life. Dorfman asks the reader to consider whether it is even possible to read about an individual’s life without also reading about the lives of many others. Perhaps more important here, though, is the way that Dorfman reminds his readers, as he does countless times throughout his memoir, that this is the story of a writer who believes in the ties between life and literature.

Philippe Lejeune has pointed out that life writing by fictional writers might be more elaborately constructed than life writing of non-professionals, and Dorfman’s memoir certainly opens itself up to such a reading. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his analysis of discourse in the novel, makes a further argument for such special consideration when he describes the ways that heteroglossic voices converge in the mind of the writer. He explains that these opposing world views “encounter one another and co-exist in the consciousness of real people—first and foremost in the creative consciousness of people who write novels. . . . They may all be drawn in by the novelist for the orchestration of his themes and to the refracted (indirect) expression of his intentions and values” (292). Bakhtin’s emphasis on the writer as the medium for heteroglossia resonates well with the multiple, dialogic ways that Dorfman describes identity and with the complex layering of competing subjectivities in the text.

Much in the same way that Bakhtin argues that literature reflects and refracts reality through myriad voices in tension that come together in the space of a novel, Dorfman’s text captures a polyphony of voices that resound contrapuntally and emerge
through his identity. A telling example of the way that Dorfman works as a social echo takes place just as he has been reunited with his family after seven months in foster care while his mother was institutionalized for depression: “Listen to me in the car as we drive home. . . . I was coming around the mountain when she comes. . . . I was rowing the boat ashore. . . . I had the whole world in my hands. . . . and it was marching on to the green grass of home” (48). These lines suggest his subjectivity as nothing more than the parroting of Anglo mass culture. Then later in Chile, as Spanish and Latin American culture take a more active role in shaping his identity, he is no longer a passive mouthpiece for US culture. “That Spanish out there contained my future. It contained the words of García Lorca I would say to Angélica one day, Verde que te quiero verde, the lover-like green of desire, and the words of Quevedo I would say to my country, Miré los muros de la patria mia, watching the walls of my fatherland crumble, and the words of Neruda I would say to the revolution, Sube a nacer conmigo, hermano, rise and be born with me, my brother” (114). When Spanish starts to guide his identity, or, as he puts it, when “Spanish was beginning to speak me,” he repeats the words of famous lines of poetry, lines that he shares with a community of Spanish speakers who have drawn on these verses to represent their thoughts (114).

Then when he unwittingly begins to live bilingually, he still functions as a medium for the voices of others. He describes his “schizophrenic, adulterous existence, writing in English and speaking in Spanish, singing American songs at sunrise and being lullabied into sleep by the Chilean mountains in the evening, crazy about Conrad and crazy about Cervantes, suspended vulnerably between two nations and two languages” (132). After the coup, Dorfman’s literature attempts to capture the voices of the dead and disappeared and their stories resonate throughout his memoir. When he tells of the suicide of Taty Allende, Salvador’s daughter, who shot herself while in exile, he reiterates that his survival has left him with the responsibility of telling these stories, of letting the dead speak through him. “I will have to carry her and her father and all the other dead of Chile like an orphan until the day I die” (59). In each of these instances Dorfman joins a cultural chorus and his identity is shaped through the voices of others. The discursive registers of popular culture, poetry, and historical trauma
dialogue and contradict, further frustrating the dialectic between Dorfman as medium for others and as author of himself. These examples illustrate the ways that Dorfman's memoir structures a wide range of conflicting voices through the prism of his personal identity. Moreover, the range of examples of his cultural and linguistic influences, while heteroglossic, coalesce in a double set of largely oppositional identity markers that continue to separate the English of the north from the Spanish of the south.

Building on Bakhtin's notion of the "dialogic imagination," Françoise Lionnet's analysis of cross-cultural autobiography as métissage points to the violence and conflict at the heart of Dorfman's hybridity. But, while Lionnet emphasizes autobiographic heterogeneity and resistance to "symbolization," Dorfman's memoir refuses to be read only in terms of competing, multiple forces and his text consistently returns to dualisms. Dorfman's life has three dramatic shifts that track according to each of his exiles and their cultural/linguistic contexts: he moves from Spanish to English as a young boy exiled in New York, from English to Spanish as a revolutionary in Chile, and then, finally, to bilingualism as an exile from Pinochet. His description of the diasporic subject as dualist and polyvalent is telling because it poses concrete limits on theories that posit diasporic identity as free of national, territorial, linguistic, and symbolic signifying systems. Dorfman's memoir indicates the extent to which these identity markers are simultaneously inescapable and imaginary. In ways that might be productively compared to the personal memoirs of writers, such as Edward Said, J. M. Coetzee, and W. G. Sebald, who speak from historical contexts of crisis, trauma, and diaspora, Dorfman experiments with language and literary structure exploring new avenues for representing the self in relation to massive historical ruptures.

Dorfman's diasporic subject is at one and the same time attentive to the binaries that structure identity while simultaneously moving beyond a dualist ontology. Such a notion of the subject creates a multi-layered self that remains true to the complexities of subjectivity, especially for those who have experienced violent dislocation. To present the self as a hybrid pastiche would eradicate the material history that separates north from south, English from Spanish, life from death, agency from victimization, the
individual from the collective, life before from life after September 11, 1973. Similarly, to focus solely on the binary would invariably lead to Manichean oppositions that fail to register the ways that these forces interpenetrate and would miss subtle details of life that refuse to be easily designated as good or evil. Worst of all, structuring the life of diaspora dualistically would allow these oppositions and the official histories that depend on them to have too much power over identity and would grant them too great a capacity to dictate mutually exclusive categories of existence. Dorfman is far too interested in seeing himself as part of humanity to succumb to those pressures.

Notes

1. For an introduction to some of the ways that Dorfman’s literature has foreshadowed historical events, see McClennen’s “Ariel Dorfman.”
2. Dorfman has repeatedly stressed that literature should be anti-authoritarian and that readers should be active participants (see Hacia la liberación del lector latinoamericano; Some Write to the Future).
3. Sollors argues that immigrants either assimilate and adapt to mainstream culture or they dissipilate and reject it.
4. This essay draws on the theoretical groundwork in my book, The Dialectics of Exile. In that study I comparatively analyze Dorfman’s exile novels in addition to the work of Juan Goytisolo and Cristina Peri Rossi.
5. Beverley and Zimmerman also support an oppositional view of northern versus southern forms of life writing in their study of testimonio, but the fallacy of this binary has been pointed out by Molloy and by Hunsaker. It is important to note that Dorfman envisions these discourses of identity as largely oppositional only to then expose the ways that they intertwine.
6. Dorfman discusses the role of renaissance literature in his literary formation in an interview with McClennen.
7. Most reviews refer to the text as a memoir. In all of my correspondence with Dorfman, he has never used “autobiography” to describe the text.
8. While my references in this essay to the Spanish version will be occasional, it is important to point out that this text was originally written in English and then was translated and adapted by Dorfman into Spanish. I have noted more than one hundred discrepancies between the two versions, made all the more significant because, for the most part, translations of Dorfman’s earlier work have tended to be meticulously literal. A future study might look at the relationship between the ways identity is constructed in the two versions and how they complement one another.
9. Dorfman has written extensively on this moment in Chilean history (see, for example, his contribution in Aguilera and Fredes).
10. The Spanish version keeps these same phrases.
11. While in exile, Dorfman would write journalistic and other forms of “non-
creative” writing in both English and Spanish. His memoir is his first published,
creative work originally written in English. For more on this tension, see his
eyssay “Footnotes to a Double Life.”
12. The subtitle in Spanish (“Un romance en dos lenguas”) is considerably
different and suggests further interpretive possibilities.

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Columbia, she held a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania. She is working on a book that examines narratives of assimilation and passing by Jewish and African American women writers.

Adriane L. Ivey is Assistant Professor of English at Oxford College of Emory University where she teaches composition and African American literature and heads the Writing Center. She is currently teaching a course on African American women writers and the Bible and is at work on her book on the same topic.

Sophia A. McClennen is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature, Spanish, and Women’s Studies at the Pennsylvania State University, University Park. Her first book is The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time, Language, and Space in Hispanic Literature (Purdue 2004) and her second book, Ariel Dorfman: An Aesthetics of Hope, is forthcoming from Duke UP.

R. Baxter Miller is Professor of English and Director of the Institute of African American Studies at the University of Georgia. He has published seven books, including The Southern Trace of Black Critical Theory (1991); The Art and Imagination of Langston Hughes (1989); and Reference Guide to Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks (1978). He has published many chapters, articles, and reviews for journals like Mississipi Quarterly, South Atlantic Review, and Langston Hughes Review. He is also a co-author and co-editor (with General Editor Patricia Liggins Hill, et. al.) of Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition (1998).

Jill M. Parrot is a graduate student at Auburn University. She is interested in twentieth-century American literature as well as rhetoric and composition.

Jayson T. Gonzales Sae-Saue is a PhD student in the Modern Thought and Literature program at Stanford University. His current research explores the intersections of Chicana/o and Asian American consciousness in cultural production within the historical reality of mutual contact.