

# Engaging Latin American Testimonio: Where to Begin?

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Few areas within Latin American literature have been discussed with more passion than a narrative form called the testimonial, or *testimonio*. The 1999 publication of David Stoll's book, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, placed *testimonio* into the critical spotlight once again. Stoll's anthropological study joined a long line of literary research, which has waxed and waned over the past four decades, into this hybrid form of (self) lifewriting.

What criteria define classic works such as *Biografía de un cimarrón* (*Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*) (1968), "*Si me permiten hablar*": *Testimonio de Domitila, una mujer de las minas de Bolivia* (*Let me Speak! Testimony of Domitila, A Woman of the Bolivian Mines*) (1977), *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (*Until We Meet Again*) (1969), and *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (*I, Rigoberta Menchú, an Indian Woman in Guatemala*) (1983) as testimonios?<sup>1</sup> What is *testimonio* and why all the controversy?<sup>2</sup> A mix of genres, discourses, and production processes, this narrative is very hard to pin down on numerous fronts. In general, the informant/witness is presumed to have experienced the events firsthand and also to exist beyond the text. In many cases, the socioeconomic status of the informant positions him or her at the margins of dominant culture where

access to literacy is limited. The interviewer/editor, who often is not a professional writer, bases the written narrative upon a series of interviews with the informant. The mediating role of the editor in this process is often the subject of extensive debates. For example, the degree to which the editor unwittingly inscribes herself or himself into the text constitutes a major ethical challenge to the testimonial project.<sup>3</sup> At issue is the idea that testimonio actually functions to misrepresent, rather than to recount, the life story of the informant.

Moreover, what about the witness, or *testigo*? Is the witness reliable? Among other issues, David Stoll's book *I Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (1999) suggests that Rigoberta Menchú's story about growing up in Guatemala at the height of a bloody civil war is full of inaccuracies and even, perhaps, downright lies. Even with the most reliable witness, however, can we trust language and memory to work in such a way that the account is more remembered than invented? In the final analysis, then, what are we reading and whose text is it? Are we reading a piece of fiction, a documentary narrative, or something in between? Are we reading more about the editor than about the informant?

These kinds of questions have been posed and answered time and again by specialists in the field. In my own work on testimonio, I have organized the vast amount of critical material on these and other issues into four discursive models by drawing upon views that range from the genealogical to the formal and aesthetic.<sup>4</sup> What follows is a model-driven literature survey specific to scholarly discussions about Latin American testimonio. These models—which I call exclusive and classic, continuous or analogous, functional, and literary—represent the more commonly referenced ideas within testimonio studies. Given the extent of the critical corpus, the following models may serve to bridge a specialization gap for those with an interest in lifewriting from other fields, or simply may make the material easier to draw upon for both scholarly and pedagogical use in general. The models, which are not intended to be exhaustive, are descriptive and representative primarily with respect to secondary sources, although primary sources occasionally fall within their parameters. By examining testimonio studies through the lenses of these models, broader issues of theory and power come to the fore. These issues are highlighted at the close of this essay.

The beginning of testimonio as a genre, under what I call the exclusive and classic model, harks back to Cuban author and critic, Miguel Barnet. By exclusive, I mean Latin American narratives only. By classic, I refer to the tendency within testimonio studies to name Barnet as the genre's creator and original disseminator. Barnet's *Biografía de un cimarrón* (*Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*) is usually cited, in fact, as the foundational work for of testimonio. Indeed, Kimberly A. Nance's recent monograph *Can Literature Promote Justice?* (2006) states that "Latin American testimonio as such is generally considered to have begun in the 1960s with Esteban Montejo and Miguel Barnet's *Biografía de un cimarrón*" (168).

After the appearance in 1968 of this oft-cited foundational text, Barnet published an article that later became testimonio's official manifesto. This article, "*La novela testimonio: Socio-literatura*" ("The Testimonial Novel: Social Literature") (1969b), prompted official recognition of a new genre shortly thereafter when the Cuban publishing house Casa de las Américas established a special literary prize for the *novela testimonio* (testimonial novel).<sup>5</sup> Emil Volek (1997) emphasizes the important connection between the emergence of the testimonial in Cuba and the need for new modes of expression following the 1959 revolution. He writes that "[t]he Revolution sought for a suitable literary genre that would best express those times of renewal, passion, and expectation." The novel and poetry, he explains, failed to meet these needs (783).

In his manifesto, Barnet uses *Biografía* (*Autobiography*) to construct a theory of this new genre.<sup>6</sup> He begins by establishing an opposition, akin to Alejo Carpentier's *lo real maravilloso* (the marvelous real) vis-à-vis European Surrealism, between the European novel and contemporary prose fiction in Latin and North America. According to Barnet, the European novel has taken an elitist, socially disengaging turn away from its ancient roots in the "relato de los viejos griots, de los chamanes, de los sacerdotes y de los juglares" (stories of the old griots, the shamans, the priests, and the minstrels) (1969b, 100). This disengagement is the result of literature's coming to reflect a consumer-driven society wherein objects are privileged over ideas (1969b, 101). It has become yet another product among products, incapable of truly representing any person of any hemisphere (1969b, 101–2). Not surprisingly, Barnet declares that "Europa está fatigada. América está ávida de acción" (Europe is tired. America is full of action). This activity or engagement, he explains, stems from the fact that the Americas have always had to fight against the false images constructed by Europe (1969b, 104). Therefore, Latin American literature has been inherently

subversive in a continual effort to assert “el **yo** latinoamericano [ . . . ] el **nosotros** latinoamericano” (the Latin American I [ . . . ] the Latin American we) (1969b, 105; Barnet’s emphasis).

As a corrective to European narrative directions, Barnet describes his own theory of testimonio in this groundbreaking article.<sup>7</sup> He emphasizes the following genre characteristics: 1) the reproduction of the sociocultural milestones of a country; 2) a protagonist who best represents these milestones; 3) the suppression, but not disappearance, of the author’s “I”; 4) a declaration of “Yo soy la época” (I am the epoch) by both author and protagonist; 5) a contribution (without didacticism) to our knowledge of reality in its historical sense; 6) a discourse based on spoken language (without raw transcription); 7) the responsible use of imagination by author; 8) a combination of the universal and the local; 9) the need for a tape recorder; 10) an articulation of a collective memory; 11) solidarity on the part of author (without paternalism); and 12) a recognition of the protagonist’s own agency (1969b, 107–18). Barnet explicitly states that, as the creator of the novela-testimonio genre, he may be blind to certain issues that critics and theoreticians might readily see: “Pero no soy un teórico de la novela-testimonio, soy un gestor de la misma y por lo tanto mi condición de creador y no de crítico puede dejar pasar por alto algunas cuestiones [ . . . ] que yo no veo” (I am not a testimonial novel theorist, but rather its promoter and therefore my condition as creator instead of critic could mean that some questions [ . . . ] go by me unnoticed) (1969b, 115).

Under the exclusive and classic model, then, testimonio refers to a specific geographical region, has an identifiable creator, a manifesto, a foundational work, and receives official recognition as a genre. The obvious strength of this model is that it presents all of the traditional developmental elements that literary historians typically seek. Similarly, this paradigm allows for a clear starting point for an inquiry into testimonio and thus mitigates theoretical paralysis. The main drawbacks are, of course, these very same boundaries. The region-specific parameters preclude any discussion of the existence of a testimonial tradition in other parts of the world. Moreover, Barnet’s manifesto makes several questionable assertions. For example, Barnet writes in “La novela-testimonio” (“The Testimonial Novel”) that the ideal informant should be representative of the epoch (1969b, 109), and yet just a few pages earlier he describes Esteban Montejo as anything but typical of his time period: “toda la vida de Esteban Montejo era atípica, estaba marcada por el signo de un destino insólito” (all of Esteban’s life was atypical and it was marked by the sign of a very unusual

destiny) (1969b, 107). Additionally, Barnet's comparison of Esteban and the informant from *Canción de Rachel* (*Rachel's Song*) (1969) is suspect for its stereotypical language. Barnet uses words like "frivolous," "poetic," and "pretentious" to describe Rachel, but characterizes Esteban as "clear," "dramatic," and "noble" (1969b, 112–13).

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Many scholars have preferred to analyze testimonio for the ways in which this kind of writing grows out of, resembles, or differs from other narrative discourses. This approach falls under what I describe as the continuous or analogous model. For example, the *crónica* (chronicle) and autobiography often are cited as, on the one hand, parts of a literary tradition which has engendered testimonio, or, on the other, as genres which share degrees of similarity with it in terms of discursive registers.<sup>8</sup> The continuous and analogous descriptors appear under the same model simply because their boundaries often overlap. The dividing line between the two depends upon whether the critics in question choose to foreground either historical or generic considerations when making their arguments. Often, however, the division disappears as both considerations are examined together.

The connection between history, social issues, politics, and literature in Latin America has been well documented by critics and writers alike. In her introduction to *The Modern Culture of Latin America: Society and the Artist* (1967), Jean Franco writes that "[a]n intense social concern has been the characteristic of Latin American art for the last hundred and fifty years" (1). John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman (1990) describe how literature in Latin America has always had a "close relation to the state" (16). A host of prominent authors such as Alejo Carpentier, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Claribel Alegría explore the relationship between the writer and society in the essay collection *Lives on the Line* (1988).<sup>9</sup> At the most basic level, then, testimonio as "political" or "committed" writing joins a long tradition of narratives with such an emphasis.

Like Miguel Barnet, Jorge Narváez and Renato Prada Oropeza also link genre, locale, and authenticity of representation, but from a less reactionary perspective than Barnet's. Rather than focus upon writing prescriptively against a perceived malaise of European literature, these critics contend that testimonio grew out of a specifically Latin American historical and cultural context. Although still closely associated with continental influences and

control, this context is scrutinized for possible connections between past and present forms so that a continuum results.

Jorge Narváez (1988) asserts that a concrete Latin American historical context has conditioned the “discurso de nuestra cultura escrita y de nuestra literatura en particular” (discourse of our written culture and, in particular, of our literature). The Spanish administration, he explains, thought that any practice of a New World “mentira ficcionadora” (fictive lie) would put the souls and minds of its subjects in grave danger of corruption (17). Narrative discourse, therefore, has tended to be historical and documentary in nature (Narváez 1986, 9). Further, forms such as the *diario* (diary), the *crónica*, and the *carta* (letter) performed an ancillary function with respect to “los cánones europeos vigentes en lo literario” (literary-based European canons). Narváez points out that while canonical genres in European literature were founded upon these “formas simples” (simple forms), they actually became the canon in and of themselves for Latin American literature (1998, 16). He concedes that the production of historical and documentary narratives has been a universal phenomenon, as has the need for giving testimony. What cannot be deemed universal, however, is the fact that for Latin America “durante más de 300 años, ello sea el único cuerpo posible de una literatura” (this [narrative form] was the only possible corpus of literature for more than three hundred years) (Narváez 1998, 17).

Prada Oropeza (1986) also notes the importance of forms such as the *crónica* within the Latin American historical context. He contends that the *crónicas* represent the continent’s first expression of a testimonial literature.<sup>10</sup> Although written by subjects of the Spanish king and queen, these narratives were produced with the express intent of recording and proving the truth of their surroundings and activities to the dominant-class readership (7). Further, intertextual dialogues often resulted as one version of events replaced the previous version(s). This displacement, according to Prada Oropeza, is the key to understanding testimonial discourse: “es siempre inter-textual pues, explícita o implícitamente *supone* una *otra* versión o interpretación (otro texto) sobre su objeto (referente)” (it’s always intertextual because it *supposes*, either implicitly or explicitly, *another* version or interpretation [another text] of its object [referent]) (9).

Thus, researchers of the continuum model have endeavored to authenticate testimonio by emphasizing historical contexts and literary traditions. Under this model, testimonio shares in the socially committed focus so prevalent throughout Latin American literary history. Also, its documentary character and literary value have been shaped historically by the restrictions

that the Spanish administration imposed upon narrative expression. Finally, testimonio can be traced back to the *crónica*, the first instance of testimonial writing in Latin America. In each case, history and tradition are used to construct an original space within which testimonio developed.

Attention to the specificity of context is an analytical practice supported by the poststructuralist project of deconstructing claims of universality. However, as Elzbieta Sklodowska (1992) notes, an emphasis upon the Latin American authenticity of the genre cannot be defended in light of the work of Clas Zilliacus, who documents how resistance writing has been a universal phenomenon (65). In addition, the historical searches of Barnet, Narváez, and Prada Oropeza for a testimonial tradition have been blind to questions of gender and the act of writing. Jean Franco (1992) factors issues of gender into her historical analysis of discursive shifts that took place between the colonial period and the time of independence, for example. She describes in detail how some genres do not permit women to speak (110). This important point illustrates how the use of history as the servant of a literary tradition often fails to recognize women's literary production and the gender politics embedded within literary production in general.

Having discussed how testimonio historically grew out of other modes and restrictive writing environments in the continuous model, I now turn to those critics who have analyzed testimonio by drawing an analogy to other narrative forms. These forms range from the most obvious, autobiography, to degrees of similarity with such narratives and genres as the picaresque novel, the epic, memoirs, the diary, novels of social realism and New Journalism, and the slave narrative tradition. Given that the very point of this model is to make generic, and at times diachronic, comparisons, testimonio here necessarily must shed its exclusive "Latin Americanness" in these discussions. Opening up testimonio in this way to reveal its shared characteristics with other traditions goes against the grain of the regional parameters of the exclusive and classic approach.

Wendy Zoe Woodrich includes an entire section on testimony as autobiography in her dissertation "When the Center No Longer Holds" (1992). She makes clear at the outset that "[a]utobiography is literature, and the testimony is autobiography." Generally speaking, she argues, in both testimony and autobiography the narrative points outward towards an extratextual world, and the reader takes for granted that the events described have been more "remembered than invented" (144). Woodrich draws heavily upon the work of Sylvia Molloy, who has outlined in *At Face Value* (1991) the ways in which autobiographical writing in Spanish

America has characteristics that are distinct from the “great individual” model of autobiography. These characteristics—namely, hybridity, a representation of self as well as country, defense of the “I” over the revelation of the “I,” and a strong testimonial stance—parallel the elements displayed by testimonio (1992, 156–57). Finally, Woodrich notes that autobiographical writing has been a fluid form and has evolved “throughout its history by means of authors who progressively push the genre’s limitations [. . .]” (145). She contends that the testimonial form allows for yet another evolution within autobiography to take place (146).

The idea of testimony as autobiography is not without challengers. In their introduction to a special issue of *Latin American Perspectives* (1991) devoted to testimonial literature, Georg Gugelberger and Michael Kearney focus not upon the similarities between testimonial writing and autobiography, but on the differences. They write that autobiographies are narratives conveying how impressed the writing subject is with his or her uniqueness. This is in marked contrast with testimonial writing, they contend, because “the self [of testimonials] cannot be defined in individual terms but only as a collective self engaged in a common struggle” (9). For their part, Beverley and Zimmerman suggest that once a testimony begins to assert an identity that is distinct from the group, “then it ceases to be testimony and becomes autobiography” (177–78). Doris Sommer, in “Not Just a Personal Story’: Women’s Testimonios and the Plural Self” (1988), distinguishes between the metonymical construction of the testimonial “I” and the metaphorical “I” of autobiography (108). Ivonne Jehenson (1990) describes how the “ego-ideal” is much more appealing in autobiographies than in testimonies: how many of us aspire to the life of Rigoberta Menchú, for example? (78). Also, Jehenson uses Gusdorf’s classic definition of autobiography as a purely Western discourse in order to highlight the differences between it and testimonial writing in Latin America (79).

Other parallels have been drawn between testimonial writing and the picaresque novel. John Beverley compares and contrasts these forms in his “Anatomía del testimonio” (“Anatomy of Testimony”) (1987). Both picaresque and testimonial narrators, he explains, affirm their subjectivity within the text itself; the obvious difference being that one is historical and the other is not. In each case it is often a first-person voice who not only conveys a sense of urgency, but also who creates a moralizing tone (159). Yet, the relationship between these respective narrators and their socioeconomic surroundings is different. The picaresque narrator experiences his or her plight and human condition at an individual level,

while the testimonial narrator focuses upon how he or she suffers with others through terrible conditions and events (Beverley 1987, 160). The narrator of testimony may even refer to the reader as another *compañero/a* among many as the metonymical function of the epic hero is fulfilled (Beverley 1987, 161).

Anna Housková, in her “El testimonio como género literario” (“Testimony as Literary Genre”) (1989) foregrounds possible relationships among testimonio, the epic, the memoir, and the diary. She posits that testimonio can be linked to a Latin American epic tradition due to its “base en la vida y la conciencia colectiva” (basis in life and the collective conscience). Housková explains that the testimonios that appeared during the 1970s and 1980s are more than simply a reaction to social and political turbulence. They are, rather, expressing a new phase of a collective self-consciousness at the national and continental level, a phenomenon akin to the motivations of the epic genre. She claims that we can conceive of the recent production of testimonials as “un regreso a la fuente de la forma épica” (a return to the source of the epic form) (16). Housková also describes how testimonio, like the diary form, often is confessional in nature (17). She explains that the memoir may approximate testimony insofar as it moves more towards the representation of an epoch; that is, the memoir’s usual focus upon individuality and self-reflection is inherently different from that of testimony (16).

Other comparisons between testimonio and analogous forms of writing have focused on an aesthetics of the real. While Françoise Perus (1989) and Hugo Achugar (1987) have examined the connection between the literary codes of testimonio and the novel of social realism, David William Foster (1984) forges a link between the Latin American nonfiction novel and works falling under the rubric of New Journalism such as Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1965). Foster notes, however, that Rodolfo Walsh’s *Operación masacre* (*Operation Massacre*) (1957) “anticipates the techniques credited to Capote” (42). Foster classifies this work as a documentary narrative and positions *Biografía de un cimarrón* (*Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*) as part of a “subgenre of Caribbean literature” (51). His definition of testimonial writing incorporates characteristics that are a bit uncommon; he calls it “literature that fictionalizes and allegorizes recognizable individuals and events in Latin American society and politics” (49).

Rosemary Geisdorfer Feal (1990) makes a compelling case for the similarities between the slave narrative tradition and testimonio. She fine-tunes the terms with which to speak critically about these narratives by borrowing from Philippe Lejeune’s work in autobiography. In order to

foreground the collaborative practice inherent in such works as *Biografía (Autobiography)* and *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú (I, Rigoberta Menchú)*, Geisdorfer Feal suggests that we speak of them as heterobiographies that have an autobiolocator and an ethnobiographer (101–2).

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In sum, the continuous or analogous model depends upon comparisons between testimonio and literary history, traditions, and narrative discourses. As Sklodowska (1992) points out, however, these comparisons are never quite satisfactory and, given the hybrid nature of testimony, can be endless (77). She writes that “[e]l testimonio se parece a muchas formas narrativas— literarias y no-literarias—, mientras que ninguna de estas formas se parece al testimonio” (testimony is like many literary and non-literary forms, while none of these forms is like testimony) (76–77).<sup>11</sup> Sklodowska advises that these endless comparisons can be avoided by focusing more upon what testimonio does, rather than upon where it came from or how it is similar to or dissimilar from other forms (74–75). In other words, she calls for a shift in emphasis that would examine the *functions* of testimonio.

The functional model helps to move the discussion of testimonio beyond what Sklodowska has aptly described as a “círculo vicioso” (vicious circle) of infinite yet inadequate comparisons between genres (74). This model presents yet another way that critics have chosen to talk about and to characterize testimonio. Interestingly, a distinction between the production and reception aspects of the functional approach has yet to be explicitly articulated within the literature. A further distinction sometimes can be made between emphases on content or form for each aspect. Moreover, given that this model scrutinizes the implied reader, testimonio again sheds its “Latin Americanness” here as it did under the continuous or analogous model. The implied reader who engages the oppressed voice of the narrator is a global formulation that cuts across time and place.

Sklodowska identifies a contradictory contract based upon mediation of the spoken word that testimonial writing attempts to fulfill. Thus, she focuses upon both the production and the reception of testimonio. Although her emphasis appears to be upon formal considerations, at the center of her analysis is the illocutionary act; that is, an utterance with meaningful content. She characterizes the testimonial contract as a variant of the novelistic one in that they are both simulacra. Borrowing terminology from speech act theory, she describes testimonial writing as “mimesis de un

acto de habla” (mimesis of a speech act). The declaration within the text of a desire to testify to a lived experience comprises the illocutionary act. The actual locutionary act of the “voz de origen” (voice of origin), however, has been (re)written and therefore displaced from its original context. Not only does this distance unsettle the illocutionary act of the text itself, but this separation also creates discrepancies between the illocutionary act and its perlocutionary aspect (1992, 97).

Skłodowska first suggests that the only way to smooth over these gaps is to read innocently, suspending all disbelief. Yet, in light of postmodern semiotic sensibilities, she acknowledges that such an ideal reading is hard to imagine. The only satisfactory response, she maintains, is to read against the testimonial contract—especially as it is presented in “paratexts” such as prologues—and therefore demystify it (97). Even though Skłodowska suggests this deconstructive manner of reading, she does admit earlier in her discussion that “no existe una competencia del lector bien establecida con respecto al testimonio. Esta competencia aparece in statu nascendi [. . .]” (reader competency with respect to testimony does not exist. This competency is in *statu nascendi* [. . .]) (75). She closes her discussion with a detailed typology of mediated testimony that focuses upon the editor’s role in the incorporation of nonfiction pre-texts like legal testimony, memoirs, autobiography, biography, interviews, and oral histories. If the pre-text is merely inserted into the narrative, then the editor fulfills a communicative function. If the pre-text is “novelized,” then the editor is carrying out an aesthetic function (Skłodowska 1992, 102).

With this idea of the resisting reader in mind, Barbara Foley’s work on documentary fiction (1986) offers an insightful counterpoint to Skłodowska’s suspicion of the testimonial contract function. Skłodowska resists the notion that the mimetic project of representing the spoken voice is not fraught with difficulties. She writes that testimony “siente la urgencia de ‘certificar’ su carácter verídico/auténtico/genuino por medio de discursos para-científicos [. . .]” (feels the urgency to ‘certify’ its truthful/authentic/genuine character by means of para-scientific discourse [. . .]) (48). This insistence upon truth and authenticity, in her opinion, only serves to expose the (re)constructions and representational gaps that the testimonial contract attempts uncritically to hide (49).<sup>12</sup> For Foley, however, convincing the reader of truth and authenticity is the very point of these narratives. In other words, because these works “foreground contradiction(s) in the referent,” and given that they must formulate a propositional stance, the very goal, not surprisingly, is to win over the reader (1986, 235).<sup>13</sup>

Foley explains these ideas in her discussion of the African American documentary novel. Although her subject matter differs from Sklodowska's—especially concerning the role of a mediating editor—her observations do factor in important considerations regarding subjectivity. She writes that the “documentary overdetermination” of these works is due in part to the positional complexities of writing and speaking subjects who have been denied “full subjectivity” because of racism. Having been shut out in this way, therefore, has prompted an “assertion of propositionality.” Further, these novels, like testimonio, emphasize counter versions of events with respect to official hegemonic accounts. Thus, not only are readers being asked to hear a subject who historically has been ignored, but also they are being asked to consider new versions that insist upon the exposure of contradictions. In each case, the readers are presumed to be suspicious of the writing subject and must be won over with the help of “documentary validation.” While this process signifies for Sklodowska the production of authorial voices that aim to seduce innocent readers, for Foley it means a preemptive strike against the authority of already skeptical readers. This idea leads Foley to position the African American documentary within what she describes as an “adversarial tradition” (235).

Linda J. Craft (1997) also aligns her analyses of the Central American testimonial with the functional approach. For a narrative to be categorized as a testimonial, Craft writes that it must fulfill a testimonial function. She defines this function as “the representation of voices of, by, and (in some cases) for the Other [. . .]” (189). She bases this definition upon the specific historical context that has taken shape within Latin America during the last two decades. Testimonial writing appeared at this time as a cultural response to, on the one hand, “corrupt, dependent, and neocolonial nation states,” and to, on the other, the inadequacy of a capitalist model to foster healthy and just communities.<sup>14</sup> Although she acknowledges that testimonial writing has historical precedents within a centuries-old struggle against colonization, she is clear about using the term to define a recent and “particular paradigm of ‘literature’ [. . .] that is rooted at the margins” (188). For Craft, the testimonial function is a constant at the level of story, while the way in which it is incorporated into the text, in other words its form, may vary. She devises a schematic diagram wherein testimonials are positioned according to the degree of mediation by the novelist. (Given that mediation is always present, Craft opts for the term “novelist” over the usual preference for the word “editor” in these discussions.) This continuum ranges from “pure” testimony to the “pseudo-testimony” (189).

The difficulties that arise from an Other-based definition of testimonial function are twofold. First, the concept of Other is a “shifter” in that its meaning depends upon its context. What in one country, culture, or social group may be described as the voice of the Other may be perceived in another as a voice speaking from the center of power. Second, the idea of margins, as Sklodowska points out, too often reveals a class bias and silences those voices whose victimization has more to do with gender, for example. In her critique of Beverley’s insistence upon characterizing testimonio as the expression of a marginalized or subaltern voice, Sklodowska writes, “Si siguiéramos a Beverley, el calificativo de testimonio no podría darse ni a una confesión de una víctima de violencia familiar que perteneciera a la clase media [. . .] ni a un relato de un intelectual victimizado por el sistema político” (If we followed Beverley, the confession by a victim of domestic violence from the middle class, or an account by an intellectual victimized by a political system would not qualify as testimony [. . .]) (1992, 80).

Jaime Concha (1979) defines the idea of testimonial function in yet another vein. Whereas Craft’s Other-based function is contemporary and synchronic, Concha’s concept of testimonial function is diachronic. This concept is constructed around the *testigo* (witness). Concha sees any mode from any period which has presented an eyewitness account as fulfilling a testimonial function.<sup>15</sup> He characterizes this account as one that “provoca una profunda conmoción en el ánimo del testigo, ya por su fuerza dramática, ya en virtud del efecto de revelación sobre la fe o la ideología de quien contempla y comunica su mensaje” (provokes a profound shock on the witness’s spirit due to its dramatic impact or to its revelatory effect on the faith or ideology of those who contemplate or communicate its message) (96). These testimonial accounts reach as far back as Plato, and include such names as Saint Augustine, Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga, and Bartolomé de Las Casas. Concha’s notion of a contemporary witness emerged in the nineteenth century, a time of transition between the great bourgeois and proletarian revolutions (97). This contemporary witness came into being with the help of both the practical tool of journalism and the intellectual one of Marxism (98). Like Craft, however, Concha does not consider issues of reception. Some readers would question Concha’s testimonial characterization of Plato’s *Apology*, for example.

Both Hugo Achugar and George Yúdice (1992) pursue the idea of a practical testimonial function, although in different ways. Citing Foucault’s notion of power as embedded within discursive practices, Achugar asserts that testimonial writing is a function of and makes thematic “la lucha por el

poder” (the fight for power) (280). He notes that this struggle cannot be defined exclusively in relation to the extratextual world; rather, it is also very much a contest for discursive production. Achugar stresses that because all discourse aspires to power, testimonial writing can be characterized as “ya como un discurso desde el poder, ya como un discurso que intenta la desarticulación del discurso en el poder” (a discourse from the perspective of power or as a discourse that tries to dislocate discourse in power) (281). His main point seems to be that the referential power struggle expressed by testimonial writing must also be viewed in terms of its pragmatic function within the related contest over discursive production.

George Yúdice describes two functions of testimonial writing. One function is representational and illustrated by state-supported testimonials that represent the dominant ideology and demonize the sectors that would transgress its authority (1992, 210). This “top down” end product constructs a populist subject and represents enemy “others.” On the other hand, there is the “praxis conscientizadora” (consciousness-raising praxis) function that emerges from the “bottom up” (1992, 211). His concept of *concientización*, an outgrowth of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogia do oprimido* (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) (1970) and of liberation theology, emphasizes the acquisition of knowledge through interactive dialogues among cognizant subjects who respond to the ethos of their community (1992, 209). Unlike *testimonios representacionales* (representational testimonies), the *testimonios conscientizadores* (consciousness-raising testimonies) often are communal acts within the context of the struggle for self-survival. As part of the “praxis conscientizadora,” these testimonies prioritize action over reflection or representation and transform the external world so that new societies and new consciousnesses may emerge (1992, 210).

Both critics, therefore, call attention to the practical function of testimonial writing. To Yúdice, the text is a proactive production dedicated to the survival of a community. Achugar’s practical function highlights the discursive power play that testimonial writing makes in conjunction with the foregrounding of the power struggles of the referents in question. Both approaches to the practical function emphasize how production, form, and content reinforce one another. Neither critic explores the way in which the contests for survival and discursive practices play out on the reception side, however, except for the fact that they assume that reception means transformation.

Researchers of the functional model move beyond analyses that search for testimonio’s origins or parallel narrative forms and, instead, focus their

energies upon addressing the roles that testimonio fulfills, which they identify as a contradictory testimonial contract, an adversarial function, the representation of the Other, the presentation of a witness's testimony, and a practical function with respect to power struggles. I believe that the function in question must be viewed from all vantage points of textual production and reception in order for the functional model to be fully coherent. If a text performs a production function, then that function has implications for textual reception, and vice versa.

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More aesthetically based than the continuous or analogous model, the literary model examines the relationship among testimonio, literature in general, and the canon. In respect to the canon, the debate focuses upon whether testimonio can be considered literature. Interestingly, some critics dismiss the debate *tout court* either by asserting that all literature is testimonial in nature or by foregrounding contexts within which the opposition between the literary and the nonliterary is emptied of meaning. Because of the complexities inherent in such a broad term as "literature," and given the fact that almost any article on testimonial writing addresses the literary aspect at least in passing, what follows is merely a sample of the most common themes in the critical discussions of testimonio as literature.

Critics who argue in favor of testimonio as literature do so from numerous vantage points. Anna Housková posits the idea of testimony as a symbolic form. She explains that testimonial writings are literature "porque (y cuando) tienen esta capacidad de símbolo del mundo más vasto que los hechos descritos" (because [and when] they have a certain symbolic capacity regarding a more vast world than the facts described) (15). Prada Oropeza inserts testimonio into literature by way of narratology. He writes that testimony, as a story of human actions, has a diegetic level with a linear relation of sequences as well as sequences embedded within one another. However, he also describes how the "código veridictivo" (truth code) of testimony dominates the narrative, thereby distinguishing it from fictive, anthropological, and ethnological works.<sup>16</sup> This code manifests itself through the explicit statements of intention to present a true account on the part of the "emisor-actor" (broadcaster-actor) (19).

Eliana Rivero (1987) and Elzbieta Sklodowska are among the critics who foreground codes and functions that mark the text for degrees of literariness. Sklodowska, as I mentioned above when discussing the

functional model, writes that the work's ambiguity—perhaps akin to Housková's idea of the symbolic text—is increased when the nonfiction pre-text is “novelized” by the mediating editor, and therefore an aesthetic code may prevail (1992, 102). Eliana Rivero, on the other hand, believes that a denotative, and less literary, function predominates as a result of the extra-textual existence of the referents (42). She does acknowledge, however, that at times testimonial discourse moves beyond transparent language and approximates a connotative literary level that “complace la sensibilidad del lector” (pleases the sensibility of the reader) (43). David William Foster searches for those fictional techniques, such as dramatic reenactments, a mosaic organization, and narrative withholding that would “engage the interest of the reader” (43–44).

Ariel Dorfman, in his analysis of Chilean testimonies (1986), suggests that whereas some critics may uncover interesting fictional techniques, like fragmentation, he sees a hastily written and amateurish document (189–90). In spite of his sympathy towards the tragic circumstances that these texts describe, he painstakingly points out the poor use of or lack of concern for language, the monotonous presentation of material, and the creation of myths of heroism at the expense of accounts to the contrary. In his closing remarks about Hernán Valdés's *Tejas Verdes: diario de un campo de concentración* (*Tejas Verdes: A Concentration Camp Diary*) (1974), he writes that the experience narrated “no es ‘literaria’ sino que ferozmente real” (is not ‘literary’ but fiercely real) (215).

Whereas Dorfman's observations tend toward the aesthetic judgment of testimonial writing as “not literature,” John Beverley (1993) contends that testimonial works are written against literature. The crux of Beverley's argument is that testimony cannot be literature because it is not fiction. Given that readers are meant to experience the narrator and the accounts described as real, testimony “can never [. . .] create the illusion of that textual in-itselfness, set against and above the everyday life and struggle, that is the basis of literary formalism” (84). Further, testimonial writing works as a kind of foil to literature as it reveals the privileges bound up within this institution (82).<sup>17</sup> Thus, for Beverley, part of the aesthetic effect produced by testimony “is paradoxically that it is *not* literary, not linguistically elaborated or authorial” (92).<sup>18</sup> This notion of an uncommon aesthetics, so to speak, also is taken up by George Yúdice, who writes that the aesthetics of testimony's not fitting into the criteria of dominant institutions does not mean that testimonio is any less significant. He defines

this sense of aesthetics as one in which self-identity and survival are reworked through discourse (1991, 19).

Discussions concerning the literary value of testimonial writing often include thoughts on the implications of its canonization. The main argument against canonization is that testimonio would be appropriated by the dominant culture and therefore lose its subversive character. Beverley and Zimmerman, insisting upon the nonfictive aspect of testimony, believe that incorporating it into “literary fictionality is to deprive it of its power to engage the reader [. . .] [and] to make of it simply another form of literature” (177). They also describe how saturating the market with testimonial accounts—as happened in postrevolutionary Nicaragua—only ends up “neutralizing” the special effect it aims to achieve through its existence outside of established literary realms (179). Gugelberger and Kearney point out that it would be counterproductive to include testimonial writings within the canon because the canon itself is a form of domination (11).

Linda J. Craft notes, however, that many testimonios have achieved their transformational effect precisely because they were “read in mainstream classrooms and libraries.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, she believes that testimonial writing will never be fully appropriated in a world that is far from solving its socioeconomic problems. This kind of subversive writing will thus always be necessary (22). Sklodowska focuses less upon the implications of canonization and more upon how testimonio came to be incorporated into the canon.<sup>20</sup> She attributes this in part to a process of normal literary evolution as critics and readers looked toward these more accessible works after the Boom period of the 1960s (1992, 179).<sup>21</sup> Institutional support, especially in the form of the Casa de las Américas prize, helped to usher this form into the canon (Sklodowska 1992, 56).

As mentioned above, some critics resist the traditional boundaries between, for example, literary and nonliterary writing or political and apolitical writing. María Elena de Valdés (1988) notes that long-standing generic divisions have become blurred in an era in which writers like Elena Poniatowska combine journalism and fiction in their works. In light of this phenomenon, Valdés presents a very broad definition of literature as “any text whose reading brings about the reader’s reflection on his or her world” (150). Further, she takes neither a writer’s sources nor his or her methods into account in her definition of testimonial writing. The only characteristic that qualifies a work as a testimonial is that both narrator and implied author must have witnessed the events and known the people described in the narrative (1988, 160 n. 1). Thus, she calls Cristina Pacheco’s short story

collection, *Cuarto de azotea* (*The Flat Roof Room*) (1986), feminist testimonial literature even though the stories are highly fictionalized accounts.

Jaime Concha makes a similarly useful observation regarding these sorts of erasures. He explains that political freedom must precede any dialogue about what does or does not constitute literature. Concha presents the case of writing under the military regime in Chile, a time when “*el simple hecho de escribir [fue] [. . .] literario y político a la vez*” (the mere act of writing [was] [. . .] literary and political at the same time). In this cultural wasteland, the first sort of testimonial writing to emerge consisted of telling the rest of the country and beyond what was going on inside of Chile. Getting this information out was a political act, and making sure it was written accurately and without embellishments was the only literary option available (98).<sup>22</sup> Thus, in this kind of repressive context, discussions about canonicity are meaningless, Concha maintains.

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To conclude, critical approaches to testimonio throughout this survey and across all of the models presented here typically respond to a handful of binary oppositions. In the case of the exclusive and classic model, for example, the competing artistic agendas of Europe versus Latin America and the universal versus the national have everything to do with the motivation behind Barnett’s work and his scholarly devotees. Other possible oppositional pairs which grow out of the models are contemporary/traditional, Subject/Other, contemplative/performative, aesthetic/political, and the literary/nonliterary.<sup>23</sup> The arguments under each model are constructed in a way that works either with or against the power inscribed within the desired field of the binary pair. These power plays tend to rescue or reject testimonio and therefore may generate reductive critical readings.

Hovering above these sets of oppositions, however, is a larger theoretical clash between deconstruction and a politics of identity (in the broadest sense of their commonly accepted terms). Testimonio often represents the discursive site upon which the embedded interests of these theoretical positions play out. At times these interests converge, such as in the project of toppling master narratives. At other times, however, these positions directly compete with one another. That deconstruction à la Derrida has decentered concepts such as subjectivity and referentiality provides a clear example of this rivalry. Perhaps each stance contains something of the other within it, given that these positions at times

converge and at other times clash. As the dynamic of deconstruction challenges multiple manifestations of authority, for example, it paves the way for new identities to emerge.

The failure to acknowledge not only how these processes work dependently, but also that each contains forces of the other within it, has served to obfuscate many an analysis. On the one hand, deconstruction can fail to contextualize power, and therefore often overlooks the importance of strategic maneuvers such as the use of contestatory discourse. On the other hand, a hyper-concentrated critical gaze upon identity may create a naïve sense of solidarity or, conversely, factor out points of contact where identities tend to intersect. One might say, then, that testimonio is the narrative locus where the tearing down/building up process of deconstruction meets the building up/tearing down process of identity-based politics. It is a symbiotic relationship, and one dynamic cannot function without the other. When testimonio is considered within the dual scope of (de)construction, however, the concepts of deconstruction and identity can become a system of reciprocal hermeneutics rather than a system of competing agendas.

## Notes

1. Except for book titles, all translations from the Spanish are mine. Note that “*Biografía*” in Barnett’s title is translated as “Autobiography” in the English translation. This editorial change represents well the complexities of testimonio writing.

2. Elzbieta Sklodowska observes that “despite all the critical attention it has received, testimonio remains undefined” and that it “serves as a shorthand for a whole spectrum of narrative conventions” (1994, 32). Although I provide a general working definition for testimonio here, there is no consensus on a precise definition of the term.

3. Sklodowska (1992) devotes an entire chapter to investigating the “(po)ética de la mediación” ([po]etics of mediation) of *Biografía de un cimarrón* (*Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*) and *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* (*I, Rigoberta Menchú*). Craft (1997), on the other hand, sees *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* as “pure testimony.” See Sklodowska (1992, 109–47) and Craft (1997, 189). While I do not discount the important ethical and aesthetic considerations of the mediation process, I argue that a collaborative effort at representation is, in fact, possible. Further, I agree with Stacey Schlau and Electa Arenal (1995) that co-laboring is a political act. I concur as well with Craft’s assertion that “[g]ood intentions [for the representation of the Other] are [. . .] preferable to bad ones or to none at all” (13).

4. Three collections devoted to testimonial writing comprise the more noteworthy efforts to organize and discuss this material. See Jara and Vidal (1986), Beverley's introduction to *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* (1992), and Gugelberger and Kearney (1991). Also outstanding in the field are book-length studies by Sklodowska (1992) and Craft (1997). I relied extensively on these sources when formulating these models. This survey does not take up the Rigoberta Menchú and David Stoll debate. Since the appearance of Stoll's book in 1999, the MLA International Bibliography has been saturated with articles on the topic, and, therefore, on testimonio. Many critics would agree that this particular debate has been thoroughly exhausted and has earned a much needed rest.

5. Sklodowska faults critics for their blanket acceptance of Casa de las Américas's imprecise definition of the testimonio. This unquestioned definition, she writes, has created a false consensus and has ushered in a phenomenon that she calls a "falacia genealógica" (genealogical fallacy) (1992, 68).

6. See Sklodowska's analysis of Barnet's methods (1992, 47–52).

7. Note that Barnet uses the terms *investigador* (researcher) or *autor* (author) and *informante* (informant) or *protagonista* (protagonist) interchangeably throughout "La novela-testimonio" (1969). This usage reveals a few key points. First, one may question whether being a researcher necessarily makes one an author and vice versa. Second, the witness is conceived only as a source of information or as a character, but not as an author.

8. Sklodowska briefly mentions analogous forms as well (1992, 76–77).

9. See Carpentier's "Literature and Political Awareness in Latin America" (21–30), Vargas Llosa's "Social Commitment and the Latin American Writer" (126–36), and Alegría's "The Writer's Commitment" (306–12) in Meyer (1988).

10. For a critique of this idea, see Jehenson (1990, 78).

11. I disagree with Sklodowska (1992) on this point. As numerous scholars have argued, other narrative forms can and do reveal certain parallels with testimonial writing.

12. This is the major point as well of Sklodowska's "Testimonio mediatizado: ¿ventriloquia o heteroglosia? (Barnet/Montejo; Burgos/Menchú)" ("Mediated Testimony: Ventriloquism or Heteroglossia? [Barnet/Montejo; Burgos/Menchú]") (1993).

13. This statement prompts the question of how the idea of winning over the reader differs from other narratives regarding the desire to shape the reader's response. I understand Foley's argument to be based upon the politics of the writing and speaking positions, something that Sklodowska (1992; 1993) does not consider. Foley is suggesting that the legacy of racism has distorted the reception of these positions. Thus, along with the general desire to control the reader's response to the narrative, there is an additional layer of desire to correct or to challenge the reader's perception of African American writing and speaking subjects.

14. It is not clear why Craft (1997) depicts these socioeconomic conditions as exclusive to the last two decades of Latin American history. Dependency, corruption, and the abuses of colonization have been constants before, during, and after the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors.

15. Jorge Narváez makes the same point (1986, 236).

16. This distinction is problematic. Fictive works often display an explicit *código veridictivo* (truth code). One classic example from Spanish Peninsular literature is *Lazarillo de Tormes*.

17. For a similar view, see Gugelberger and Kearney (1991, 11).

18. Beverley (1993) seems to use “authorial” here to denote authorship rather than authority. Thus, he is emphasizing the different, and positive, effect that testimonio can have on the reader due to the fact that the narrator does not sound like a professional author.

19. Unfortunately, Craft (1997) does not pursue this point. I assume she means that a connection can be made between a widely read book like *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* and an increased awareness on an international scale of human rights violations. Without this assumption, Craft’s comment seems to imply that all readers are receptive to, and perhaps transformed by, the testimony they have read.

20. The idea of testimonio as canonical is not so clear. One must ask whether Sklodowska (1992) sees testimonio as canonical in and of itself, or whether it is more a question of selected texts that have become part of the canon. Given her emphasis upon the institutional support enjoyed by testimonio, one must presume that she is stating a case for the former idea.

21. See also Woodrich (1992, 237–39). On this point, both Sklodowska (1992) and Woodrich imply that testimonio is an “easier read” than the works of the Boom period of the 1960s. The high degree of experimentation found in works such as Julio Cortázar’s *Rayuela (Hopscotch)* (1963) and Carlos Fuentes’s *La muerte de Artemio Cruz (The Death of Artemio Cruz)* (1962) stands in marked contrast with the more traditional style of narration found in the testimonial.

22. On this point, however, one could say that the decision to write without unnecessary embellishments is, in fact, a literary decision. Further, writers and songwriters alike often harness the power of “literariness” in their work as a way to counter state censorship.

23. Sklodowska also notes a handful of these oppositions (1992, 4).

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