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Genres of the Real: *Testimonio*, Autobiography, and the Subjective Turn

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It is almost impossible to provide a definition of *testimonio*; many have been offered over time, because its meaning and literary nature have been up for debate since this narrative practice drew critics' attention. Furthermore, while the term has become part of the academic lexicon, *testimonio* still receives other names. Among them are nonfiction novel, documentary novel, new journalism, life history, and autobiography. John Beverley initially defined it as a "non-fictional, popular-democratic form of epic narrative, a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet . . . form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a 'life' or a significant life experience" ("The Margin" 24). The author claims it is a popular epic because it incorporates literary procedures but does not grant them priority.

Griselda Zuffi, in turn, states that the "anti-literature" interpretation served to defend *testimonio*'s political function of being a discursive alternative regarding writers/intellectuals' attempt to speak in the name of others. The aim was to bridge the gap between them, to open the door to the margins (6). Ending with the "cultural construction of difference" was the order of the day because the literary tradition that naturalizes difference is "an epistemological misrepresentation" (Yúdice 3). *Testimonio* aimed at challenging "the 'othering discourse' as it has been called . . . this truth or hegemony fabricating Western discourse" (Yúdice 4). George Yúdice stresses the fact that in this practice "the subaltern" are construed as "enunciators of history" (16). "Emphasizing popular, oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity" (17). The models chosen by this approach were *Si me permiten hablar: Testimonio de Domitila, una mujer de las minas de Bolivia* [Let Me Speak!] and *Me llamo Rigoberta*

Menchú y así me nació la conciencia [I, Rigoberta Menchú: *An Indian Woman in Guatemala*]. In these texts readers discover "a different subject of discourse . . . one seeking for emancipation and survival" (16). It is because of this search that *testimonio* appeals to women as a means to tell their story, although they are often presented, at best, as followers of men's struggles.

Testimonio has also been an inspiring genre for women who need to delve into the innermost echoes of torture and repression. The feelings anchored in their bodies lie at the heart of women concentration camp survivors' experience, and they seek other voices with whom to enter into a dialogue within this framework. They often focus on the gender-specific repression they suffered – such as sexual abuse and the kidnapping of their children – and present their stories in oral/written patterns or in literary form. In the second case, they acknowledge the importance of language and use aesthetic devices to process the traces of the past in their present. These writings could be considered autobiographical because they explore the connections between one's memory and the memory of others. In fact, the borders between the two genres are porous. Both are exercises in memory, but they are not identical; the difference resides in who narrates and what is the focus of the story. The "I" of *testimonio* is a plural self, as Doris Sommer claims.

Like every story based on life experience, *testimonio* deals with affect, with the memory of physical wounds that are an internal echo of the historical circumstances that produced them. It can be said, in this sense, that *testimonio* is a means for working through traumatic memories, not only for the speaker or writer but also for society as a whole – a must for the ethical recovery of a community. It can thus function as a mirror; it has "helped to make ourselves visible to ourselves," as George M. Gugelberger has stated, a need all women have in societies that turn them invisible (3). By calling attention to collective suffering, these women question traditionally constructed identities, create self-awareness, foster political commitment, and promote debate.

Beatriz Sarlo, however, considers that this type of writing actually impedes debate. That is why she denies its legitimacy in relation to academic studies that, in her view, favor rather than crystallize reflection because they create a greater distance with the past. In *Tiempo pasado* (2007), this author contrasts the ideological turn that took place in the early 1970s, a "gigantic speaking out," with the "subjective turn" of the 1980s, which should be subject to scrutiny. Sarlo's view of memory narratives as produced by an unquestioning subject seeking to be healed delegitimizes both the narrator and the meaning of the "cure." Are we dealing with an individual's recovery from an illness, or with the recovery of societies tormented by injustice, abuse, and terror?

Testimonio testifies to extreme historical circumstances, including atrocities under state terror or genocide, destitution, and abuse in working environments. These circumstances would be doomed to "indiferencia y hasta olvido" [indifference and even oblivion], as Tomás Eloy Martínez puts it (12), if some witnesses did not feel an intense urge to communicate their experience. In Primo Levi's words, "the need to tell our story to 'the rest,' to make 'the rest' participate in it, had taken on for us, before our liberation and after, the character of an 'immediate and violent impulse'" (15). *Testimonios* search for a unique way to inscribe these experiences, and this search demands above all an empathetic listening, a listening that asks, "¿Cómo habla el que habitó el abismo y retornó a la minucia cotidiana?" [How do those who inhabited the abyss and returned to everyday trifles speak?] (Sneh 321). The psychoanalyst Dori Laub claims that massive trauma cripples our perceptions and our recording ability. It is the presence of a listener that enables a narrative, and hence knowledge of the event, to be produced (Felman and Laub 57).

Many testimonies that articulate the oral and written registers are the result of this way of listening, which makes narrative possible. Others, written by the witnesses themselves, have an imaginary listener. In this sense, they are closer to fiction or autobiography but preserve their condition of testimony. Yet all of them constitute a desperate call for attention to issues that demand that every citizen take an ethical stance. *Try to look, try to see*, is the imperative pronounced by these voices. "I don't expect others to understand," stated the Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo. "I want them to know, even if they cannot feel what I feel" (260, author's emphasis). Paul Ricoeur describes the witness as someone who "asks to be believed. He does not limit himself to saying 'I was there,' he adds, . . . 'believe me'" (164–165). Witnesses' appeal, their testimony, creates links among experience, art, ethics, and politics. These accounts are political actions; witnesses want to recover their historical and cultural roots, their tie to those community or family members who were taken away or abused, and to assert their identities. By sharing their experiences they expect to transform a world that has wrought tragedy, injustice, or disaster. The story itself is a struggle against negationism or indifference.

For this reason, I view contemporary women's *testimonio* as a production of meaning that generates knowledge, an act that creates subjects who resist (through the reaffirmation of their body and words), and a public call for attention to historical events that is materialized in different registers and with different aesthetic economies. These are borderline works that straddle genres. They are hybrid, polyphonic. Various discursive modes coexist within

them that are tied to regional political and cultural contexts, but they all share one purpose: appealing to the Other.

The Warp of Testimonial Writing

Testimonios are multidimensional. What is important is how the imprecise boundaries between memory and history, document and literature are negotiated. In this context, writing becomes a transformation process that goes from personal experience to public account, and this shift tends to conceal the work of writing. Nevertheless, choosing and editing the material and transforming speech acts or memories into a coherent narrative that is accessible to an audience constitute a political and aesthetic practice. Women's *testimonio*, born from different traditions, creates new forms, takes old ones further, or pushes the boundaries of the genre. The texts I discuss here (along with the genealogical series that put them in context) are just examples that illustrate these phenomena. Current testimonial production is too broad to be encompassed in this overview.

While testimonial writing started in Latin America with the arrival of the Spaniards, it reemerges dramatically in the twentieth century to report the effects of historical processes on different social groups. Starting in the 1970s, we witness the gradual development of the "*novela-testimonio*" through a series of works that range from ethnography and social science to literature. The unique design of a hybrid that transforms our approach to history and literature is thus laid out. This hybrid becomes part of the canon in Cuba in 1970, when Casa de las Américas creates a *Testimonio Award* to highlight its existence. *Testimonio's* presence grows from then on as a literary form removed from the elitist figure of the intellectual and more attuned to the type of narratives that Latin American historical experience seems to demand.

Although women adopt *testimonio* with greater persistence, it is the Argentine journalist and writer Rodolfo Walsh who launches the genre in the Americas as a way of taking a political stance in literature. *Operación Masacre* (1957) [*Operation Massacre*], which was the product of his research into clandestine executions that had taken place in Buenos Aires in the 1950s, is a way of answering the question, "*¿Para quién se escribe?* [For whom do we write?] (Aguilar 1). The book's implicit answer is that we write for those who are committed to sociopolitical change. The writer tries to lead his readers to modify their outlook by way of a montage of journalistic and testimonial pieces. His style also draws from crime fiction. This approach persists in *testimonios* by

women whose work is connected with investigative journalism, such as *La noche de Tlatelolco* [*Massacre in Mexico*] (1971) by Elena Poniatowska and *Los zarpazos del puma* [*The Claw of the Puma*], one of many reportage books by the Chilean writer Patricia Verdugo (1985). *Chile, Pinochet and the Caravan of Death* (2001) updated the original. Yet even if they have become classic denunciation works, women's *testimonios* stem for the most part from a different taproot that is more akin to autobiography.

Articulating Orality and Writing

The techniques that most clearly distinguish these *testimonios* can be traced back to the work of the U.S. anthropologist Oscar Lewis. Published in 1961, *The Children of Sánchez* [*Los hijos de Sánchez*] narrates the life of a typical poor Mexican family. The narrative is constructed as a kaleidoscope where all perspectives intersect. Lewis's book became the model for *Biografía de un Cimarrón* (1966) [*Biography of a Runaway Slave*] and *La canción de Raquel* (1969) [*Rachel's Song*] by the Cuban author Miguel Barnet, who called his works "*novelas-testimonio*." The dialogic or polyphonic structure of these foundational texts appeals both to women who come from an oral tradition and need writing to ensure that their suffering and claims are taken into account and to the writers who aspire to legitimize these marginalized stories. The texts discussed here, written in various countries (Mexico, Bolivia, Guatemala, Chile, Argentina, and Cuba), demonstrate the continuity, variation, potential, and limitations of this approach.

Hasta no verte, Jesús mío (1969) [*Here's to You, Jesusa!*], another testimonial book by Poniatowska, was inspired by the methodology she had applied as Oscar Lewis's assistant. She based the book on the oral testimony of the Oaxacan Jesusa Palancares, a poor orphan who fought in the revolution + and thus traveled across Mexico. The narrative – as, Molloy suggests, marked by wandering and the lack of a place of one's own – is testimonial in that it reveals the story of many other dispossessed women of the period who were empowered by political struggle (226). The protagonist of *Si me permiten hablar...: testimonio de Domitila, una mujer de las minas de Bolivia* (1977) [*Let Me Speak! Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines*] underwent a similar experience. The testimony of this Bolivian activist was recorded by the Brazilian anthropologist Moema Viezzer in a series of interviews and later edited along with Domitila's public talks and other biographical and political materials. The text is the outcome of a partnership, acknowledged in both the Spanish original and the English translation.

The book presents Domitila as a labor leader and a feminist, and a wife and mother as well. Her complex, suffering persona had a strong impact on the audience, an impact enhanced by her political gestures (Ferman): "Domitila . . . attended the International Women's Year Tribunal organized by the United Nations, held in Mexico in 1975, in representation of the Housewives' Committee of Siglo XX, the largest and most militant mining center in Bolivia," states the back cover of the English translation. This is a typical *testimonio* document in that it aspires to support indigenous women's struggles and spread the drive to resist.

The same mark is present in *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983) [*I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*]. A twofold narrative created jointly by witness and writer, this *testimonio* is a hybrid construction in the Bakhtinian sense. It combines two statements, two linguistic systems, and two systems of belief – that of the witness and that of the editor. In this case authorship becomes an issue; Elizabeth Burgos appears as the sole author, making readers assume that the witness only provided the raw material. In this way, the notion of *testimonio* as constructing subjectivity by way of a dialogic act is turned around. Faced with an interviewer who seems unable to understand her, Rigoberta keeps her secrets. The distance between them is not bridged, and readers are involved in a situation that contradicts its alleged goal – to end marginalization. Doris Sommer underscores "the repeated and deliberate signs of asymmetry throughout Rigoberta's testimony" and sees her leitmotif as a way of taking distance: "I keep secrets (. . .) [and] my people know them but you will not" ("Las Casas" 245, 248). Sommer's conclusion follows: "We should notice that the audible protests of silence are responses to anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos Debray's line of questioning. If she were not asking possible impertinent questions, the Quiches' informant would have no reason to resist" ("Las Casas" 243).

Nevertheless, as Beverley notes, "it is important to admit transculturation *from below*: in this case, for example, to worry less about how we appropriate Menchú, and to understand and appreciate more how she appropriates *us* for her purposes" (*Testimonio* 69, author's emphasis). When texts are the product of a joint endeavor, if power relations are unequal because participants belong to different social groups, frictions may arise and ultimately reproduce the exclusion the authors aimed to repair. Yet the narrative transcends their relationship. That is why this paradox failed to undermine the strength of a book that constituted a turning point in the debate on women's status, native people's genocide, the boundaries of literary texts, and the urgent need to restructure power relations in our cultures. Rather, paradox triggered

change. The textual economy of *testimonio* was altered after this particular case. Never again would the name of the witness go unacknowledged.

Unlike the texts discussed, probably as a result of the specificities of South American history, collective testimonies written in postdictatorship Argentina were not based on an "informant/lettered editor" bond. *Pájaros sin luz: Testimonios de mujeres de desaparecidos* [*Birds without Light: Testimonies of Women of the Disappeared*],¹ coordinated by Noemí Ciollaro (1999), was the outcome of an invitation by an Argentine writer to a collective whose members shared a political culture and had been shaped by similar tragedies. In this book, nineteen women activists relate the consequences of their partners' disappearance on their own intimate life. The weft of voices confronts the fantasmatic entity created by state terrorism – the disappeared – from a gender perspective. Readers are shown the loneliness and exclusion experienced by these women. By publicly admitting defeat from a critical perspective, these narratives show that the restoration of the social fabric in the aftermath of horror is already under way (88).

Ese infierno: Conversaciones de cinco mujeres sobrevivientes de la ESMA [*That Inferno: Conversations of Five Women Survivors of an Argentine Torture Camp*] (2001), another *testimonio* written by a women's collective, takes on the same task. Five women recorded their memories twenty-three years after their experience as detained-disappeared (abducted persons) in the Navy's Mechanical School (ESMA), a concentration camp that is considered paradigmatic because of the high number of prisoners it held and the atrocities they suffered (ESMA had already become a Museum of Memory by the time the book was published). These survivors had started meeting in 1988 to share and chronicle the traces of the abuse they had suffered and the strategies they had devised to resist slavery in the hands of their torturers, who sought to have complete control over the inmates' lives and bodies. It was the first time that an intimate portrayal of the violence perpetrated against women in the camps was described in such a conversational manner. According to Leonor Arfuch, this style might even create uneasiness in the reader, as if so relaxed an exchange could not correspond to the atrocities revealed. Uneasiness is actually the very emotion finally experienced by significant sectors of Argentine society after years of public hearings, published accounts, voices of survivors recorded by grassroots organizations, and artistic explorations of the long-lasting consequences of state terror.

In diametrical opposition to this autonomous narrative of women survivors who rebuild themselves in the face of a ruthless power, *El infierno* (1993) [*The Inferno: A Story of Terror and Survival in Chile*] by Luz Arce reveals a subjectivity

that repudiates emancipation and, in this sense, challenges the meaning of *testimonio* we have discussed so far. Arce, who was a member of an armed left-wing organization, relates how she became a collaborator for the Chilean secret services after her kidnapping. *The Inferno* is a confession. It expresses her Christian repentance, endorsed by the church, which reviews and introduces her testimony. The priest who writes the prologue validates Arce's confession by way of the hegemonic discourse about a "democratic transition" that promotes national reconciliation.

Diamela Eltit perceives in Arce's prolonged collaboration with the secret services her inability to restrain the compulsion to carve herself a place in the male world, no matter the cost. This final catharsis ratifies her dependence. The theme of "betrayal" is very complex, and we must never forget who is the victimizer. I am not talking, therefore, of the content of Arce's statements when I say that *The Inferno* embodies the paradox of a testimony that betrays *testimonio* as a category. This testimony seeks healing rather than the construction of a resisting subjectivity, for there is no plural "I" in it.

The Complex Testimony/Truth Relationship

I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala (according to Beverley, a dramatic mistranslation of the original title, *My Name is Rigoberta Menchú, and This Is How My Consciousness Was Born*), was introduced in the United States by the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group. Ileana Rodríguez and John Beverley created this group in 1992 – the same year Rigoberta Menchú received the Nobel Prize in Peace. In the United States, the genre lived *in between* disciplines, "outside canonized literature" (Gugelberger 11). "It was a nomadic and homeless genre with the hope for solidarity and community" (11). In this context, Menchú's testimony became a beacon of literary, women's, and cultural studies, a tool to work against the academic institution from within. Nonetheless, in 1998 it was the focus of a major academic controversy that seemed to shatter its credibility. In his *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (1999) David Stoll questioned her account, leading to a media debate. The U.S. anthropologist identified "lies" in the text whenever it did not satisfy his demand that the account match his findings.

Stoll represents the perspective of readers who question *testimonio* because they expect it to provide documentary evidence. "[His] critique of Menchú involves the empiricist battle of facts versus politics" (Warren 204). Yet most witnesses do not seem to respond to this expectation. Thus, the aspiration to

"objectivity" – pervasive not only in the social sciences but also in Western thought – leads to a basic misunderstanding concerning the role of *testimonio*. What kind of truth does it deliver? Should this truth be assessed in terms of accuracy? To what does *testimonio* testify? According to Ileana Rodríguez, Stoll "repeats a five-hundred-year-old theme: that of being unable to discern between misunderstandings (that which translations are unable to account for), silences (that which informants are not ready to tell), and lies (that which informants believe the interrogator wants to hear)" (335). It becomes clear that the demand for a certain type of truth is tied to a political agenda.

Menchú has opened a space for the silenced story of the Maya Quiché genocide, exposing a wound that no questioning of the account's accuracy can close. She uses rhetorical strategies drawn from the oral tradition to strengthen her story, for she is not a lawyer but an activist and storyteller. By reformulating the past, her narrative might not be efficient as a "source" of facts, but it is attuned to what it reveals: the destruction, struggle, and fragile survival of a community. Even if the word "testimony" evokes a legal context, the story told is based on a subjective version of extreme experiences that are retrieved by memory. Why consider it a *testimonio* and not a novel, then? Novels also create images and reflections suitable for depicting societies that allow abuses viewed by many as indescribable. *Testimonio*, however, does so "without the comforting alibi of fiction," and, because it is not fiction, it creates in some readers a demand for an unattainable transparency (Ferman 156).

Testimonial literature's "reading contract" is such that the reader "has to be persuaded to interpret the discourse as truth," an idea that recalls Philippe Lejeune's thesis in "The Autobiographical Contract" (Sklodowska 88). *Testimonio* sets out the communicative conditions for reading, engaging readers in constant "acts of faith." Claudia Ferman calls them "conditions of authentication." Among these are

the introductions written by the mediator/interlocutor. . . ; the fact that the testimonial subject presents herself as a "plural subject," a part of a whole, and thus presupposes the sense of historical representation; the particular data that ascribes historical weight to the text. . . , the context in which these texts are presented, such as a university classroom [among others]. (156–157)

These conditions ensure that readers will face the "long suffering" portrayed by the text. In other words, readers' position is essential to the reading of *testimonios*. Nevertheless, while they are presented as authentic, these texts do not rely on accuracy. Neither do they constitute an unmediated *mise-en-scène* of witnesses' speech style.

Horror and the Loss of a Narrative Attitude

It has been said time and again that the concentration camp experience is unspeakable, but I agree with Jorge Semprún, who considers it unlivable. This lexical uncertainty suggests that disaster challenges one's very ability to narrate. Above all, witnesses' language is marked by horror. Furthermore, the task of translating this experience into a narrative that is faithful to memory without undermining its credibility seems impossible. How can we link that past, a kind of living death, to the present of narration? How can we share events that are part of humanity's shameful heritage with those who, for the most part, would rather ignore them? The question of how to tell the story is critical because exhibiting pain may cause spectators to take distance. One has to decide how to show one's suffering so that it will not traumatize readers, since that is not the goal.

In view of the utter destruction of frames of reference wrought by genocide, the feasible reaction, the one we have witnessed, is that of restoring the subjectivity that concentration camps strove to destroy. In this way, there emerges a logos with memory, as Reyes Mate characterizes it. Those who take on the work of remembrance are beings arising from the ruins who evoke and show the catastrophe they experienced as best as they can (in most cases, without theories to support and guide them). This is the case of many survivors of state terror in the Southern Cone. By means of their writing, witnesses want to create meaning for themselves and others while answering the question, How do we narrate what lies in the boundaries of language?

In *Memorias de Villa Grimaldi* (2011) [*Memories of Villa Grimaldi*] (first published in Uruguay under the pseudonym of Carmen Rojas) Nubia Becker Eguiluz relates her and her campmates' experiences at Villa Grimaldi concentration camp in Santiago de Chile, where she was held along with her partner. She does so with a realism that aspires to create a vivid presentation of reality and achieves this goal. Yet, by taking the place of an impossible mourning process, *testimonio* recounts above all what lies beyond representation. So does Becker's text; it produces an aesthetic event that far transcends the account of the facts. *Memorias* . . . reveals the protagonist's intimate experiences, her dread of torture, and the ways in which she strives to find strength amid disaster.

Unlike realist authors, whose texts seem to say to us, "This is what happened; you are there," in order to expose heinous events concealed by power, Partnoy makes a shift toward a textual weave where language becomes the site of horror. By combining poetry, visual art, and documentary proof, *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival* (1986) [*La escuela: Relatos*

testimoniales] produces a new effect on readers. Even the visual paratext (drawings by her mother, Raquel Partnoy, that head each section in all but the 2011 edition) plays an active role; it anticipates or suggests a contrast with the discursive register. Documentary evidence is provided at the end – a list of names of members of the repressive forces and a blueprint of the camp.

In this way, this *testimonio* facilitates a striking encounter between literature and the law: "The prosecutor . . . asked for the book to be incorporated as evidence in the Truth Trials in the city of Bahía Blanca in 1999. . . . [In addition to] my testimony . . . he requested that the judges allow me to read *Graciela: alrededor de la mesa* [Graciela: Around the Table] as part of my statement" (personal communication with author). The text, however, does not aim to reproduce Partnoy's experience at La Escuelita concentration camp. Rather, it immerses readers in a world where "logic" has been suppressed. The camp is seen from the perspective of this kidnapped woman who peers from under her blindfold and conveys what she sees to readers through two filters, humor and irony, which protect them from horror.

Aware of the connection between *story* and *history*, between memory and history, the author knows she must resort to narrative, even to fictional techniques, to construct her experience. She unfolds imaginary dialogues or streams of consciousness to testify to it. Her unique approach to the space and objects surrounding her and her effort to preserve imagination in an environment that works toward its destruction are modes of resistance. If power aims to destroy signification, Partnoy's task is to create new meanings. Resistance persists under extreme conditions even if its acts become minimalistic so as to remain invisible. Solidarity restores unity where repression had created distance, and this process is depicted through language.

In *Una sola muerte numerosa* (1997) [*A Single Numberless Death*] we also find that the role of language, the subjective turn, and polyphony are exacerbated. After her experience at the Club Atlético camp, where her brother and other relatives and friends disappeared, Nora Strejilevich, "pierde una versión de sí misma" [deprived of a version of herself], tries to create a new one by incorporating her story into her family and cultural history. To do so, she focuses on "la elaboración de la memoria colectiva que el archivo judicial descarta" [the construction of the collective memory dismissed by court records] (quoted in Bocanera 107). Writing imitates the practices of memory by mocking chronology and integrating scraps of other voices into a lyrical account. The book incorporates the journalistic and essay registers, children's songs and games, the discourse of official memory, parents' letters, public statements by perpetrators of state violence, quotes from essays and literary texts, and,

in particular, many fragments of anonymous testimonies that show how the dictatorship affected people's lives within and without the camps. In this way, it provides a setting for the numberless death that destroyed a whole society, without focusing on facts but, rather, on "traces of the real" (Jara 2).

The tendency to favor both the work of memory and the interweaving of different perspectives in the portrayal of state terror is also present in *Diálogos del amor contra el silencio: Memorias de prisión, sueños de libertad* (2006) [Dialogues of Love against Silence: Memories of Prison, Dreams of Freedom]. María del Carmen Sillato narrates how she "disappeared" along with Alberto, her partner, and the birth of her son in captivity in the city of Rosario, Argentina. The narrative includes fragments from her sister, Chary Sillato's, diary and Alberto's and her own letters to their son, Gabriel. Sillato invited twenty survivors of Argentine repression to relate their memories. She explains that the texts were chosen on the basis of two criteria, namely, the literariness and the content of the testimonies; the latter must relate the authors' direct experience of repression. In other words, the verdictive axis shifts; it no longer lies in the documentary value of the material. The literary testimony does not need to provide evidence because the public trials where these witnesses have also participated have proved the existence of a systematic plan to force people's disappearance. Twenty or more years after the event, beyond the legal ritual, the facts are not the most important feature.

This overview has shown the various ways in which testimonial forms favored by women have materialized. An oral account edited from the perspective of a "lettered" editor gives way to a more egalitarian relationship between mediator and witness and/or to a polyphonic textuality. At the same time, new testimonial modes tied to the chronicle continue, and will continue, to emerge, driven by the pressing need to denounce. A case in point is the blog *Generación Y* [Generation Y], created by the Cuban blogger Yoani Sánchez. *Havana Real: One Woman Fights to Tell the Truth about Cuba Today* (2011) is the English translation of all her chronicles up to the publication of the book. Sánchez has been posting her reports since April 2007, overcoming great challenges. These are not polyphonic texts but snapshots of daily life in Havana. They shed light on the manifold and painful limitations of that life and show how women can be empowered by dissent practiced through writing.

Unfortunately, there are even forged *testimonios*. This is the case of *Letter from El Salvador* (1984), attributed to the Salvadoran poet Jacinta Escudos. Not only does she not acknowledge this book as her *testimonio*; she also denies that she meant to publish the poems. "The problem is that it [the book] was

published without my permission. The poems were stolen and published under another name. I sometimes include it in my publications to vindicate my work, but it is a material I would have never published because I did not have a chance to finish the poems" (personal communication with author).

In sum, *testimonio*, a preferred genre among women aspiring to build or rebuild their identities as agents of change, is an interlacing of oral and written registers emerging in the wake of devastating sociohistoric conditions, conditions that produce very diverse aesthetic and linguistic economies. In the academic world the effort to incorporate the "voice of the voiceless" (despite responding to an unattainable utopia) remains a turning point in the history of the humanities. It has helped question the hegemonic subject and allowed for a corpus of women's writings to be acknowledged as legitimate literary production.

Note

- 1 The title alludes to a line from "Naranjo en flor," a very famous tango by the brothers Expósito in which the protagonist talks about the loss of his beloved, a loss that makes him feel "like a bird without light."

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