Carlos Soto-Román: As you know, I've been thinking a lot about the issue of representing reality through art, or particularly through poetry, but especially when it comes to sensitive topics, historical tragedies, atrocities, or some other issues that are not easy to talk about, but at the same time, I think it is absolutely necessary to weigh, to ponder, and to meditate on these tragedies in order to not only leave a message, but most importantly, to not forget. Do you think poets have a moral duty to respond, somehow, to this poetics of *nunca más* (never again)? What is, according to your experience, the role of poetry there or what can poetry do to help to preserve memory?

Daniel Borzutzky: I don't know if I can say anything about the moral duty of all poets. I tend to feel uncomfortable making those kinds of declarations. But what I can say is that I personally feel something like a moral duty to write about the things that are most important to me, and what is most important to me is the way in which state and economic violence destroy people, communities, and cultures. And what's also most important to me is the way in which we survive this destruction, through love or art or political struggle and through intangible acts of resistance and persistence. This can take documentary forms—as your poetry quite brilliantly does—or it can take lyric or experimental forms. I don't know what to say about poetry's ability to help society remember things at a larger level; I hope that's the case, but I'm not so certain most of the time. But I do feel that I write *as if* poetry can do that, *as if* poetry has some role to play in larger public life. In the US, poets are largely ignored. But perhaps the poetry that matters most to me is the poetry that writes *as if* it were a vital part of public discourse, *as if* it believes deeply in that possibility.

CSR: The Chilean poet Gonzalo Millán once said: "There are certain borderline issues that need to be addressed in extreme ways." For him it seemed contradictory and even inappropriate to respond to the horror through consecrated forms of beauty. This seems to be very aligned with the responses that Charles Reznikoff and Heimrad Bäcker posed to the Holocaust, just to give an example. Nowadays, what

would be an appropriate way to address the horror that surrounds us? Is there any "consecrated form of beauty" that could, eventually, be up to that task?

DB: There's a line I always remember from an essay by Fanny Howe where she says that "the point of art is to show people that life is worth living by showing that it isn't." I don't know that any form of beauty or art is really up to the task. But art making is optimistic, even as it's trying to show us that life is and isn't worth living at the same time. The artists you mention above are all concerned about the damage that can be done when unspeakable pain is aestheticized, and the challenge is to somehow create a more or less aesthetic experience that does not feel like one, or that does not seek to be one, or that does not fetishize beauty over the pain and trauma of actual people and communities and their experiences. Documentary forms can often address horror without aestheticizing it, though so can art that is struggling to understand itself as art: art that investigates its own ability to try and, more often than not, to fail at creating forms of expression that do justice to traumatic experience. I think I have tried to write this way: where atrocity is being presented alongside the attempt to present atrocity, where the speakers are always struggling with what it means to try to talk about their own complicity and their own failure to "appropriately" address the horror that surrounds us.

CSR: In the short documentary *The Possibility of Hope*, Slavoj Žižek says, referring to the movie *Children of Men*, that he believes it's a realistic film. Quoting Hegel's *Aesthetics*, he goes on to say that a good portrayal looks more like the person who is portrayed than the person itself. A good portrayal is more you than you are yourself. And according to him, this is what the film does with reality. The changes the film introduces do not point toward alternate reality, they simply make reality more than what it is already, showing us that the nightmare we all expect is here. I think something similar happens with your books. Terrible situations are presented like dystopian fables, but it doesn't take much reading to realize that that is just the actual reality. What made you choose that particular style of representing reality?

DB: I love this idea: that art makes reality more real even when the art itself is not realistic. My not-very-original answer is that I learned

this from Kafka who was incredibly important to me when I started writing, as was Juan Rulfo and Beckett and Clarice Lispector each of whom were able to make reality more realistic by creating art that is otherworldly or which takes our own worlds and pushes them to their extremes. This is what I think I am often trying to do: to show that what looks to be unrealistic is actually happening or on the verge of happening. My writing has been classified as "absurdist," which I've never felt comfortable with. It feels closer to realism. But also important to me is the way that time operates in my writing, and the way that multiple histories and timeframes converge with multiple nations and narratives. This has allowed me to show what I think are deep connections between, for example, Latin America and the US or Chile and Chicago, where economic and social violence occur on a continuum of time and history.

CSR: Elvira Hernandez, another Chilean poet, said in an interview that in Chile, people get emotional with movies like *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, particularly with the issue of the concentration camps, as if we never had such things and we never had the possibility of looking at a reality so horrible as that, but the thing is that in Chile we lived those realities and we are not horrified enough. She thinks that such a state of anesthesia is in part the responsibility of intellectuals. Do you agree with that? Do you think poets, thinkers, artists need to bring back the horror to elicit an answer from people to the current atrocities of the world? Would that be the only way to remove people from that anesthetized state? What other ways do you think would be worth trying?

DB: I like Elvira's answer, but it assumes that anyone actually listens to artists or cares about what they make and think. Maybe your question reveals that in Chile this is more possible than it is in the US. I don't know. I think both Chile and the US have generations of artists who have pretended they were not living in extreme states of horror and violence. And so yes, I do agree with Elvira that artists and intellectuals have not done enough to expose these horrors and to try to change them. I can think of all kinds of ways that we might remove people from their anesthetized states that essentially involve bringing them into greater proximity with state, police, economic, and racial violence. A general strike would be one way to do this, of course, as

are the kinds of far-reaching public demonstrations that Chile saw in fall 2019—demonstrations that are now leading to the formation of a new constitution and hopefully a new governing structure—and the demonstrations in the US in the summer of 2020 that forced a public reckoning with racism and racial state violence. On one hand, I have much more faith in political organizing as a tool for social change than I do in art. But on a different hand, art helps us both see the world for the shit show that it is and to imagine that it might be different. And so I suspect that without art we wouldn't be able to live in the kind of world we want to live in, and we might not be able to imagine new ones. These sound like platitudes. I hope they're not.